Centerville Slough Project

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Eel River Estuary and Centerville Slough Enhancement Project
Historic Resources Addendum

Shaw Barn. Centerville Road. Photo by Jamie Roscoe, December 2015.

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December 2015
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Introduction

A collaborative project—Eel River Estuary and Centerville Slough Enhancement Project—involves governmental agencies, non-profits, and landowners with the goal of restoring and improving habitats and agricultural opportunities on lower Eel River and in the area of Centerville in Humboldt County. Multiple project objectives include restoration of ecosystem functions on a landscape, although altered by diking and ditching, still retains a unique complex of wetlands, sloughs, a major river system, and the Pacific Ocean. Modification of artificial controls such as culverts and tide gates, reconnection of watercourses, sediment reduction, and better management of flooding potential are ongoing projects with more proposed, all with the objective of improving conditions for aquatic species and wildlife, and the rancher’s need for good pasture for his stock.

Findings

An extensive cultural resources document for the Eel River Estuary Preserve was prepared in 2014 to identify resources within the initial project area. With new project proposals and an expanded Area of Potential Effect (APE), several additional structures were surveyed. This addendum looked at three barns and a house, none of which will be affected by proposed projects. They were surveyed because they fall within the expanded APE.

Methods

Some of the research conducted for the 2014 historic resources document was applicable to the addendum, including land ownerships and newspaper references. For the present report, additional research was conducted in the Recorder’s Office and in the HSU and County libraries. Site visits were made and photographs taken during the first week of December 2015 by Bill Rich and Jamie Roscoe. Jay Russ, who runs a beef operation on lands within the project area, was also present during these visits.

Context

Much was written about the settlement of the Russ ranches between Centerville and Eel River in the 2014 document. A State-established process for securing ownership of swamp and overflowed lands via Certificates of Purchase and eventually patents, brought the Eel River delta and Centerville regions under Euro-American control within a short time after settlement. Joseph Russ, his widow Zipporah, their children, and the extended family that followed acquired the major portion of this lower Eel River area, some of which remains in Russ family ownership.

The Russ agricultural pursuits were livestock based—many dairies, particularly in the Bear River region; sheep; and cattle. The low lands in the Eel River delta and at Centerville were water-rich and with a certain amount of diking, draining, and moving of watercourses, they were able to provide year-round pasture for efficient operations. Those lands continue this efficiency, raising grass-fed beef now highly desired by local consumers. Habitat values and ecosystem functions can be integrated into the mix with on-going agricultural operations. Proposed multi-faceted enhancement projects seek to accommodate all these interests.
Buildings Surveyed

Three barns, each with very different functions, and a house were surveyed as part of this historic resources addendum: the large Shaw dairy barn on the north side of Centerville Road.
and two outbuildings; a loafing barn on the east side of the lane that runs on the section line between sections 5 and 6, 2N2W; and a house and horse barn at the end of that lane.

**Shaw Barn.** The Shaw property at Centerville consisted of the S half SE qt and NW qt SE qt sec 6 and the NE qt NE qt sec 7, 2N2W. The handsome house, now the home of Linda and Jack Russ, is located on the southerly side of Centerville Road in section 7; the barn, milk house, and garage are directly across Centerville Road (northerly side). When Joseph Armitage died in February 1880, he left this particular piece of property to his sister Isabella Shaw; to his other sister, Matilda, he left property in San Francisco (Deeds 3:290, 15 April 1881). Upon Isabella’s death in 1899, the property went to her son, Joseph A. Shaw (Deeds 71:128, 15 Jan. 1901, Decree of Distribution). The four children of Joseph and May Shaw inherited the property upon Joseph’s death in 1946 (Official Records 1443:605, 15 Sept 1950, Decree of Distribution). Joseph and Annette Russ purchased the Shaw Ranch from the Trustee of the Joseph A. Shaw’s estate in 1969 (Official Records 1025:512). A leader in local and state sheep and cattle organizations, this third Joseph Russ, among his many recognitions, was named California Livestock Man of the Year in 1964 (Ferndale Enterprise 1 March 1991).

Joseph Armitage and his sisters, Isabella (Shaw) and Matilda (Kent), came to San Francisco about 1852 via the Isthmus. Isabella was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1825, but Joseph may have been born in the United States about 1830. The family first lived in New York, then Nashville, Tennessee before the three siblings, plus Matilda’s husband, Thomas Kent, reached San Francisco, where Isabella married Seth Lewis Shaw in 1857. Seth and his brother Stephen are generally credited as the “founders” of Ferndale (Ferndale Enterprise 10 Oct. 1899).

The Shaw House on main street in Ferndale has long been identified with this family, including Seth and Isabella Shaw’s son, Joseph Armitage Shaw. Although he lived in Piedmont in the San Francisco area for many years, his obituary indicated that he was born and died in the old family home (Ferndale Enterprise 8 Feb. 1946). All this suggests that he did not live in the house at Centerville and despite efforts to locate tax assessment information to indicate when the house was built, nothing was found up to about 1920. Fortunately, a date was located for the dairy barn.

Work on J.A. Shaw’s new barn at Centerville is progressing very satisfactorily. When completed, this will be one of the most convenient barns in the valley. (Ferndale Enterprise 26 June 1906)

The Shaw Barn is a big barn, measuring 135 feet along its sides and about 84 feet across the front. It is an end-gable structure with center mow and loft bordered on either side by 12-foot driveways with 15-foot cow stables along the exterior walls. Some of the original wooden stanchions extend along the eastern side of the barn. Generally each cow was allotted three feet, so a 135-foot barn suggests space for 45 cows per side. Allowing for a few calf pens, this barn probably accommodated about 80 cows. Accounting for driveways and stables, the center mow for hay storage measures about 30 feet in width. This barn was built to accommodate a large dairy herd; subsequent information about two of the lessees indicates they did, in fact, milk about 80 cows.
The barn is clad with vertical flush board and the roof is covered with corrugated sheet metal that typically replaced original shake roofs not many years after construction. Corrals and an added entry for weighing calves headed for market can be seen in this image. Very early dairies in the Eel River and, in fact, throughout Humboldt County did not sell fresh milk, but processed the cream into butter on the premises and fed the skimmed milk to the hogs. As creameries were built (Eel River Valley having one of the very first on the Pacific Coast—the old Humboldt Creamery operating at Arlynda in January 1890), butter making on the large dairies ended and the creameries took on the labor-intensive job (Ferndale Enterprise 3 Jan. 1890). With less separation and butter-making on the dairies, milk houses were constructed to hold the cans until taken by wagon to the creamery or later for pick up by the creamery trucks. This milk house looks like a standard size with concrete lower walls and a sheet metal roof. Today, milk goes directly from cow to an onsite-tank to milk truck tank to the creamery, never exposed to the environment.

Only two lessees of the Shaw Ranch could be identified. Robert Brown (2010) mentioned that Paul Scalvini was renting the Shaw Ranch around 1950. Brown reported that Scalvini ditched Shaw Creek, turning it onto the Russ marsh for sediment deposition in order to cultivate potatoes. When the creek flooded the adjoining Moranda ranch, he was forced to “shovel” it out and return it to the original channel. Paul Scalvini was a native of Italy, born about 1900. At the time of the 1940 U.S. census, it was living along the Centerville Road with his wife, Mary, and
three young children and John Merga, a hired hand. Scalvini listed his occupation as dairy farmer, so it is possible that he was operating the Shaw Ranch at the time of this census.

In August 1939, Scalvini purchased 82 cows, two bulls, four horses, 24 yearling heifers, tractor, milking machine, and “all farming and dairy utensils on the place,” plus 118 tons of hay in the barn, as well as green feed and growing crops from Mathew Candeias (Misc. S:250, 22 Aug 1939). Unfortunately, the “place” is not identified, so who knows if it referred to the Shaw Ranch or some other place.

The other lessee was Charley Manzi. When the Russ south barn on the beach burned in the fall of 1947, the newspaper reported that Charles Manzi, who was operating the Shaw ranch at Centerville, was the first to discover the blaze as he started to milk about 3:30 a.m. one Saturday morning (Ferndale Enterprise 9 Sept. 1947). A chattels mortgage by Charley and Mary Manzi to Joe and Mary Leonardo in April 1951 listed the Manzi dairy stock and equipment: 80 dairy cows; one bull; three double unit Universal Milking Machine with McCormack pump; one “D” tractor; one J.D. “B” tractor; one pulverizer; three, 14-inch plows; one nine-foot disc, all “being located on what is known as the Shaw Ranch near Centerville” (Official Records 185:517, 24 April 1951). Brown (2010) said that Charlie Manzi was on the Shaw ranch in the early 1950s, and that when he left, the ranch was rented out to raise potatoes, Earl Ambrosini managing the potato operations.

Also on this piece of property, west of the barn, is a wood-frame garage. An end-gable structure, one-story with sliding doors to accommodate two vehicles, this little building fits nicely into its surroundings, quite handsome in its simple authenticity.
Across Centerville Road is the lovely home of Jack and Linda Russ. Renovated and modernized, the house has two stories with a hipped roof and centered portico with railed balcony above. The roof ridge parallels the front façade. Paired and single windows are symmetrically arranged across the front façade. A single window above the portico and centered entrance (with transom above) are flanked by paired windows in both stories. All of the windows are changed out with artificial pane divisions, simulating a six-over-six arrangement. Small, tasteful brackets extend from the cornice to the window moldings in the upper story.

The house sits against the hillside, well-placed above the wet flatlands just a few yards to the north. One of the best ways to date early houses are windows and doors, but without those original features and little help from the tax assessments and newspaper references, no date was determined for the house.
House and Horse Barn at End of Lane. These buildings appear to be right on the quarter section line through the center of section 6, 2N2W, at the end of the lane that runs directly north from Centerville Road. However, the best guess is that they are in the very northeast corner of the southeast quarter of section 6.

This land has long been in the extended Joseph Russ family, beginning with his early acquisition of swamp and overflowed lands through Certificates of Purchase, followed by government-issued patents. Russ died in 1886 and his widow, Zipporah, and the ten surviving children inherited his vast grazing lands, timber, town properties, the home place, and personal property. The piece of ground where these buildings are located was part of the Occidental ranch, one-third of which went to Mary Russ Robarts. Her husband, James Robarts, was actively involved in management of this ranch between about 1889 and an accident in 1894 which confined him to a “rolling chair.” During those five or so years, James was busy on the ranch,
building bridges across sloughs, including the Centerville and Cut-Off sloughs for the “convenience of his stock,” so they could pass from one range to another; construction of a large barn on the Occidental reclamation district; and in 1890 the construction of a dwelling house (Ferndale Enterprise 12 April 1889, 30 Aug. 1889).

James T. Robarts informs us that he has secured the services of Joseph Robbins to erect for him a dwelling house on the Occidental ranch for the use of the men employed thereon. Mr. Robarts intends milking a large number of cows on this place as soon as he can so arrange. He will sell his milk to the Humboldt Creamery. (Ferndale Enterprise 18 April 1890).

It is unknown, of course, whether this is the dwelling house mentioned in this 1890 reference. Obviously, no large dairy barn remains, as fire and flood could have removed it years ago. The house is of some interest, however, because it represents a house-type built during settlement—a one-and-a-half story, end-gable structure with an open veranda across the front. Original siding is a standard, horizontal shiplap, now covered with asbestos shingles. It has a modern metal roof. A front-door transom remains, but the entry door and all the windows have
been changed. Although the house-type suggests an early house, without original windows it is very difficult to estimate a construction date, so the turn-of-the-20th century date is as good a guess as any.

It measures 30 feet across the front and about 32 feet along the side. The open veranda, 7.5 feet in width, extends across the front of the house and there is an exterior chimney that may be a replacement of the original brick chimney. Two, one-story additions are attached to the rear of the house, one flat against the back wall (18 feet across); the other perpendicular at the southwest corner, roughly 14x21 feet in size.

The horse barn associated with this house is a side-gable structure with two sliding doors and a person door on the east façade, which faces the back of the house. Siding is vertical, flush boards and roofing is corrugated sheet metal. The gable-end walls originally had two square fixed windows of six panes. Corrals and a loading chute are adjacent to the barn on the south side.
Measuring 60.5 feet across the front and 30 feet on the side, this little barn was never used as a cow barn. Tie stalls with mangers and saddle racks indicate it was used as a horse barn. Some of the barn is floored with wood planks; other parts have been filled with dirt and large cobbles, along with a peripheral strip of concrete just inside the exterior walls, probably for containing water runoff. The barn currently provides storage for tools and equipment. No attempt was made to date this barn.
Tie Stalls in Horse Barn. Photo by Jamie Roscoe, December 2015.
Loafing Barn. Located on the east side of the lane that terminates at the house and horse barn described above, this large, open shed measures 50x80 feet and was built in the 1990s. It has cement lower walls with substantial metal beams and roof trusses resting on the walls, leaving an open space at the top of the walls. There are no interior structures, such as feed troughs or hay racks, since its purpose is simply to provide cover for stock during inclement weather. It is unfloored except for six-foot driveways of grooved cement. Farm equipment is stored within and outside this structure, which has been split off from the adjacent “Peterson” property.
Bibliography
Brown, Robert. “Shaw Creek; Russ Creek.” October 2010. Manuscript in possession of Jay Russ.


Ferndale Enterprise. Published in Ferndale, 1878 to present. HSU Library, MF 719.

Maps:
Belcher Atlas of Humboldt County. Available online HSU Library Special Collections.
Metsker Map. Ownership by township and range. HSU Library, Humboldt Room.
U.S.G.S. Ferndale Quad. 15 minute. 1959; revised 1972.

Shaw Barn and Ranch to the north. Google Earth, May 2012.