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Arcata Sports Complex Project

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Arcata Sports Complex Project
Janet Eidsness
May 1988

Introduction

The City of Arcata is developing a sports complex, including playing fields and structures, on its property lying south and west of 7th and Union Streets. Prior to the commencement of construction, an archaeological investigation was performed to determine the extent and significance of a previously-identified prehistoric site. In addition to artifacts associated with the prehistoric time period, historic artifacts were also encountered. To assist in the evaluation of these artifacts, research of the historic component of the property was undertaken. This report discusses the historic environment and land use, land ownerships, biographical information on some of the families associated with the property, and a settlement-period house which once occupied the site.

Environment and Land-Use

Humboldt Bay is one of California's largest coastal estuaries. Historically the bay may have covered 27,000 acres but land reclamation has reduced it to about 16,000 acres, excluding tributary sloughs. Most of the agricultural land bordering the bay was once salt marsh, which originally covered 7,000 acres prior to the reclamation projects begun in the late 1800's. (Monroe, 1973)

Freshwater streams, salt marsh, and intertidal flats combined to create a highly productive environment for a variety of life forms. One of the earliest descriptions of the bay and its environs is contained in a letter from Captain Douglas Ottinger, master of the Laura Virginia, one of the first vessels to enter the bay in the spring of 1850. He wrote his wife from aboard ship on April 20, 1850:

I must now tell you that the land is so beautiful and the soil so rich that I was almost fascinated with the scene, and if I could have you and Ginney, Rachel and our family, with some of our valued friends, I could almost give up Erie. In addition to the good qualities of the land, the waters produce clams in abundance as well as fish; and geese, ducks, snipe, plover, etc. are about as numerous as wild pigeons at Erie in the spring. The wood is not less productive than the waters and droves of elk and deer, with a goodly number of bears are always to be found. (Lewis, 1966 pp. 181, 182)

Rapid settlement of the Humboldt Bay region followed its rediscovery by a land party in December 1849. In the spring of 1850 the townsite of Union (Arcata) was laid out on the prairie above the marsh lands with members of the Union Company immediately claiming lands in and around the new community. Within the year, a young blacksmith from Massachusetts named William E. Phillips arrived on the bay and over the next several years acquired most of the land in the west half of Section 33, 6N1E, where the project property is located.

Bordering the property on the west is a small creek which has its origins in Arcata's Community Forest and its outlet into the bay via Gannon Slough. A U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map, published in 1894 but displaying topographic information executed between 1869 and 1870, shows an extensive network of channels and creeks draining into the slough, which empties into the bay just north of the mouth of Jacoby Creek. An 1855 newspaper reference indicates that the slough, known historically as Big or Embarcadero Slough, was of sufficient size to accommodate freight-carrying vessels for some distance from the bay: "We are requested to state that freight will hereafter be delivered from vessels -- by the steamer Glide and the 'Know Nothing' -- either at the Wharf or at the Embarcadero of the Slough at the option of shippers...." (Humboldt Times, 28 April 1855, p.2c.1) According to information in the Susie Baker Fountain Collection, practically all of the businesses in Union had warehouses on Big Slough with buildings stretching from the main landing on Front Street to the upper one on Fifth (SBF Notebooks 42:191). Paralleling the Slough, these buildings, along with the landing/wharf facilities, would have been on Phillips land and may account for the substantial (\$1000 to \$1300) assessed value of improvements on his land listed in the tax assessment records for the 1850's and 1860's (Tax Assessment Books, HSU Library).

The south half of the SW quarter and the NW quarter of the SW quarter of Section 33 are identified as "Salt Marsh" on an 1855 General Surveyor's Office map (Assessor's Office, Humboldt Co. Courthouse) and as "swamp and overflow lands" in Survey 25, performed by the County Surveyor for Phillips on December 16, 1857 (Swamp and Overflow Lands. p. 50). These lands provided habitat for the abundance of bird life and other associated species which Captain Ottinger described and maintained the integrity of Gannon Slough, which served the commercial interests of the community.

Non-timbered upland areas, which would have included the project property, were used by Phillips for livestock. According to the agricultural products schedule for the 1860 federal census, Phillips had 70 acres of improved and 210 acres of unimproved land, valued at \$1700. Although he had farm implements and machinery valued at \$250, he apparently raised no grain as did other bottom land farmers. He did, however, have an extensive livestock operation consisting of 140 head of cattle, exceeding the next Union Township farmer by 100 head. In addition, he had five horses, two mules, 12 milk cows, and 11 pigs -- quite a farm for newly-settled lands on the bay.

Diking and reclamation of bay marsh lands west and south of Arcata began in 1892 with the construction of the Harpst and Spring Dike which extended from Butcher Slough (near G Street) around the edge of the bay's mudflats to Jacoby Creek. Ten feet wide at the base, four-and-a-half feet wide at the top and five feet high, the dike was 400 rods (6600 feet) long and reclaimed about 350 acres (Arcata Union, 18 June 1892, p.3c.2).

The editor of the Arcata Union described the reclaimed lands as a "very large pasture" and opined that Phillips and others would have never foreseen such events:

The first owner who took up this marsh as swamp and overflowed land never dreamed that this large stretch of country from Arcata to Jacoby Creek, inhabited only by the festive clam and the busy little crab would some day be pasture for hundreds of cattle.... (Arcata Union, 18 June 1892, p.3c.2)

Failing to recognize the value of these wetlands even to the "festive clam and the busy little crab," local people supported their conversion to grazing lands:

For many years residents of Arcata owned the tide lands adjoining the bay south of town, using them as an inferior pasture occasionally, but the salt water made the deed very inferior and the land, covered by the tide twice a day, served only as a breeding place for mosquitoes and was an eye sore as one approached the place by the railroad. But this is all in process of change. Over a year ago certain men in Arcata determined to redeem their marsh land, if possible, and immediately commenced to dyke against the tide, beginning just east of the railroad embankment, and working east to the place of M.P. Roberts, who joined with them. (Roberts owned the lands formerly claimed by Phillips)

...At the present time the dyke forms a most efficient barrier against the tide, thoroughly redeeming what would otherwise be valueless marsh land. The amount of land reclaimed is about 400 acres, which, at the present time -- but little over a year from the time the dyke was completed, affords excellent pasturage for many head of cattle and horses, as the fat stock of the ranch of M.P. Roberts, and of his neighbor, Messrs. Harpst & Spring abundantly prove. The land has not yet been seeded to clover, as there is still too much salt in it for that grass to grow luxuriantly, but here and there sprigs of clover are coming up showing that when the rains of another winter have done their part to clear the land of salt, that the land will be inferior to none on Arcata bottom in its ability to grow a strong crop of that grass. This is land worth in

the beginning but a few bits an acre for inferior pasture, transformed in the course of a year to a valuable property, the equal, if not the superior of any other, for grass growing and crop raising purposes. (Arcata Union, 19 Aug. 1893, p.3c.2)

The major portion of lands in the west half of Section 33 south of 7th Street continues to be used for cattle grazing some eight-five years after these glowing words were written, although some land has been lost to development. The M.P. Roberts Ranch functioned as a dairy until the mid 1960's when the Union Street/Samoa Blvd. project was constructed. The project property, owned by the City of Arcata, is presently leased for cattle grazing.

The Seventh Street/Old Arcata Road to Eureka generally follows the route used by native people as they moved from the "land a little above the water" (Arcata Prairie) to the village sites near Eureka. Early settlers utilized the trail also, although a bay crossing was preferred since a passable wagon road was a long time in the making. Until completion of the marsh route, present Highway 101, in the 1920's, land travelers between Eureka and Arcata passed along Seventh Street and the project property.

Land Ownerships

Early land claims and transactions are somewhat unclear because the records are incomplete and often contradictory, and because the land was unsurveyed, resulting in metes and bounds descriptions. However, through a preemption claim, filed in 1851 (General Record A:224), and a claim to swamp and overflow lands, surveyed on December 16, 1857 (Swamp and Overflow Lands, p. 50), William E. Phillips acquired 280 acres of public land in the west half of Section 33, 6N1E. Both claims were later patented (Patent Book 1:185, 9 March 1861; Patent Book 1:275, 1 July 1864). In a land trade in 1867, 17 acres of land in the NW quarter of the NW quarter lying south of the center of 7th Street were conveyed to Phillips by his neighbor Findley Lindsey, who lived across the road and 23 acres in the NE quarter of the NW quarter lying north of the road were conveyed to the Lindseys by Phillips (Deed Book F:703, 518). When Phillips' wife, Sarah, divorced him, she relinquished her interest in the land described as "bounded on the south by the south line of Section 33, on the west by the west line of said section, on the east by the Meridian line running through the center of said section, and on the north by a line running east and west from a point in the center of the county road due north of the dwelling house of W.E. Phillips and comprising the SW quarter, south half of the NW quarter, and the southern portion of the north half of the NW quarter, Section 33 (Deed Book F:705).

In March 1869, Brice M. Stokes purchased the 274 acres from Phillips, who had left the county two years earlier (Deed Book G:367). Stokes sold 197 acres to Melvin P. Roberts in October 1888 (Deed Book 28:81). The farm, enlarged to 225 acres by Roberts, was managed by his wife and children after his death in 1926.

In 1935 the farm was divided between the two Roberts' daughters with the project property retained by Hazel Roberts Anderson. This portion of the farm was sold to Brizard Matthews Machinery Co. in 1959 (O.R. 598:221) and to the Arcata Public Improvement Corp. in 1981 (O.R. 1639:975).

Of particular interest to this history is a one-acre-and-16-rod parcel, within the project property, which was sold by Brice M. Stokes to his daughter Melissa Green in June 1877 (Deed Book U:657). The parcel extended 363 feet eastward along 7th Street from the western property line near the creek and ran north and south 132 feet. Melissa Green sold it back to her father in May 1883 (Deed Book 9:311) and he, in turn, sold it to one of his sons, Brice M. Stokes, Jr., in November 1889 (Deed Book 33:1). In 1902 one-third of an acre was added to the north of the parcel when the Lindseys sold a strip along the south side of 7th Street to Dora Stokes, wife of Brice, Jr. (Deed Book 80:54). In November 1920 Dora Stokes sold both parcels to Melvin P. Roberts (Deed Book 150:383).

Biographical Information

The first owner of the land, Massachusetts native William E. Phillips, arrived in Humboldt County in February 1851, when he was 24 (Fountain, 1964-66).

According to the 1860 federal census, Phillips and his wife, Sarah, a native of Illinois, had two young sons, William R., age 5, and Edwin A., age 3. A daughter, Ann, had died of whooping cough at a year of age in November 1859. Living with the Phillips family at the time of the census were two farm laborers, one of whom was a Robert Phillips from Massachusetts, age 26. Also in the household was a six-year-old Indian boy.

Phillips built the little house at the corner of 7th and Union Streets and the large barn of mortice and tenon construction which once stood a short distance to the east of the house. In recognition of its fine early settlement Greek Revival architecture, the Phillips House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

The second owner, Brice M. Stokes, arrived in Arcata in the fall of 1854 with his wife, Catherine, and their five children after a five-month trip overland from Missouri. Accompanied by Catherine's parents, her brothers and their families, and Brice's mother, they were drawn to Humboldt by Catherine's brother, Isaac Wilson, a member of the land party which discovered the bay in 1849. Wilson, no doubt, wrote home about this land of giant trees and golden opportunities. The trip westward was a true pioneer tale. Catherine's mother died and was buried on the Platte River in Nebraska and Brice's mother died in the Sacramento Valley before the family could make it to the new home on the northcoast. But the trip was not without joy; baby Margaret joined the four Stokes siblings at Willow Spring, Utah. (Fountain, 7:149)

Four more children were born in Humboldt, where the family lived first in Arcata and later near Blue Lake before settling on the Phillips farm in 1869. One of the sons, Marion, ran the dike which reclaimed the marsh land once owned by his family (Arcata Union, 29 July 1915). A farmer and stock raiser all his adult life, Brice died in May 1891 just a few days before his 64th birthday (Death Records, Recorder's Office, Humboldt Co. Courthouse). He died of heart disease which apparently afflicted his five sons, all of whom died at an early age, one in his forties, two in their fifties, and two in their early sixties. Catherine Stokes died in 1909 at the age of 84 and was survived by eight of her nine children. (Arcata Union, 27 Feb. 1909)

Melvin P. Roberts, born in Maine in 1841, came to California at age 19 via the Isthmus of Panama. After a few months of mining, he arrived in Humboldt County, where he became involved in timber and ranching, an involvement which he maintained until his retirement. He began the dairy business in the Arcata bottom in 1882 and continued that enterprise after purchasing the Stokes place in 1888. He was instrumental in the land reclamation projects in the Arcata area and active in politics. He was elected to the State Assembly in 1901 and later served on Arcata's Board of Trustees. (Davis, 1911)

Roberts was married to May Nelson in September 1887 and they began their life together in a new house on his farm west of town. (Arcata Union, 10 Sept. 1887) There were three children -- Atlant (Mrs. Rush Dolson), Melvin P., Jr., and Hazel (Mrs. Frank Anderson), all of whom were born while the family lived on the farm purchased from Stokes. (1910 federal census) The family moved into the house at the southeast corner of 10th and G Streets in Arcata in 1899, but Roberts continued to maintain the dairy which he leased to various people, including Pete Mazza in 1900 (Arcata Union, 21 April 1900) and Frank Riberio in 1910 (Fountain, 1964-66). Others who leased the dairy included A. White and Sons, George Cabalzar, and Bill Tonini (personal communication, Chris Cabalzar, June 6, 1988). Roberts died in January 1926 and Mrs. Roberts in August 1933 (Arcata Union, 21 Jan. 1926; 18 Aug. 1933).

The Stokes House

A 1932 photograph, courtesy of Chris Cabalzar, establishes the original appearance of the house which once stood on the project property. It was located on the one-acre-and-16-rod parcel that Brice M. Stokes sold to his daughter Melissa Green in 1877 (Deed Book U:657). The photograph shows a settlement-era house of one-and-a-half stories, front-facing gabled roofline with cornice returns, 6/6 windows, off-centered front door topped by a transom, and shiplap siding. This house-type was built in Humboldt County during the 1870's, reflecting cultural origins in contrast to planbook or architect-designed houses, which began to appear locally in the mid to late 1880's.

Date of construction for the Stokes House, which stood about feet to the east and feet to the south of the 7th Street cherry tree , is estimated to be c. 1878. The parcel, purchased for \$25, does not appear on the tax assessment roles until 1879-80, when an improvement value of \$150 is listed. Assessments were made in the spring of the year and initial improvement values generally indicate construction the previous year, so the house may have been built in 1877 or 1878. When Melissa Green sold it back to her father in 1883, the selling price was \$400, which also indicates the presence of developments.

Except for the Cabalzar family, it was not possible to determine who the various residents of the house were between 1878 and 1935, when it was moved to its present location on Bayside Road. Melissa Stokes Green and her husband, Frank, who were married in 1876, may have lived there initially, but when she sold the house in 1883, she was living in Walla Walla, Washington. Brice Stokes, Jr. purchased the house in 1889 and perhaps he and his family lived there during the 1890's, but by 1900 Brice and Dora and their four children were living in Grizzly Bluff on the Eel River. (1900 federal census) Brice died in 1911 (Fountain, 7:149) and when Dora sold the house to M.P. Roberts in 1920, she was living in L.A. County (Deed Book 150:383).

Mrs. M.P. Roberts, Jr., who lived in the Phillips House after her marriage in 1917, said that they always referred to this house as the Stokes House (personal communication, Sept. 1984). This tends to add weight to the possibility that some members of the Stokes family lived here prior to 1920. After that time, the house may have been rented by various families who worked on the Roberts dairy.

George and Emeritha Cabalzar and their three sons, Martin, Julius, and Chris, lived in the house from about 1928 to 1934. Emigrating from Switzerland about 1923, the Cabalzars lived first at Freshwater, then Arcata, before Mr. Cabalzar moved his family to the Stokes House when he began working for A. White and Sons Sanitary Dairy which leased the Roberts Ranch. Mr. Cabalzar later leased part of the ranch himself and milked about 32 cows. (Personal communication, Julius and Chris Cabalzar)

The slope of the land required the rear portion of the house to be supported by 10-12 foot high pilings, creating a work and storage area beneath the house. An elevated walkway on the west side ran from the front yard to a side porch which entered into the kitchen. The one-and-a-half story section contained a west-side bedroom, steep steps to the two upstairs bedrooms, and a hall leading to the livingroom which extended across the back of the larger section. Attached to the rear of the house was a one-story kitchen and pantry. The toilet was located to the rear of the side porch.

The garage was located near the road just to the west of the cherry tree. A small barn for horses and the family cow stood on a flat alongside the creek on the west boundary of the parcel. Just below the house and somewhat west was a chicken house. The family had a garden spot behind the house. The historic artifacts

were found downslope and directly behind the rear of the house. These artifacts may represent a fifty-year period of occupancy from about 1878 to 1928; the Cabalzars hauled their trash to the Arcata dump, according to Julius Cabalzar. Window glass and other materials associated with the house's construction could have been deposited when the house was moved across the pasture to its present location in 1935.

Since its settlement by William Phillips in the early 1850's, the land in the west half of Section 33 has been used for the production of livestock for both beef and milk. Phillips' barn, built by 1854 (Humboldt Times, 14 Oct. 1854) on the flat just east of his little house and enlarged to a structure 80 by 120 feet in 1900 (Arcata Union, 21 April 1900) saw more than a century of use before it was demolished in the 1970's. The newer barns, located below the Phillips House, were constructed in 1935, the smaller one for the farm horses and the larger to accommodate 50 dairy cows (Arcata Union, 1 March 1935). Although the dairy operations ceased some twenty years ago, the land has continued to provide for cattle grazing, even to this day, despite some development and highway construction. Certainly, cattle grazing within two blocks of Arcata's City Hall is testimony to the tenacity of this land to endure.

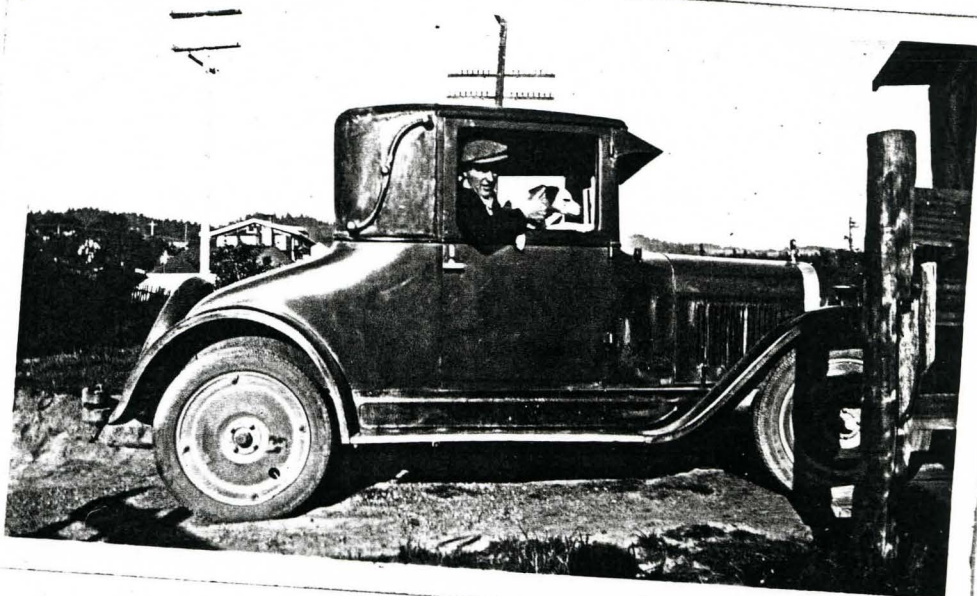
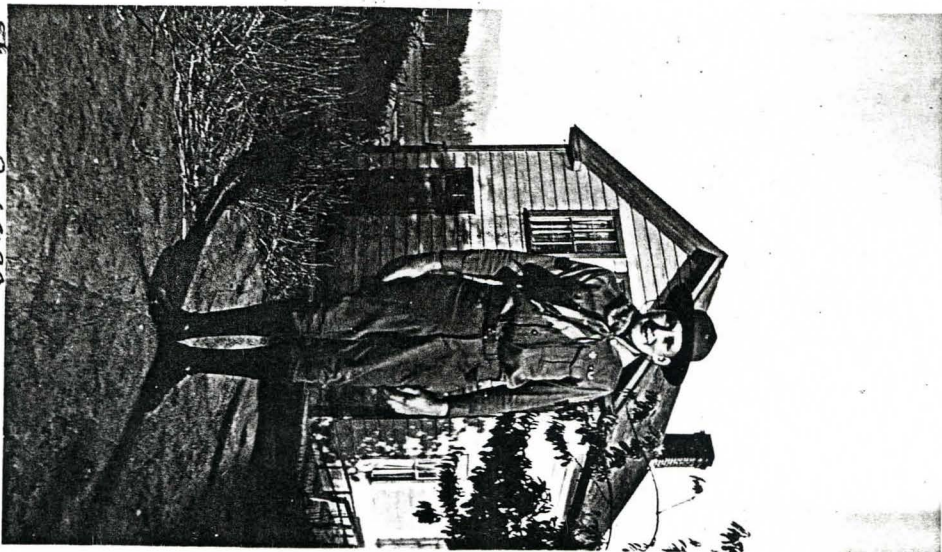
The proposed project will eliminate this historic use; however, the physical evidence of that use can be retained through the barns and the Phillips House, all of which should be rehabilitated and maintained as part of the City's development of the area.

Prepared by Susie Van Kirk
June 1988

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June 3, 1938



Janet:

I would suggest you write a non-technical summary of the prehistoric information for the City to use. I find it hard to follow the methodology and for the layperson, even the significance of the site is not clearly stated. For the technical people involved in this kind of thing, I am sure your information is excellent, but I think you need to make a short summary for the public so that it clearly understands the significance of the information, i.e., that it shows older use than has been found locally, etc.

Also, are you going to make recommendations for protection of the cultural values on the site? I feel this is extremely important to guide the City as it moves forward on this project.

Info for page 23:

The Stokes House was moved from its original location to 325 Bayside Road during August 1935. The Roberts' daughter, Mrs. Rush Dolson, and her husband and children lived in the house, which is still owned by a Dolson daughter, Martha Dolson Wayne of Los Angeles. Just how the house was moved is unknown, but according to Mrs. Wayne's diary, moving began on August 10th and was completed August 17th, indicating, perhaps, that teams and sleds were used to move the house across the flat below the slopes of the hillside.

Info for page 18:

The first commercial logging and milling of redwoods in Arcata took place on Campbell Creek in the vicinity of "C" and 11th Streets where Thomas Titlow and others built a stream-run sawmill in 1853. The 1855 General Surveyor's Office map shows a short piece of railroad that could have been used to bring logs and lumber from the mill to Gannon's Slough. Logging in East Arcata and what is now the Community Forest was initiated by James Gannon in 1869. A letter in the Weekly Humboldt Times in 1874 describes Gannon's logging operations:

Lumber Resources, Arcata, June 17, 1874. Mr. Editor: In the second letter concerning the lumber interest around Arcata, we desire to speak of the logging claim nearest the village. It is in the possession of Mr. James Gannon. The road leading from Arcata to Eureka crosses a railroad about a half mile from the former place. This railroad leads up to the timber where the logs are cut. The length of this railroad from the landing, where the logs are placed on the trucks, to the Embarcadero Slough, which leads into the Bay, is a mile and a quarter. The grade of the road is a gradual descent (one place rather abrupt) and the four horses attached to the truck easily haul the heaviest logs. From the terminus of the railroad to the timber where the logs are cut there is a splendid snaking ground, about a half a mile long.

The 1894 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map (topography executed in 1869 and 1870) shows a railroad running southerly from about 8th Street in the vicinity of "B" and "C" Streets, across 7th Street to connect with Gannon's Slough at a point which would have been on a line with 1st Street. This railroad would have crossed or perhaps bordered what was then the Stokes farm. In fact, when B.M.Stokes sold the house site to his daughter Melissa in 1877, the deed description refers to the property as commencing at the northwest corner of Stokes' farm "near Gannon's Railroad and running thence south parallel to the railroad...."