

## **The History of Camp Cazadero**

Cazadero Camp Beginnings by Sara Gerboth

A mysterious thing happened at Cazadero Camp before we got it and we have never found out what actually took place. The members of the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ wanted a conference ground of their own. The churches were dissatisfied with using other's grounds only at the less desirable leftover times. Sentiment was leaning toward a camp in Sonoma County and the conference appointed a staff member to search for property. In 1944, she spotted an ad in the San Francisco paper for some land in Cazadero and called Hank Hayden, the minister at Guerneville and asked him to go look at it. Hank, a busy man, decided to take care of two things at once. In his hiking shorts, so unministerial, with his old car full of Guerneville Cub Scouts, he stopped by the little General Store-Post Office-Real Estate Office of Ed Morhardt in Cazadero to inquire about the property. But Ed wasn't busy that day, so he loaded them all into his pick-up truck and took them up to see it (Dorothy McHugh's sons Rod and Bruce MacKenzie were part of that troop).

The description read: "800 acres north of Cazadero, seven buildings, year-round spring and tank. Redwoods, oaks, Doug firs. Terrible, steep road fording creek. Creek very bad in winter. Need jeep or truck to get up there."

Ed drove them part of the way, fording the stream several times. Finally he stopped and said, "You will have to hike the rest of the way." They piled out and saw ahead the very steep hill which the pick-up couldn't make with 13 people. Hank and the boy Scouts climbed the hill and looked at the property and into the buildings.

"The Ollie Bradley Truth Rest Home," the sign said and Hank noted that though it was 1944, 1928 calendars still hung on the walls in the old lodge (Redwood Lodge), baby cribs stood ready for babies, toothbrushes were still in holders and beds were all made up with now molding blankets. Vines and shrubs had overgrown everything, like a jungle. Bobbette Thompson, a camper, helped clean out this same lodge at the first Easter work camp. She remembers all the clothes in the closets and dresser drawers and other personal items such as combs and brushes lying around as if the occupant would be back any minute. It looked as if they had all left in a hurry. She wondered why. What had happened?

We found out later that the Rev. Mr. Bradley and his wife Ollie, ran the church of Truth in Santa Rosa. They acquired the Cazadero property as a group retirement home, but why then the baby cribs? It has been a community established on principles of self-sufficiency and independence and they tried hard to stay away from the town and other civilization. They tried to live on the mountain without contact with others. They planted all kinds of fruits and vegetables and preserved them for the winter. One camper tells of cleaning out the canned food basement and throwing away hundreds of colorful jars of peaches, apricots, applesauce, blackberries, raspberries, tomatoes, snap beans, onions and quince. Even though it smelled wonderful, they could take no chance with the possibility of food poisoning from eating the inherited food. The glass jars were hauled up the hill to the dump, and the beautiful contents were buried in trenches dug in the hillside next to the basement. Why hadn't they taken the canned fruit with them, or at least come back for it?

Despite all the questions he had, Hank liked the beautiful meadow surrounded by redwoods, firs and oaks, and he saw potential there. He was intrigued by the variety of fruit trees in the orchard and the gnarly old grape vines. The lodge and the old farmhouse looked sturdy. He eagerly notified the Conference office of his opinion of what he had seen. An appointed committee came to look it over, but enthusiasm waned when the older members of the committee could hardly make it up the steep grade and they submitted a negative report.

"Too remote," they said.

Hank Hayden responded by giving a moving presentation to the Midwinter Conference of Pilgrim Fellowship, the youth groups. The PFers pledged \$1,000 of the \$21,000 asking price, and since the reports from all the others that visited the camp were overwhelmingly positive, the Conference decided

to go ahead with the purchase. The 800 acres was purchased in the winter of 1945 for \$21,000. (Wages then were about \$1/hour, and houses sold for about \$7,000.) Churches of the Northern California Conference were asked to donate. Hank went back to the camp with a photographer and the best five of the photos were enlarged to 8 ½ x 11 and sent to all the churches with descriptive flyers. Local churches had lively money raising campaigns and the total mortgage was paid off in three months.

The next big task was preparation of the property for the summer camping program. The Conference minister asked the Sebastopol Pilgrim Fellowship to go up to Cazadero Camp on Washington's Birthday three-day weekend to try to make enough of it livable so that a Conference Work Camp could be held during Easter vacation. We responded enthusiastically. On Saturday morning, Jack, my boyfriend, drove their Jeep with my mother and me and several other kids, while his father drove their pickup just ahead of us with Jack's mother in the front and kids in the back. They had told us that the road was bad and that we would have to ford the stream several times, but we had no idea what we were in for...We had been uneasy when it rained hard all night and sure enough, the stream was large, brown, roiling, and over its banks in places. We paused behind as the pickup went through the water several times, and then we followed. We took pick-ups and the Jeep only, and it was a good thing. One time, as the pickup went through the water, it hesitated and stopped, and the engine stalled.

"Pile out!" Jack said, and we did.

"Get out and push!" he yelled to the kids in the back of the pickup. They all did. We waded into the swift brown water, shoes, clothes and all. Jack's father got the engine started and we pushed and pushed. The tires spun, but slowly, slowly, the truck moved forward and out of the water. Most of the boys were dressed in Levis rolled up to their ankles, the style then. Most of the girls were dressed in daring boy's Levis, just recently considered acceptable for girls (there were no Levis made for girls then), and even though we had them rolled up to our knees as was the fashion of the time, they still got wet, and our shoes and socks filled with mud. Nobody seemed to care. We thought it was fun. We all jumped back into our vehicles and on we went. This scene replayed several times and I noticed that Jack's dad seemed angry. I was glad I wasn't in his truck. The Jeep made it just fine. When we had finally crossed the seventh and last ford we stopped and rested a few minutes before we headed up the steep hill. We found out later it was a 28% grade, and by the time we made it to the top, both radiators were steaming. We all piled out, happy to be there. Jack's father walked away grumbling.

Our job that weekend was to clean out the old farm house (located where the north end of Gill Lodge and kitchen are now) and make it usable. My mother, Jack's mother, the other girls and I walked to the farmhouse, opened the door and peered in. It was impossible to see anything. In every room layers and layers of cobwebs loaded with dust hung from ceiling to floor. In the dimness at the other end of the kitchen we could make out a big old black wood stove.

"I guess we have our work cut out for us." my mother said. "I should say so!" Jack's mother agreed.

The assignment for the two mothers was to clean out the kitchen well enough to be able to prepare all the meals for this crew of twelve kids and adults for the weekend with the boxes of groceries that they had brought with them. I admired the way they approached things: no moaning or groaning; they just started in. They had brought some cleaning supplies, and we found some old mops and brooms there and went to it. We started by pulling down dirty cobwebs. As it turned out, the spiders making the webs were among the smallest creatures we had to worry about. Mice and rats were everywhere, even in the stove, bats hung from the ceilings, and raccoons, skunks, and rattlesnakes lived under the house. When the girls first came upon mice nests, they squealed.

"Oh, we have to go get the boys to come and kill the mice!" they yelled.

My mother and I looked at each other. We lived on a chicken ranch and frequently had to kill mice in the feed bins. We grabbed sticks of wood and stepped up and bopped the mice. Big gray ones, and little wiggly pink ones. The girls stood back and watched dumbfounded. We were called on many more times that weekend and I didn't know if I should be honored or disgraced.

The kitchen was long and narrow with the big black wood stove taking up most of the west wall. When we reached the stove, we found large kettles sitting on the stove with big metal stirring spoons in them, and one had a layer of burned beans in the bottom. Again, as if the people had left in a hurry.

“Let’s go start on the dining room,” I said, wanting to get away from this spooky stuff. “OK,” Ann responded. More cobwebs, more dirt.

“Look,” Ann said, “there are still dishes on the tables, and silverware and cups, too, and look how the chairs are all pushed back helter skelter, like the people all jumped up and left in a hurry.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and left the beans to burn.”

I pulled down a few more cobwebs with my broom and made my way to the nearest table.

“Look,” I said, “there’s still old dried up coffee in the bottoms of these cups.” We called the others to come and look. I wondered if the ghosts of those people were still hanging around here somewhere. We fell silent as we continued pulling down cobwebs and carried the dishes from the dining room to the kitchen sink. The moms had cleaned out the stove, built a fire, and had water heating in big kettles for cleaning and washing dishes. We looked around some more. The dining room walls were covered with proof pages from old newspapers that had been painted a light color, and the ceilings were very high and made of pressed tin. Out back we found two wash tubs full of clothes, the clothing dried hard and crisp in positions they would have been when under water. The mystery continued to build. We labored hard that whole weekend: mopping, scrubbing walls and tables, washing dishes, pots, pans and silverware and then starting over and washing and scrubbing away more layers of dirt, but all the while pondering the mystery.

Later, the boys found a casket under an array of junk beneath the dorm. The pleated white satin lining was pressed way down, wrinkled, and stained, as if it had been used, perhaps more than once. Were people buried here somewhere? A chill ran down my spine.

The boys worked on pruning the jungle of shrubbery and vines that grew up over everything including the windows and they also made a safe trail around the ranch house and down to the dormitory. We were all 14-16 years old and much more interested in the opposite sex than in anything else. I was so attracted to Jack that I didn’t think about much else. But we worked hard and had a good time, too. Jim Senter, the Sebastopol minister, encouraged the girls and boys to sing back and forth to each other and started contests to see who could get their jobs done first. The time passed quickly, helped along by choruses of *I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*, *Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah*, and *She’ll be Comin’ ’round the Mountain When She Comes*.

We ate in the ranch house dining room, sharing stories of the burnt beans, the dishes on the tables, and the casket under the dorm. We didn’t sleep in the dormitory rooms, which were still full of belongings, but threw our sleeping bags on the floor in the living room of the dorm where we had built a fire in the big stone fireplace. Fortunately, we had electricity and running water, but no hot water. We pulled off our muddy clothes in the bathroom and dressed in dry clothes to sleep in. Most of us girls wet our hair and rolled it up into pin curls all over our heads as we did every night, then wrapped them in bandanas to cover the pin curls. We were shy at first about wearing pin curls and bandanas around the boys, but we were all so excited about sleeping in the same room with boys that we got over it quickly. Jim Senter slept with all the kids, well, tried to sleep. He had the boys, who were all on one side of the room, sing Good night Ladies to the girls and then the girls, who were all on the other side, sing, Tell Me Why the Stars Do Shine to the boys, and then he settled down to sleep or to try to sleep. We talked on into the wee hours, scaring each other by making up creepy stories about the people that had lived and maybe died there. We all reveled in this new experience of sleeping together. The adults, except for Jim, slept in the ranch house.

The April Easter Work Camp of youth from all over Northern California went well and things were readied for summer camps. Thirty-five to forty teens and adults spent a back breaking and soul searching week. Tools and tack and manure were cleaned out of the barn to prepare it to be the boy’s dorm. City kids that had never used an outhouse were now digging them - “holy holes on the hill.” They

had to dispose of old food, garbage, worn old furniture and rugs. They built a huge bonfire in the meadow and threw in old furniture and rugs and everything else that could not be salvaged. Everything was so wet that spring that nobody worried about fire getting out of control. Several weekend antique sales between Easter and summer helped dispose of the good furniture including dressers, chairs and double beds, many of them Victorian antiques. It was right at the end of the war, and the money was used to purchase war surplus equipment to furnish the rooms and the barn-dorm, including surplus army bunk beds and an old army truck to haul equipment and campers. Victorians were replaced with the army's best.

The first camp was in June, 1945, with the war still going, and there was still rationing of meat, sugar and gasoline. Every camper had to bring their own plate, cup, bowl, silverware, a pound of sugar, and red ration stamps for meat. The camp staff had arranged with the local butcher to buy the meat, but were stunned when the meat was delivered to camp on the hoof, six fat steers. They were pastured in the meadow until, one by one, they were butchered and stored in the local frozen food locker in Cazadero. Wim Meyer said it just about killed him to order all the beef ground into hamburger or cut into stew, but steak and roast were not camp fare.

Getting to the camp was a bit more challenging for some than for others. The Greyhound bus dropped off campers, crew, and ministers at the Pink Elephant bar in Monte Rio. People could wait on the bench in front for pick-up by the old stake-sided army truck. They rode in back up the long, dusty, twisting road.

Campers were surprised to find out that there was a telephone at the camp located in the kitchen. The single uninsulated wire was strung to the town of Cazadero (about 7 miles) from one tree to another on porcelain insulators. It was a 20 party line that ran through the meat market in Cazadero. The butcher mediated arguments about who got the party line next.

During that first summer, the boys slept in the barn and the girls slept in Redwood Lodge. Early on the first day of summer camp, just outside the kitchen door, the cook sighted a rattlesnake. She hurriedly honked the emergency horn and all the crew members came running. A crew member killed the rattle snake and tried to calm the campers that had gathered. That night there was a fire in Cazadero and all the male crew and staff went off down the hill in the old army truck with their backpack pumps and McCloud tools (oversized half hoe and half rake) to fight the fire. The crew had been trained in operating the backpack pumps, which were tanks of water carried on the back equipped with a hand pump. They came home in the wee hours. With morning light, a crew member reported that the septic tank was running over, and everyone was very glad for the "holy holes on the hill." That was enough for the cook. She quit and left before breakfast. Wim Meyer called Ivy Alexander, a camper's mom, and she came to the rescue from Antioch as a temporary cook and stayed for seven years.

During that first camp and for many years after, right after breakfast at 9 a.m., the bell rang and we all reported to our station for "Caz Care." For an hour, campers worked on trails and new cabins, hoed or weeded the vegetable garden, dug the swimming pool, worked on the road, helped dig fire breaks with McCloud tools, peeled potatoes and whatever else needed doing. There was a crew of college kids who stayed all summer and worked around the camp, and in the kitchen, and supervised groups of campers. They also directed Caz Care.

Platoons of volunteers dug the first swimming pool. Before it, campers had to hike down to Bearpen dam for a swim. By the time you hiked back to camp, you were hotter and dirtier than when you started. And, yes, the lady bugs were at Bearpen in 1945 and had to be skimmed off before anyone could swim; they made swimming rather unpleasant, and they have been there ever since.

Wim Meyer, the Conference Youth Minister, later did some asking around to try to find out what had happened at the Ollie Bradley Truth Rest Home and why they had all left so suddenly and never come back. Nobody really seems to know, but this is the theory they came up with: Morhardt Ridge, southeast of Camp, shows signs of a big fire in the then recent years. Perhaps the fire came down near our spring and into Redwood Glen before it was put out or burned out. If you walk over there even now

you can find burned trees. Naturally Ed Morhardt, the real estate agent who was trying to sell the property did not want to scare off buyers and did not dwell on that fire. But who knows, when the residents saw the flames cover over the ridge it may have panicked them and caused them to flee on a moment's notice to get as far away as possible. But it is still a mystery why nobody ever came back, even to recover their most personal possessions. We will probably never know what really happened.

People gave generously of time and money to make Caz a success. The Conference gave honor by naming cabins after these people. In those early days, building new cabins was the greatest need and there were work parties nearly every weekend. One could just go up to Caz, bring a sleeping bag and some food and go to work. Myron Alexander (Ivy's husband) was a volunteer carpenter from Antioch who built many of the cabins, and taught many a camper, minister, staffer, and parent how to drive a nail or build a stair step. As a result there is a cabin named Alexander. The Haymond Cabin was named after Scott, the volunteer architect who drew the plans for the cabins, and his wife Laura, the girls' supervisor at Caz for many years.

When the first round of cabins began to age, new winterized cabins were constructed with an eye to possible year round use. The Sebastopol Community Church received the honor of naming a new cabin because they contributed the most money to the cabin building fund (\$30,000). The church held a "Naming Contest." Some wanted to name it the "Eshelman" cabin after Byron and Anne, our members who had attended Caz Camp more years than anyone else and had done so much to make the camp a success. There is a famous snapshot of Byron, stripped to the waist, digging the swimming pool with a shovel. They declined the honor, saying it should be named something more long-lasting than a person's name. "Koinonia," a New Testament word for "Christian Community," won the contest. At a naming ceremony, Byron and Anne Eshelman nailed the new name plaque on the cabin.

Harley Gill Lodge, built in 1957 was named after the 1932-1950 Conference Superintendent. He was in office when Caz was first being considered, and from the descriptions he heard, he was not enthusiastic. When he and his wife came up and visited in person, however he became a staunch supporter.

Cazadero is a Spanish word that means, "The Hunting Ground." In its past, it has seen many people hunting deer, wild boar and other game. Now it has gone through different years and seen hundreds of campers of all ages from infants to octogenarians hunting for something different. We are a people hunting for a closer relationship to trees, flowers, water, stars, nature, and a closer relationship to others, inside our families and out, and above all, for a closer relationship with God.

Yes, Cazadero is still our Hunting Ground.