

A History of Berkeley's Live Oak Park

Written for the park's 100th Birthday Celebration, Sept. 13, 2014, by Susan Schwartz – park neighbor and longtime activist

Live Oak Park is here because of the many little creeks that flow from the Berkeley Hills the short way to San Francisco Bay. These little creeks are more powerful than they look. As rising sea level filled our current Bay at the end of the last Ice Age, the creeks basically built what are now the flatlands, by carrying rock and soil eroded from the earthquake-riven, still-rising hills. Walking north to south, you can feel the gentle rises that are little creeks' natural levees, built as they dropped their load at the outer edge of their winter floods.

Native Americans were here to watch that sea-level rise. Unlike us, they pretty easily moved as their settlements gradually disappeared under the rising Bay. They also did some engineering – the very impressive shell middens they heaped up near the Bay would have been dry refuges when rain and tides flooded the lowlands.

What now is Berkeley and Albany was mostly grassland except along the creeks, largely because the Native Americans burned regularly for safety and to improve hunting and gathering. As the population grew, residents learned to use bows and arrows and to pound and leach acorns to remove the tannins, providing a staple starch. You can see the holes this work wore at Mortar Rock Park, on the border of the Codornices watershed.

In our written history, the first we hear of the Live Oak Park area is the creek name, Codornices, Spanish for quail. The sons of Luis Maria Peralta named it for quail or quail eggs they found near the creek. Peralta was a mestizo who came from Mexico as a teenager with the De Anza expedition – while the American Revolution was going on at the other edge of the continent. He rose to become military governor at San Jose; in 1820, the Spanish crown rewarded him with all the land from today's San Leandro to Berkeley and Albany. He divided the grant among his sons. Jose Domingo got what is now Berkeley and Albany, and thus today's Live Oak Park.

Berkeley patterns started early -- Jose Domingo was something of a black sheep. After the 1849 Gold Rush, his sons were in and out of jail; Jose Domingo was cheated out of almost everything he owned, mainly by his lawyer, Horace Carpentier, who also founded Oakland as a land grab. When Jose Domingo died a pauper, leaving his wife and ten children penniless, his siblings, who had managed to hang onto at least some of their wealth, refused to pay for a decent burial.

As clouds gathered for the United States' Civil War, Berkeley was still little more than a cluster of houses and businesses at Ocean View on the Bay, some outlying farms with dubious land titles, and gleams in the eyes of the Gold Rush arrivals who would become town fathers. The site of a school that became the University of California had been chosen but not yet dedicated. In 1859, a wealthy, easygoing Missouri planter, Napoleon Bonaparte Byrne, arrived by covered wagon with his wife, her mother and sister, four

children, and two freed slaves, also named Byrne, believed to have been Berkeley's first African American residents.

Byrne had visited the Bay Area earlier, by ship. He intended to farm in the fertile San Jose area. But, in another of those Berkeley patterns, his wife loved nature and beauty, and fatefully persuaded him to stay in Berkeley. He bought almost 2000 acres, from Josephine Street to Wildcat Canyon, and today's Cedar to Eunice Streets. His wife wanted to live near today's Codornices Park, but wagons couldn't get there. So in 1868 Byrne built an Italianate villa, flanked by corral and orchard, on the present site of Congregation Beth El, west of today's Spruce Street. An elegant driveway stretched down to today's Walnut Street. (The house survived to become the oldest in Berkeley, but burned in two arson fires in the 1980s.)

The hills, while beautiful, were not good farmland. In the early 1870s, Byrne moved to Venice Island near Stockton, hiring Chinese labor in a pioneering effort to drain and farm the fertile Delta. He sold his Berkeley land and mansion to support the venture, but it failed and his wife died. Back in Berkeley, he built a smaller house near his old one and founded a fuel business, which also failed – apparently he was reluctant to dun people to pay. He was saved by being named Berkeley postmaster.

Meanwhile, the mansion and the heart of Byrne's land, including today's Live Oak Park, were bought by a much better businessman, Henry Berryman. Berryman and a partner founded the Berkeley Water Works and Berryman Reservoir, in the hills next to today's Codornices Park. Berryman built Spruce Street as a road used to drive cattle from east of the hills. Cowboys relieved their thirst at a roadhouse outside town limits. He persuaded the Southern Pacific to extend its Transcontinental steam-train tracks to Shattuck and Rose Streets. For a while, it was a close call whether Berryman Station there would become "downtown." With other developers, he established North Berkeley as a neighborhood for the ship captains, business owners, doctors, and other well-off citizens.

In the 1870s, an Irish physician, Dr. Michael O'Toole, built a 14-room Victorian in what is now the north meadow of the park. He planted an elaborate garden on both sides of the creek, with a bridge echoed in today's decaying wooden one. A generation later, with the simpler Craftsman style in fashion, a large brown shingle house was bought by manufacturer and banker R.S. Penniman.

Berkeley was growing. Key Route in 1903 provided a 30-minute train-ferry commute to San Francisco, and the 1906 earthquake brought many San Franciscans to what they thought was safer ground in the East Bay. Homes began to be built in Northbrae, beyond the city boundary at Eunice. The Solano Tunnel was built in 1908 for trains; the dirt filled a former swimming hole, now School of the Madeleine. Oxford School was built and Oxford Street built through, with a curve to keep it from cutting off all of the Byrne mansion's front yard. (Years later, accidents on that curve brought Berkeley its first speed humps.) There were plans to build Berryman Street up to Spruce, but neighborhood protest blocked them – activism started early.

Nationwide, the City Beautiful movement was thriving after the turn of the century. This was both led by Progressivism and spurred by fear of the immigrants and unruly poor left behind, as the well-to-do of the Gilded Age moved to suburbs. The Haymarket Riot and settlement houses in Chicago, Jacob Riis's

exposure of New York slum life, would be countered by the classical and Baroque Beaux Arts style, and a planned city with an impressive civic center radiating out to public parks. These would surely inspire “civic loyalty” and virtue in the restive masses.

Wealthy San Francisco and Oakland were not laggard. They commissioned and sometimes followed plans by Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Charles Mulford Robinson, and German planner Werner Hegemann. In 1913, Berkeley civic leaders rode Oakland’s coattails and paid to have Hegemann plan for Berkeley as well. Hegemann recommended, among other things, a linked park and parkway along Codornices Creek, as well as a chain of large parks the full length of the hills – an idea that was eventually carried out 20 years later, in the depths of the Great Depression .

But in Berkeley, a long series of attempts to create parks and parkways failed. One problem was the Berkeley’s shotgun-marriage of academics and the well-to-do in East Berkeley with the working class of West Berkeley, the former Oceanview. The blue collars stubbornly refused to vote for what was supposed to help them. Efforts to pass park ordinances or bonds failed in 1903, 1907, 1908, and 1911.

Finally, in 1914, the city bought the Penniman and O’Toole properties, about four acres, for \$72,000, about what was owed on the mortgages. The new park was at the north end of the streetcar lines (the common folks could quickly get there for 6 cents), and in a lush creek canyon that contrasted with the still largely treeless hills.

The name “Live Oak Park” was derided by some as unimaginative, but it echoed the idea of a “nature park.” Administration was separate from that of a few playgrounds and the existing but undeveloped San Pablo Park (planned by developer Duncan McDuffie, who also headed the Sierra Club).

This was not wild nature as we think of it. Penniman’s brown shingle became the clubhouse and North Branch library. One of the first improvements was the elegant Walnut Street bridge, graced by gaslight-style lampposts. The stone fireplace followed soon after, in 1919. Today’s redwoods were planted, and an aviary with donated birds graced today’s small Picnic Area 3. Arcaded walkways edged the crushed-rock tennis courts.

Live Oak began Berkeley’s big park expansion. In 1917, the city bought today’s James Kenney Park and accepted the line of “rock parks” set aside earlier by Mason-McDuffie as highlights of their Northbrae development. The no-longer-needed watershed lands around Berryman reservoir were leased as Codornices Park. John Hinkel donated Hinkel Park and its now-crumbling clubhouse. Neighbors bought today’s Cragmont Park and sold it at cost to the city.

None of this much changed the voters, who turned down an attempted expansion of Live Oak Park in 1919 and park bonds in the mid-1920s. Nevertheless, by the mid-20s, Berkeley’s park system, including the three out-of-city camps, was pretty well established, other than the future large waterfront parks.

Although radio and widespread car ownership were ushering in our era of mass media and individual entertainment, people still entertained themselves in groups and associations. Berkeley parks hosted sports clubs, roller skating, miniature golf, story-telling, model-airplane and kiteflying, and a 40-piece

city band. Live Oak was the city's second most heavily used park, after San Pablo with its many sports fields. The big fireplace saw more than 300 gatherings a year, sometimes three a day. In the Great Depression, adult activities including dancing and lawn bowling were increased, to occupy the unemployed. Federal work programs built the Hinkel Park amphitheater out of old sidewalk – recycling is not new – and the current North Branch of the public library, replacing the Penniman house.

World War II put a damper on change. When the Penniman house burned in 1951, the city planned a full-sized gymnasium reaching almost to Walnut Street. Neighborhood protest cut that to a compromise plan for the current center, designed by Berkeley architect Robert Ratcliff, and dedicated in 1956. The big wisteria vine is the only reminder of the old brown shingle.

By the early 1960s, the city had acquired the houses south of the park on Walnut and Shattuck, and planned to buy them up to Oxford, as well as north of Berryman down to Henry. There would be a large Rotary art and garden center, larger and relocated basketball and tennis courts, a parking lot, a new Berryman Street but closure of Walnut Street, and maybe a covered EB MUD reservoir.

This plan didn't need neighborhood opposition to be doomed. The Free Speech Movement of 1964-65 and takeover of Berkeley government by "radicals" brought other issues to the fore. A scaled-down but still controversial Art Center, also designed by Ratcliff, opened in 1967. Actors Ensemble, Berkeley's oldest theater company and amateur by choice, also moved to the community center in the mid-60s.

After Proposition 13 choked the tax income in 1978, Actors Ensemble took over the theater and ran it until last year, when the city turned it over to a higher-bidding professional company. The Berkeley Art Center Association was formed post-Prop-13 to keep the Art Center going; it still does. Berkeley folk dancers, forced out of the deteriorating John Hinkel clubhouse, began dancing five nights a week at the Community Center about 1990. Bond money let the city build a sprung-wood floor, easy on the knees.

In the 1980s, neighbors organized to install a large log play structure for older children, replacing a playground lost with the Penniman clubhouse. Another wave of neighborhood activism followed in the mid 1990s, when Friends of Live Oak (FOLO) and other park-support groups were organized under the leadership of Berkeley Partners for Parks. This was in large part to take advantage of a windfall of excess pension earnings that the state gave back to the city – how things change! Spearheaded by artist and jack-of-all-trades William Clark, who lived across Shattuck, FOLO carried out repairs including the historic stone fireplace. It also lobbied for improvements including the Berryman Path ramp at Oxford.

Besides active citizens, Live Oak has been lucky in its longstanding and loyal staff -- people like Patricia Hirabara, who ran the community center for a generation until her death in 2012, longtime youth director Marvin Buckley, tennis director Jim Edwards, gardener Michelle Pedro, who will retire at the end of this year.

I have no grand conclusions. I have no idea what the next hundred years will bring. This is not a call to action, although if you are interested, the city will launch an effort to involve more volunteers in parks with a barbecue Sept. 27 at San Pablo Park. But the park has brought our family great joy, and I hope it will thrive.