



### The Ranchos

In 1839 Timothy Murphy was appointed administrator of the mission and agent for the Indians by Governor Alvarado.<sup>8</sup> The Americans began arriving. In 1844 Murphy was awarded a land grant of 22,000 acres north of San Rafael; the Rancho San Pedro, the Rancho Santa Margarita, and the Rancho Las Gallinas.<sup>9</sup> After the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo turned California over to the United States, Murphy petitioned for permission to keep the land. The request was approved in 1852 less than a year before Bon Timoteo Murphy died.

Murphy's land was divided between his brother, Matthew; his nephew, John Lucas; and the Archbishop, Joseph Alemany.<sup>10</sup> The Archbishop's part became St. Vincent's School for Boys. Lucas' eventually passed to Manuel T. Freitas and today is Terra Linda and the Lucas Valley.<sup>11</sup> On November 4, 1858, Matthew Murphy's 515 acres were sold to William F. McAlesiter.<sup>12</sup>

McAlesiter died in San Rafael on July 24, 1902. The Murphy property was left to his wife and two daughters, Nellie McAlesiter and Ada McMahan. Ada and Nellie gave 193 acres to Mabry McMahan (Ada's husband).<sup>13</sup> On August 14, 1914 he filed the map for development in the name of the "Venetia Company" of which he was the president.

#### Mabry McMahan's Dream

In 1914 there were three million people in California. The Panama Canal opened and the state was promoting California as a glamorous dream.<sup>14</sup> In San Francisco the Panama-Pacific Exposition opened in Cow Hollow exciting everyone's imagination.<sup>15</sup> The four million dollar Renaissance style City Hall was completed and out on the sand dunes John McLaren was creating the Golden Gate park.

Mabry McMahan looked at his mudflats and dreamed of a "City of Canals", a Venice of the West. The front page of the San Rafael Independent on April 29, 1913 explained it thus:

"Around the entire three miles of canals will be concrete boulevards 80 feet wide. All along the canals at 700 feet intervals will be a number of concrete arch bridges. All the concrete work will be colored a dark red and all the plants will be from the tropics. All the walks between the lots will be of red concrete. Every home will have a lawn and all buildings must be of the Venetian style of architecture, with red tile roofs."

McMahan began reclaiming the swamp land at enormous cost. He put a dredger to work which threw up a dike along the creek to shut off water from high tide. Then with a suction dredger he widened the creek, churned up the mud and mixed it with water so it could be forced through pipes. This was pumped into the marsh behind the dikes and raised the land level.<sup>16</sup> The next year the mud had settled, the water was drained off and ground was hard enough to walk on. That operation cost him almost one hundred thousand dollars. The preliminary work on the canals had cost him \$60,000.

McMahan had Howard Helmes, "the best engineer on the coast", draw up the plans for the steel reinforced concrete walls for the canals. He awarded the contract to a San Francisco firm for \$215,000. The plans called for 140 tons of steel to be used for the six miles of canals.<sup>17</sup>

Bernard R. Maybeck, <sup>A</sup>San Francisco's "best architect" was the consultant on the plans. John McLaren, the "father" of Golden Gate Park was to supervise the planting of the banana and palm trees and the pampas grass.

The Marin Journal on November 14, 1914 reported:

"Nearly 3,000 people enjoyed the hospitality of Mabry McMahan Saturday and Sunday during the opening days of his Santa Venetia, the wonder city of Marin County. There was a program of sports arranged with great attention to detail, water polo, swimming and diving feats by both men and woman, pony polo and boat racing along the beautiful waterways, which wind up from the bay shore."

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McMahan bought three of the Panama Pacific Exposition buildings and had them moved by barge to Santa Venetia. The Indiana State Building and the white pine bungalow of the McCloud Lumber Company were brought over in 1916. The Virginia State building, a replica of George Washington's home, was brought over in 1917.

From their ranch further up the creek the Stetsons, who had bought the land from O. G. Rose watched it all with great interest. From the Rice and Piper Brickyard the barges still carried the pink bricks by barge to San Francisco, but further up the old golf course had closed and reverted to pasture. Already the 40 ft tunnel Rose had dug into the knoll in his plan to find gold was covered.<sup>18,19</sup>

McMahan named the streets. Vendola drive was the curving boulevard on the waterfront. The main street, Adrian way, he named for his son; and another for himself, Mabry way. No street was named for Ada McAlesiter and the McMahan name itself is not remembered. He seemed fascinated with giving the streets names with meant little but sounded "Venetian". But when and why he added the "Santa" to his Venetia isn't known. What is certain is that there never was such a person.

Things were moving along. Again the Marin Journal, November 14, 1914:

"The first lot put on the market was purchased by Mr. Carmichael of Sacramento, a millionaire, who amassed his fortune in real estate and who believes in the future of Santa Venetia."

But the millionaire from Sacramento didn't move in and one wonders why Mabry McMahan himself didn't move in. Times were changing fast. In Santa Venetia the lots didn't sell and in April 1917 the country entered the World War. For many years the three Pan-Pacific Exposition buildings and the boathouse stood alone. Santa Venetia was a forlorn looking area with streets without houses, sidewalks that led nowhere and the pampas grass and palm trees slowly dying. 20

Much of the concrete work which McMahan put in for his dream city remains but few of the locals know why it was put there and they would not have recognized the frail little old man who sometimes wandered the streets of Santa Venetia until as late as 1957 as the <sup>builder</sup> ~~originator~~.

On a fifteen acre site behind Santa Venetia he also began a "Christian" retreat he called "Emanuel Schools". A plaque near the swimming pool dedicates it to "the memory of Ada Irene McMahan". The directors stopped saying prayers at their meetings a couple of years ago when they lost their tax exempt status, but according to McMahan's wishes, alcohol has never been allowed. 21

Adrian McMahan was visiting friends in San Rafael when he learned that his father, Mabry, had died, <sup>alone</sup> several days earlier in a San Francisco hospital on January 4, 1958.

Looking out from the top of the hill and watching the McGinnis Park take shape one can almost catch a glimpse of of Mabry McMahan's dream that almost succeeded.