

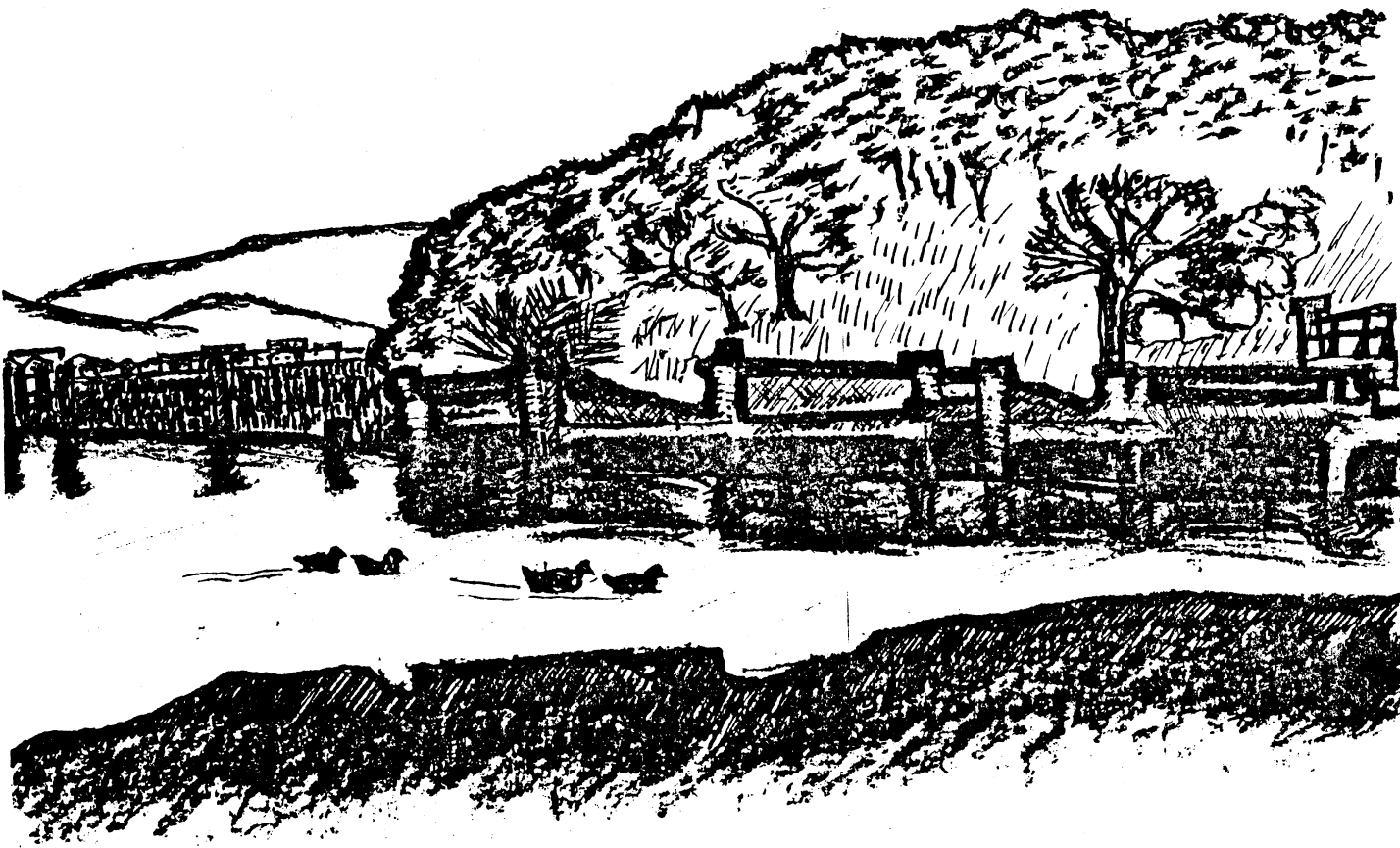
A NATURE WALK ON SANTA MARGARITA ISLAND

by

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HISTORY RESEARCH by

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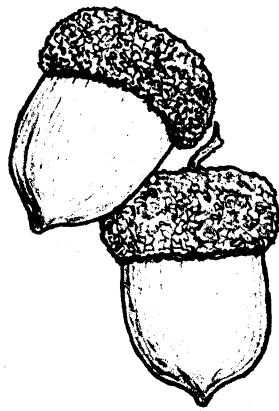
With thanks to Sue Ranuio  
for the four full-page drawings

SANTA VENETIA  
April 20, 1979

## SANTA MARGARITA ISLAND

### Rich in History - Rich in Nature

Many, many years ago the Coast Miwok Indian lived in Marin County. They led a peaceful life. They spent most of the day picking berries and nuts to eat, or hunting an elk or deer with bow and arrow, or fishing.



We do know Indians camped here. There is evidence of Indian mounds at the corner of Adrian Way and Mabry Way and under our North San Pedro Road by the 7-11 Store and the gas station. Old shells have also been found on the Santa Venetia Nursery property indicating the Indians camped on the flat land near the water. Not being highly organized and concerned with housework, they tossed all their garbage into a pile - or mound. When it became smelly and offensive they moved camp to another location.

In 1817 Mission San Rafael Arcangel (the angel of good health) was founded as a "sanitarium" for the sick Indians of San Francisco de Asis. This was the beginning of a great change for our Miwok Indians.

There were 3 Administrators of Mission Rafael before it was abandoned. The most loved of these was an Irishman, Timothy Murphy. For his honest concern for and help to the Marin Indians, he was given a 22,000 acre land grant in 1844 by the Mexican government known as La Punta de San Pedro y Santa Margarita y las Gallinas. Combined with an earlier land grant, this made him probably the biggest landowner in Marin and a man of much power. He could be called the founder of San Rafael as he built the first home at 4th and C Streets, was Administrator of the Mission and Agent for over 1,000 Indians, and first Justice of the Peace. He was a big, burley, fun loving man. He had a rancho and raised cattle here in our valley and in the Terra Linda-Marinwood area. He went into "town" for fiestas and grand parties with lots of food and lots of fun. When California joined the Union in 1850, times changed for all the caballeros and for the Indians too. Don Timoteo Murphy resigned as Indian Agent. The mission was taken over by the state and the orchards sold. The Indians were abandoned and left without enough new skills to support themselves.

Timothy Murphy died of a burst appendix in 1853. His lands were divided three ways:  
1) The archbishop of San Francisco received what is now St. Vincent's School.  
2) John Lucas, his nephew, received upper Santa Margarita land (which was later sold to Manuel Freitas and is now Terra Linda. 3) His brother, Matthew, received the San Pedro grant (now McNear property, Peacock Gap and China Camp).



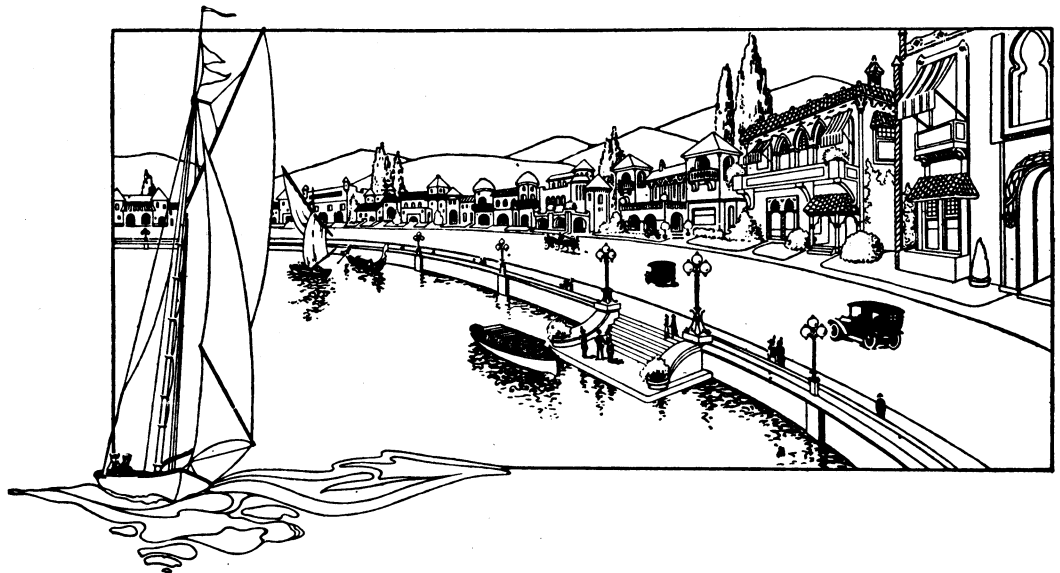
In 1856 the area we know as Santa Venetia was sold for \$127.60 to pay delinquent taxes. William F. McAlesiter acquired much of this land in 1858.

Parts of this area were later purchased by the Rice and Piper Brickyard; by Henry Campbell (1887) to build a golf course; Edwin Kimball, who planned to establish a stock ranch; Overend Rose, who sought gold; E.G. Stetson (1890), and others. Overend Rose hoped to mine gold on the hill by Gallinas School. He dug several tunnels into the neighboring hills but did not strike it rich. His home was bought by E.G. Stetson, a San Francisco lawyer, in 1890 and is now the YMCA building on North San Pedro Road.

It was considered both healthy and a mark of success to live in Marin at that time. There were big estates and lots of hotels catering to the more successful San Francisco businessmen and their families. At that time there was no gas, no electricity, no telephone, and even no mail delivery. Each home had enough property around it to support a few cows, a few chickens, a variety of fruit trees and a vegetable garden. The daughter-in-law of E.G. Stetson, Jessie Kant Stetson, was quite a gardener but most of that is now lost.

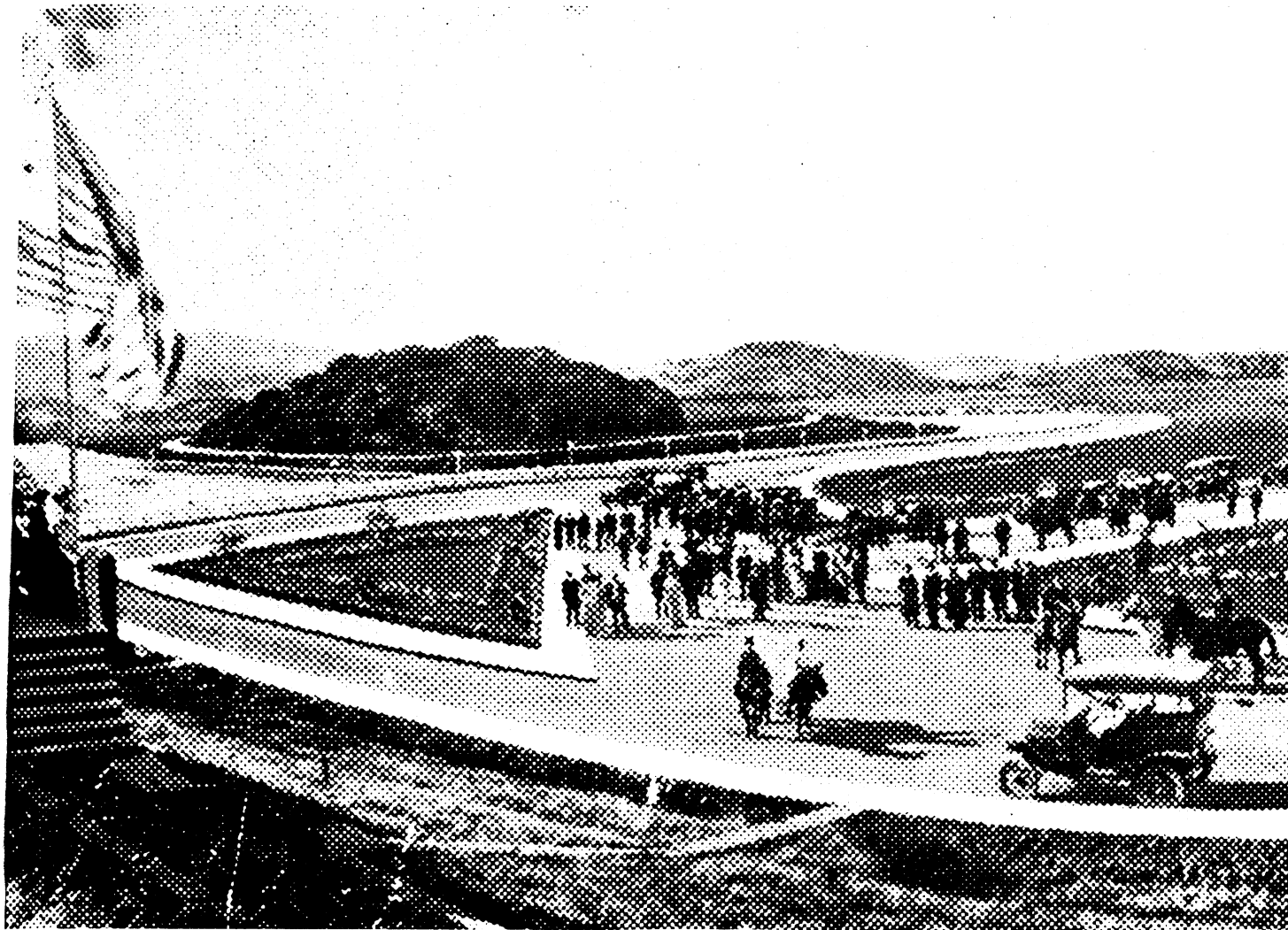
There were Swiss, German, Italian and Portuguese families in Santa Venetia at the turn of the century. Old timers remember dairy farms and olive and apple orchards. The heart of the valley seems to have been around Oxford Drive - Woodcliff. Meriam Stetson, as a boy, went to school there - when the large Clark family was in residence.

It was from this valley that Mabry McMahan saw his dream. His wife, Ada McAlesiter, inherited some property in rural Santa Venetia. Mabry and his wife lived in what was probably his father-in-law's summer home. The place was grand and Mabry was grand too. He kept a carriage house with footmen in uniform for his surrey and wagons. There were peach and olive orchards. Dressed in elegance, he would drive his surrey to the ferry and go to San Francisco to promote his dream among politicians, investors and other well known men of the day. His dream?



If he filled in some of the marshland, and built up the canals, and sold lots for houses... this could be a "modern day" Venice! He did reinforce the canals with steel and concrete. The remains of this can easily be seen from the bridge to Santa Margarita Island. Thousands of rare and exotic plants were brought in. Some of these can be seen near the island and down Oxford Drive. Three exposition buildings were brought by barge from the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Bridle trails were laid out and gondolas brought in for opening day. He had plans for a waterfall and grand hotel to be built on this 5 acre island. As you look at the island now, notice the tumble of rocks overshadowed by oak trees. It is a sign of a great upheaval and earthquake long ago.

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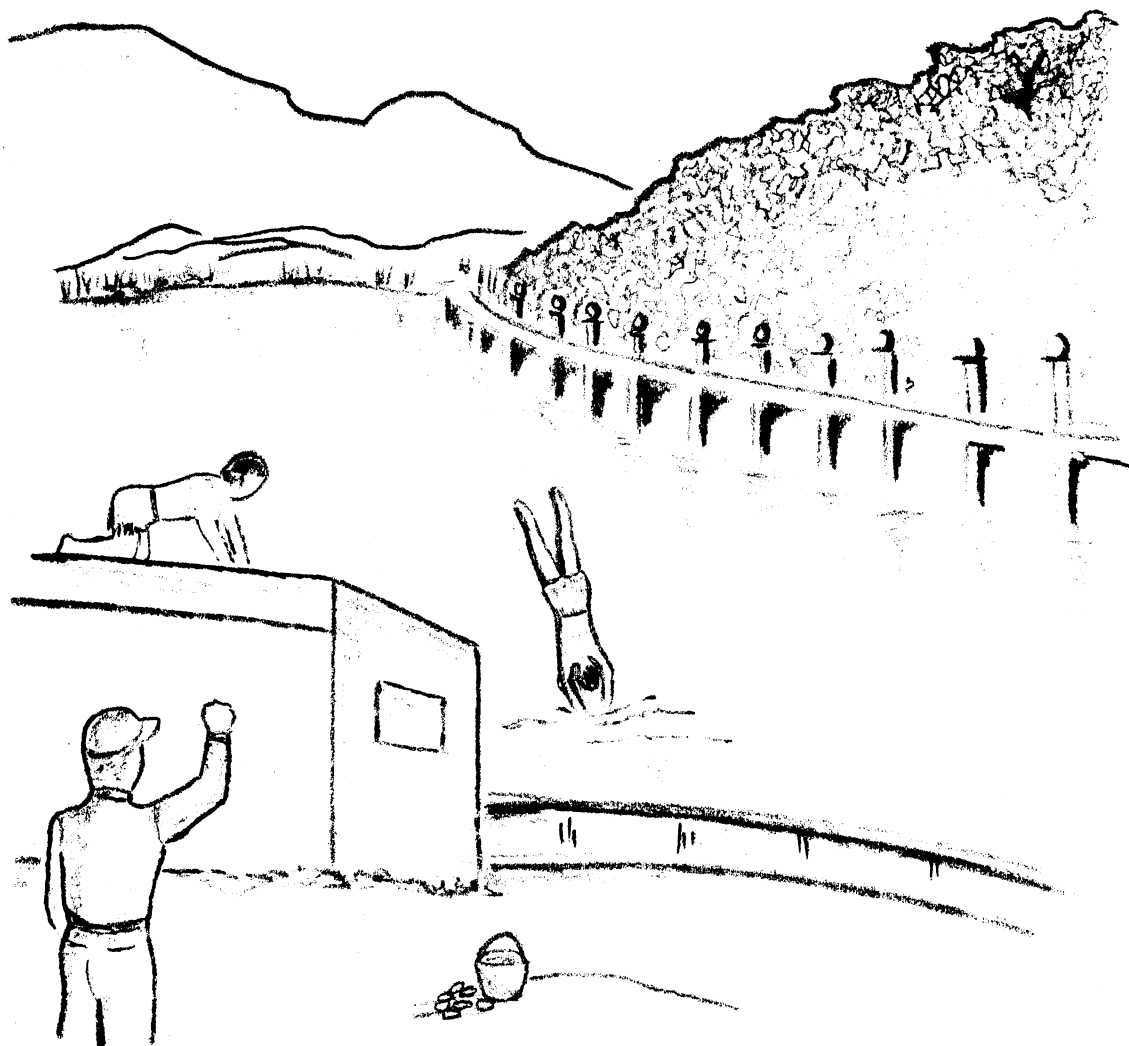


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November 9 and 10, 1914, over 3,000 people came and looked and walked and enjoyed and dreamed too. The first lot was sold to a millionaire, Mr. Carmichael, from Sacramento. But no homes were ever built. Our country soon entered World War I and thoughts turned to defense. Next came the Depression when few could afford such luxuries - such dreams. Local children would skate on the sidewalks and swim in the canal. The little community did not change much.



But life was good then! Bob Lauchenauer (now of San Anselmo) remembers his days as a boy in Santa Venetia. On a summer day he and his friends might row their boats from what is now the Civic Center lagoon and past Robert's Dairy and the Stetson place (where they sneaked an apple or pear). At Santa Margarita Island they might meet some of the boys from St. Vincent's Orphanage for a friendly swim. Then past the San Francisco Duck Club (MacPhail School) to Buck's Launching and China Camp. There they "chewed the fat" with Pistol Smith and Jake Obletz - without their parents knowledge as these men were market hunters and knew the bootleggers.

A boy could kill some duck here and sell them to a local hotel for \$1.00 each, or dig clams in the mud by the island for 25¢ a bucket. Locke remembers later working for Meriam Stetson for 50¢ a day.

You must remember there were only a few homes at this time. Close your eyes and try to imagine rolling hills, occasional homes surrounded by orchards and open fields. Gallinas Creek (Santa Margarita Creek) and the canals were much deeper and wider and the water was clear and inviting. Pete Peterson ran the bathhouse. His home was on the hill to the west of the island. On the other side of the hill lived the Schmidt family (Schmidt Lane). Paul Schmidt hauled logs down from the hills past Majeski's farm (Gallinas School). He made boats in an old barn under the eucalyptus tree behind the Marinove pool. He launched them into the salt water marsh by the island.

As you stand on the bridge today you see 2 large palm trees on the shore to your right. They stood at the entrance to the boathouse-dance hall. It probably extended over the water and was popular with San Francisco socialites in the 1920's.

All that is remembered of McMahan's dream are the street names: Mabry Way (for himself), Adrian Way (for his son), Vendola Drive (his dream). The buildings from the Pan-Pacific Exposition disappeared. The concrete walls began to decay. As an old man Mabry McMahan would often "hang out" at Tweedie's General Store and tell stories.



Ruth and John Tweedie moved here in 1941 and bought the store and gas station where the 7-11 Store is now. Ruth Tweedie remembers the clouds of mosquitoes that rose from the marshlands. (Most of the homes are on filled land.) At first a popular stopping spot for families on a Sunday drive, they soon gained fame. "If you can't find it anywhere, go to Tweedie's!" The store remained the same with its rough board shelves until sold in 1968.

Like everywhere else in Marin, Santa Venetia changed after World War II. Dairymen no longer received shipments of hay from the barges docked off Meadow Drive. An airport was used as a flying school, local businesses were established, and tract homes were built. Many families moved in. The area from Meadow to Mabry was the first to be developed by the Von Rotz Construction Company. A school was needed - first Santa Venetia Elementary in 1951 and eventually Gallinas in 1962. Old homes and farms were sold. Fruit trees were plowed under. The rural nature disappeared as more and more families moved in.

In the 40's and 50's the canal around the island was large enough and deep enough for large yachts to come and anchor overnight. Residents remember goats on the island. The owner would row over once a week with food and water.

In 1963 the Billings and Hutchinson Gravel Company bought Santa Margarita Island. They wanted to develop it and fill in the canal to build a solid road. Community pressure made them give up the idea. Later Mr. Rubini and Mr. Farina bought the island with the intent of constructing a pool and restaurant. Once again the project was defeated by the displeasure of the local residents. They did build the first bridge on the island in 1970. After a heated battle before the Board of Supervisors their plan for 124 single bedroom condominiums was defeated.

The building of the bridge did mean that the island was accessible to the public. And with "John Q. Public" came destruction. The west side of the island burned in July, 1974. Water was pumped from the canal to put it out. What you see there now is new growth.

Once again community spirit grew in 1978 when local residents formed the committee to "save Margarita Island". They saw the natural beauty Mabry McMahan had seen and shared his dream. They saw a need for open-space, a place where adults and children could walk and enjoy nature undisturbed and reflect and make their own dreams. And so through neighbor's contributions, fund raisers and contributions from all over Marin, and with county funds, \$350,000. was raised. The County of Marin now owns Santa Margarita Island as "open space". That means it is not to be changed or developed in any way. This island and its canals are preserved for everyone's enjoyment.

So as you stroll along and peer under bushes and identify various trees and grasses, think of the others who lived here - many, many years ago.