

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Ben Joy

by Robin Rudderow - 2014

Who named "Joy Road", and why? Driving past, I wondered, "Were they really happy when they named that road?" When I learned that, buried in the little graveyard up in the Bodega Bay Harbour were several young children with the last name "Joy" from the 1850's I realized the road is named for a Rancho Bodega pioneer family.



JOY RD

Benjamin Joy was born in Leeds, England on January 4, 1821. His wife, Elizabeth Machell Joy, was born in Brentford England on May 28, 1824. They came first to Wisconsin in approximately 1845, then to California in the early 1850's.

When the Joys moved to California, they must have lived at or near Bodega Bay, because their first three children died between 1852 and 1856 and were buried in the Seaman's Cemetery (in the Harbour) at Bodega Bay, as was their last child, who died in 1868. The Joys' first child, James William, was born at Provo City, Utah Territory in August 1851, and he died on December 7, 1852. Alice Ann was born August 14, 1853 and Phylis Charlotte was born on August 27, 1855. Alice Ann died on January 11, 1856 and Phylis Charlotte died on November 10, 1856. How sad!

In 1857 the Joys purchased a house and lot in Bodega Bay from Donald McDonald. Later that year Tyler Curtis sued Ben Joy and other Rancho Bodega settlers, claiming that they were squatting on the land that rightfully belonged to Curtis' wife, Manuela, and the children from her marriage to the deceased Captain Stephen Smith. Fortune finally smiled on Ben and Elizabeth Joy, when Thomas Benjamin was born on July 2, 1858, and Ann Maria, on June 24, 1861, and they lived and thrived to old age.

In 1864, Ben Joy purchased the mill that had been built in 1855 on the northwestern corner of Rancho Estero Americano by three brothers named Thurston. The Joy family moved to the property, where Minerva Mercy was born later that year. Minnie, as she was called, also thrived, but the last child, Elizabeth Emily was born June 29, 1867 and died September 8, 1868.

The 8,849 acre Rancho Estero Americano had been granted to Edward Manuel McIntosh in 1839. In 1849, it was sold to Jasper O'Farrell, who then sold it in 1864 to San Francisco banker Benjamin Belloc, who subdivided it into 50 tracts, each approximately 20 acres. What Belloc broke apart, the Joys put back together, first purchasing in 1865 the four tracts of Rancho Estero Americano land that surrounded the mill, a total of 89.25 acres, then they purchased another 37 tracts of 740 acres in 1871, and they purchased 2 more tracts in 1868 and 1871.

With his California holdings well established, Benjamin Joy traveled to England in 1876 on business matters when he became ill there and died. Thomas Benjamin was 18, Annie 16 and Minnie 12. Elizabeth and her children continued to operate the mill on the original site until 1885. They made improvements to the mill and increased its output to 12,000 feet of lumber per day. During this period, much of the timber on the eastern edge of the property was cut and some of the land disposed of. When the most accessible timber on the eastern side of the property was cut, they moved to the western edge of the tract on Tannery Creek. In 1885 they built a home, workers quarters and a new mill. The new mill increased capacity to 20,000 feet.

JOY ROAD

Minnie was a teacher at Watson School from 1887-1888. She also taught at Potter and Joy Schools. One of her students was Howard McCaughey. In 1893 Minnie married Alfred Laton. Al worked for the Joy family lumber business in his early years, and later went to work for other lumber companies, as well as to be the mayor of Sebastopol. Minnie and Al had a daughter, Anita, and two sons, Joy and Burle. Anita inherited Joy Woods when Ben died.

We recently received the following remembrance, written by Anita Laton, about her family's gathering for New Year's Eve 1899 at the Joy family home on Tannery Creek: There were six gathered in the Little Sitting Room at what we now call the Mill House, in Joy Woods. Outside the hills and redwood trees stood close around a little clearing where a creek ran past the saw mill, the house, a few cabins, with horse barn, ox barn, and carriage house at the upper end, lumber yard, office and bark shed below the mill.

Usually we did not spend New Year's Eve at the Mill but this year was special. My father, Alfred, had brought Minnie, his wife, almost-five Anita and almost-three Joy from Sebastopol that afternoon. We came the twelve miles in a buggy, drawn by Johnnie, our horse, who, with Brownie, my dog was a real member of the family. Dad drove, Mother held Joy, and I sat on a little wooden salt box in front of the dashboard with Brownie beside me.

The quiet center of everything is my grandmother, a little old lady, 77 at the time, dressed in a high-necked, long-sleeved dark dress, a gold brooch pinning a little lace collar at her throat, a woolen shawl about her shoulders. She sits very straight in a low rocking chair, probably the one Mrs. Curtis, Captain Stephen Smith's widow, had given her. Even to my childhood eyes, she seemed tiny, and fragile, kindly but in a world even more remote than that of ordinary grown-ups.

She sat in a little room six thousand miles, half around the world, from England, the place she still sometimes referred to as "home". She had worked in the farthest frontier of America for almost half a century, had been a widow for half that time, had run a saw mill successfully, and sat tonight in the redwood country with her three middle-aged children about her, the center of a home and a life largely of her own making.

In point of years, Uncle James Swan shared seniority that New Year's Eve with my grandmother. He was the husband of her long-dead sister Charlotte, her only link with her childhood home and family.

Ben was 42 in 1900. He had worked hard all his life, wordlessly devoted to his mother and sisters. Annie was 40. She was slender, energetic, hardworking, managed the household and kept in touch with all the happenings in the woods and the mill. I can remember times in later years when she and Uncle Ben and Uncle James "got steam up" in the mill and "ran out" an order all by themselves, she as active and knowledgeable as the two men. She possessed a zest for living and made a life rich in friendship and activity.

The room was lit by three kerosene lamps. Usually there would be one or at most two lamps in a room but Al liked rooms to be well lighted and when he came by grandmother always asked Annie to light three lamps. One hangs on the wall, with a concave reflector behind it throwing brighter light on sewing or newspapers or account books. One has a tall stand of blue glass, another is of clear glass.

A small iron stove stands out from one corner, a cheerful wood fire crackling and popping within it. Upstairs, the chimney of that stove went through my grandmother's bedroom, to our childish minds a most ingenious arrangement for warming the room.

A comfortable, lived-in room; the only touch of formality was a large framed picture of Minnie as a young woman. A calendar is tacked up by the door; Annie has pinned notes and newspaper clippings and pictures here and there as reminders. Cream colored lace curtains hang over the dark blinds at the two windows.

Al produces a bottle of port he has brought for my grandmother and fills glasses for her, Uncle James and himself, remarking that it is “medicinal” and will “improve their health” in the new year. Annie retorts that pure water is healthier and brings some from the always-dripping tap in the dark kitchen for Ben and Minnie and herself. They had joined the Good Templars in their teens and remained true to its principles of abstaining from alcohol throughout their lives. Then, as the clock strikes twelve they toast the New Year and each other, Annie signs softly “Should old acquaintance be forgot” and Minnie takes the alto part as she has done so many, many times, while Al hums an accompaniment almost below his breath, and probably slightly out of tune.

The Joys raised goats to eat the brush, and had a problem with eagles killing the kids. The birds were captured and sent to zoos. We recently obtained a photo of an eagle chained by the leg in the Joy’s barn yard. We also obtained photos of the Joys’ mill in 1907.

What happened to the Joys’ land? In 1928 and 1940 Joy Woods was considered for a State Park. In September 1951 Howard McCaughey gave a speech at the dedication of Joy Woods as a tree farm, and it seemed at that time that everyone agreed with the value of preserving the history and integrity of the vast Joy Woods holdings. But in 1959, Anita Laton sold all but 20 acres and the land was subdivided and sold off over time. A big chunk of trees were taken out for a vineyard.



Grove of Old Trees

One large stand of mainly second growth redwood, which hasn't been logged in over 100 years, is on Fitzpatrick Lane, just off Joy Road. In this grove, the Joy family and the Bodega Corners community enjoyed many picnics and celebrations. The neighborhood that grew up around the grove came to treasure it for its beauty, peacefulness, and connection to the early days of Bodega Corners.

In 1994, a timber harvest plan was approved to selectively cut 20 to 25 percent of the trees in the grove over five feet in diameter. Realizing the grave risk to the grove, a group of neighbors formed "Friends of the Old Trees" and sued the Department of Forestry to stop the timber harvest plan. The Sonoma County Superior Court issued a writ of mandate to stop the logging, and in 1997 the California Court of Appeal affirmed the lower court's decision. The Court of Appeal found that the State had failed to consider the impact of removing the trees on the surrounding water table, including the phenomenon of "fog drip," the process in which trees capture moisture from fog, which then drips to the forest floor and adds to the water table below the trees.

The landowner submitted another timber plan, and this time the neighbors approached Land Paths, which purchased the 28 acre grove for \$2,000,000 in 2000; \$1.25 million of the purchase price came from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. Additional contributions were from Save The Redwood League, California Coast Conservancy and private donors. In 2013 a bequest of five acres brought the "Grove of the Old Trees" to a total of 33 acres.

Now the Grove of the Old Trees is protected from future development and is preserved for the generations ahead of us. You can visit the Grove and appreciate its beauty. It is located at 17400 Fitzpatrick Lane, Occidental. There is a small gravel parking area at the entrance.

The remembrance by Anita Laton is truly a treasure, and Rancho Bodega Historical Society (RBHS) thanks Janet and Walter Drucker of Occidental for this donation. I invite our members to write remembrances of their days in Bodega Country and to send them to me to preserve and be cherished by future generations.

The Grove of Old Trees is located on the original homeland of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok people. For years, the Grove of Old Trees was owned by two families, the Colemans and the Van Alstyines. The families operated sawmills in the area, but reserved the redwoods in the Grove as a family gathering place.

Unfortunately, in the 1990s the grand redwoods were slated to be cut down as part of a Timber Harvest Plan. You can actually see blue stripes painted on certain trees that were in line to be harvested.

A group of county residents known as Friends of the Grove launched the long campaign to protect the remnant stands of redwoods. Thanks to the tireless work of neighbors and environmental activists, the blue stripes are a reminder of a fate averted.

LandPaths former board member Caryl Hart was also instrumental in the final successful push to save the Grove of Old Trees.

In 2000, LandPaths purchased Grove of Old Trees with the assistance of Sonoma County Ag + Open Space, Save The Redwoods League, California Coastal Conservancy, and private individuals. Today, Sonoma Ag + Open Space holds a Forever Wild conservation easement on the property, which mandates a zero take of the trees.

The property will stand forever as a publicly accessible forest preserve, a place for research, respite, and environmental education. We cherish this living remnant of the redwood forests that once covered much of the Northern California coast.