

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Early Surveying Turned Western Landscape into 'Property'

*by Adrianus Boudewyn - 2006*

"Surveyors are the recorders of history," Robert W. Curtis told a rapt audience at the annual Rancho Bodega Historical Society picnic in July "and, unlike the rest of us, when surveyors look at they see the faces of many great surveyors (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Teddy Roosevelt) who went on to become important men."

Bob Curtis, president of Curtis & Associates in Healdsburg, speaks with a passion about the history of this important profession, which in the early days of was often undertaken by men of the sea who knew how to read a compass and to navigate. The July picnic was held courtesy of members Donna and Clarence Freeman and the weather couldn't have been better!

In an entertaining and informative presentation Curtis told stories about early surveying in and displayed books, maps and much of the old equipment used. He donated a set of maps to the Society and spoke of his extensive library of surveying maps and deeds he has collected over the years.



Early surveying, as Curtis explained, reflected the importance of these activities as the first European colonists settled in and turned the landscape into property -- determining the limits of private and public lands, the paths of transport, and county and state boundaries. The U. S. Rectangular System was designed by Thomas Jefferson in about 1785 and in the same year enacted into law through the Federal Land Ordinance.

Government surveyors had been doing this kind of work a good 60-70 years before they contracted for work in Alta California, soon after settlement of the Mexican War in 1846-48. More than 30 government survey parties were active surveying private land titles ("ranchos") established during the Spanish and Mexican rule as well as the new public lands acquired by the U. S. government. Most of the ranchos were located on the Coast, with being the furthest part north, and in San Joaquin and valleys.

At the time some 617 ranchos (14,000 square miles) granted to individuals under Mexican rule, had to be surveyed anew before being confirmed by the new U. S. Government. Because of the steepness of the terrain in many parts of Bodega Bay, the Surveyor General decided to establish three (instead of one) initial points for government surveys in 1852 and in 1853. For each location a baseline and meridian was established and all were interconnected at designated points. So that when you read the deed of a property in Bodega Bay, it will reference as the point of origin for measuring property lines," explained Curtis, "because that where the initial mark was made by the surveyor."

That surveyor was Col. Leander Ransom, Office Deputy Surveyor. He was a man of imposing built . He was 51 when he selected the summit of the base point to survey central and western in the summer of 1851. From his extensive notes and a letter to the Surveyor General, we know that it was in July when he started

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out with a party. In oppressive summer heat, he labored to the top to establish an initial point at the summit, through which the new Mt. Diablo base and meridian lines would run. He did that by chiseling a hole in solid rock on the highest point and erecting a flagpole which could then be used a sight to establish markers on the base and meridian lines. That assignment took him to early September.

Curtis said "surveyors in that early work made extensive field notes of their surroundings and landmarks, which means the early surveys were rich in historical information. Such information was necessary to describe the procedures used in the measure and compass readings, essential information for other surveyors in later years."

Curtis said it was no easy task to perform that contract work during days of the Gold Rush, reading from 1851 correspondence by Col. Ransom's letter to his bosses in 1851: "Surveying is a different operation in many respects from what is in the other states of the union. You meet at the threshold with difficulties perplexities, and annoyances, that cannot be duly appreciated by any who are not fully initiated. "Your tools camp equipment and provisions, the hire of laborers and the transportation of baggage and fare of men, all partake in the inflation produced by the 'gold fever.' "

Leander then complained of the oppressive heat and the lack of water as he and his men traversed with horses and donkeys from July to early September. "The scarcity of water during this, the dry season was a serious drawback on our operations. We often traveled for miles and as a consequence we had either to pack or carry it from four to five miles for drinking and cooking purposed, or place our camp at a considerable and inconvenient distance from our work; Wells of water are among the comforts and conveniences that are to be in this portion of the state. Running water in creeks or brooks is seldom met with, and the only points with very few exceptions, were where water is to be found is far up the deep canyons, or ravines formed by the mountain ranges. "

Curtis said surveyors were instructed to make general notes on the spot, not from memory, and to attach an affidavit attesting to its accuracy. Exhaustive field notes included observations about the land surface, whether level, rolling, broken or hilly, the soil, the kinds of timber, and types of water sources available. Also to be noted were improvements, including towns and villages, Indian towns and wigwams, houses or cabins, fields or other improvements, ancient works of art such as mounds, also quality of soil and other geological features.

For surveying purposes, public lands were subdivided into grids of 36 square mile townships and square mile sections. After the townships were established, the ranchos were surveyed. And finally, the survey of townships into sections. Early tools were sometimes crude and could lead to human error, hence the importance of extensive field notes.

While national surveyor names of fame, Curtis said noted surveyors included Jasper O'Farrell, a trusted and respected surveyor, politician, and farmer, who surveyed and who settled in Bodega. An Irishman by birth, he was fluent in Spanish and could write legal documents in that language. Another man who wore many hats was Alphonzo Benjamin Bowers, an inventor, educator, shop keeper, engineer, and well known mapmaker who arrived in 1854 to take charge of the school system. He drew the first map of (for which payment was denied). Another famous name was I. E. Ricksecker . He was a civil war veteran who arrived in 1882 and became a county surveyor.

"The Indians have a saying," said Curtis, "that to know a person, you have to walk in their moccasins. In surveying, we say that to properly survey a parcel of land, we need 'to follow the footsteps of the surveyor who came before us.'