

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Melvin Cyrus Meeker

Melvin returned east to purchase machinery to start a sash, door, blind and planing mill in Petaluma. After making his purchases, he left in May 1865 on the ill-fated Golden Rule, which was crushed upon a reef during a storm. The ship's crew and passengers disembarked to an island about 12 miles from the ship and were later rescued. Fortunately, a large part of Melvin's machinery had been shipped by way of Cape Horn, and he and his machinery finally arrived at their destination. In order to gain more knowledge for his business, Melvin went to work for a saw mill and in February 1866, he purchased a timber claim on government lands and subsequently another tract whereby he set up a saw mill in Bodega Township. A half mile of railroad track was built to be used for logging.

In the spring of 1869, Melvin purchased the homestead that became Camp Meeker. The homestead was located between Occidental and Monte Rio and amidst the redwoods directly on Dutch Bill Creek. After the burning of his first residence, Melvin built a fine two-story home in August 1875. Melvin and his family lived there until 1911, when they moved into their new home, the "White House", which overlooks Camp Meeker. The nearby town of Occidental became a reality through the efforts of Melvin and other interested citizens. He and Rev. A.M. Wining and A.S. Purvine established the present site of the Methodist Church that was erected on the proposed line of the North Pacific Coast Railroad. A post office soon followed, a voting precinct established, and Occidental became part of California. Melvin married Flavia Sayre on February 19, 1868 and passed away on December 2, 1915.

After logging the coast redwoods that built and then rebuilt San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, Melvin Meeker sold lots for people to build a home to come and spend the summers. There was a theatre, large dancing pavilion, bowling alley, stores, hotels and a library. The legendary Camp Meeker Players who played at the outdoor stage, that has now returned to nature, put on extremely entertaining shows. Logs provided seating for the shows, and on occasion, gentlemen from Bohemian Grove would join the performances. (A previous RBHS newsletter included an article on Bohemian Grove. The first parcel of the Grove was purchased from Melvin Cyrus Meeker.)

Camp Meeker, an unincorporated community, now has approximately 350 homes on properties ranging from a couple thousand square feet to many acres. The population is around 425 people. It is the home of St. Dorothy's Rest, a retreat center and summer camp. In November 2009, Camp Meeker removed a WPA (Works Progress Administration) era dam and installed a bridge in its place. The dam had created a large swimming hole with water over ten feet

deep. Removal of the dam allowed an adjacent section of Dutch Bill Creek, flowing into the Russian River near Monte Rio, to be restored. In 1996 the federal government listed the Coho salmon as a threatened species, followed the next year by steelhead. State fish and game officials eventually required owners of summer dams to conduct environmental impact reports to investigate the dam's impact on fish. Although not financially feasible for Camp Meeker residents, eventually the park district teamed up with the resource conservation district and a contractor was hired to remove about 1500 tons of soil built up behind the dam and bring in about 1600 tons of rock. The rock provides step-up pools below the culvert to help fish more easily swim upstream. -- Susan Teel 2016