



## The Emperor's Game arrives in Santa Cruz

Polo champion Dorothy Deming Wheeler and her Pogonip Polo Club

By Terri Morgan

**S**anta Cruz's 640-acre Pogonip property has a long history as both a recreational area and a film set. Many longtime residents recall when scenes for *The Lost Boys* were filmed in the park, which is located between UC Santa Cruz, the San Lorenzo River, and Henry Cowell State Park. The site also served as a backdrop for two films in the 1930s: *The Maid of Salem* and *Stand Up and Fight*. The property currently is featured prominently in a book about the history of the first and only United States Women's Polo Association.

*Comin' Thru: The Golden Age of Women's Polo 1934-1941* (M.T. Publishing Company, Inc.) was published in August 2016, a few weeks after author Colleen McInerney-Meagher's 90th birthday. McInerney-Meagher, a Watsonville resident, is extremely knowledgeable about the subject, having played polo on the Pogonip Women's Polo Team with Dorothy Wheeler. Wheeler, who co-founded the association, was instrumental in es-



establishing the polo club at Pogonip. The book includes over 100 historic photos of polo matches, players, and fields.

Polo dates back to the first century AD when two Persian emperors held their original matches. Polo became a popular sport both locally and statewide during the 1920s and '30s, with fields in Aptos, Monterey, Pasatiempo, and Santa Cruz. Wheeler and her husband Deming, along with several other prominent citizens and polo players, helped launch the Pogonip Polo Club in the 1930s to bring a world class polo field to the area. Pogonip quickly became the region's polo center for both men and women. McInerney-Meagher, who had begun play-

(Top) Two of Pogonip's women polo players charging the ball during a match. (Below) The fee schedule for the Polo Club for the summer of 1937 which featured private riding lesson for \$1.25 each with breakfast offered for an additional fifty cents.

Photos: ©Colleen McInerney-Meagher Collection



(Above) A women's polo team gathers before a match at Pogonip Riding and Polo Stables. The players on the team were (L-R) Katherine Smith, Doreen Ashburnham, Dorothy Wheeler, Colleen McInerney, Wilma Kain, their pony Indy, and Elaine McInerney.

ing the sport at age eight, was an avid enthusiast of the fast-paced game.

"It was a blast," said McInerney-Meagher, whose blue eyes sparkle when she talks about polo. "There's nothing more exciting. You're going 30 to 35 miles per hour on a horse, and I just loved it."

The Pogonip women's team was a league powerhouse, winning the state championship seven years in a row.

Prior to the polo club, Pogonip was the site of the Casa del Rey Country Club and Golf Course. Opened in 1912, the golf course was associated with the Casa del Rey hotel, which offered its guests transportation from the hotel to and from the links. The 18-hole course also was served by the Southern Pacific Railroad, which would pick up and drop off passengers at the Link Station. The first hole started

at the top of the path that led up from the Links Station, according to McInerney-Meagher, who also co-authored *Pogonip: Jewel of Santa Cruz* with Joan Gilbert Mar-

"It was a blast.

There's nothing more exciting. You're going 30 to 35 miles per hour on a horse,

and I just loved it."

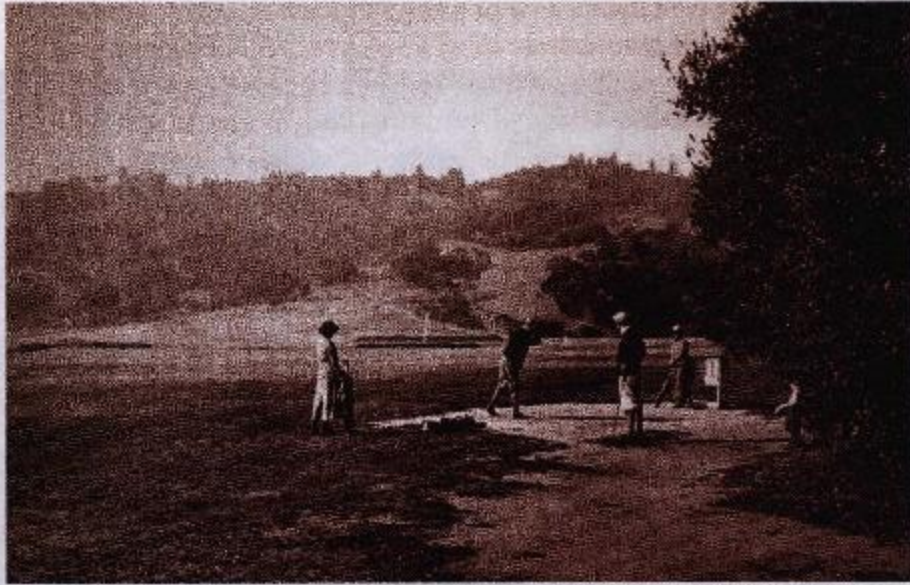
said McInerney-Meagher, whose blue eyes sparkle when she talks about polo.

tin. The 18th hole ended in front of the wooden clubhouse that housed locker rooms, a social hall, a kitchen, and a dining area. The second floor of the building

included staff quarters.

The golf club opened to great fanfare in February 1912, with a concert at the bandstand by the Boardwalk, followed by a fireworks display off the Santa Cruz Wharf. Following a three-day tournament, the festivities culminated with a ball on Washington's Birthday. But despite the hoopla and high hopes, the golf club soon hit upon hard times. Businessman Fred Swanton, who was one of the founders of the golf course, declared bankruptcy later that year, and the club was forced to reorganize as the Santa Cruz Golf and Country Club, according to McInerney-Meagher. A downturn in the economy followed, leading to a drop in tourism and recreational activities, including golf.

Competition from the Pasatiempo



(Above) Golfers tee off at the Casa Del Rey Golf Course which preceded the Polo Club. Founded in 1912, the course enjoyed prosperity until 1929 when it fell on hard times and was forced to close.

Golf Course, which opened in 1929, and the Rio del Mar golf course which opened in 1930, took its toll on the Santa Cruz Golf and Country Club. The stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression slammed the door, and the Pogonip golf course closed for good in 1934.

The golf club closure opened what seemed like a golden opportunity for a polo club at Pogonip. The sport was immensely popular in Santa Cruz, but within a short time polo matches took a back seat to World War II. Soldiers from Fort Ord were invited to the grounds to play polo before being shipped overseas. In 1944, after the Casa del Rey hotel was converted into a hospital for sailors and marines, Dorothy Wheeler organized picnics, dances, and horseback rides on the Pogonip property to boost the morale of recuperating servicemen.

Recreational activities on the Pogonip property continued to evolve through the years. The Pogonip Polo Club hosted its last match in 1948. The clubhouse was closed for renovation, and when it reopened later that year, it had been transformed into a country club. The Lezin family, who owned the



(Above) Dorothy Wheeler (L) and Marion Hollins, creator of Pasatiempo Golf Course. Wheeler and Hollins teamed up to create Santa Cruz's first polo field.



(Above) Local Pogonip players celebrate with a group of Argentine polo players following a match in 1942 at Pogonip. Colleen McInerney stands at the far right holding her horse Sleepy.

Saltz Tannery for many years, joined the club after moving to Santa Cruz.

"My family got involved in the club in the late 1940s," said Jeremy Lezin, who has fond memories of swimming in the pool while his parents played tennis. "It was a great place to hang out."

Unlike most country clubs, the Pogonip Club was inexpensive, allowing people from all walks of life to join. The club leased the property and the building from the city for a token amount in exchange for ensuring that the restaurant that operated in the old clubhouse building remained open to the public.

"It was a very casual, low-key place where you could spend the whole day," recalled Lezin, who served as the club president for about a decade. The clubhouse hosted card games, ping-pong matches in the game room, lunches, dinners, barbecues, and holiday celebrations. Weddings and special parties were held there as well.

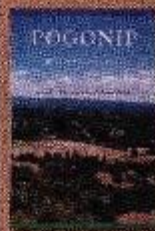
The years were not kind to the old

clubhouse, however. By the late 1980s, the clubhouse was condemned as unsafe by the Santa Cruz building inspector. Without a clubhouse, membership dwindled from about 150 families to 80 or 90 members, Lezin said.

The board of directors for the club wanted to tear down the old structure and put up a new clubhouse, but the city had other ideas. The building was designated as a Santa Cruz Historic Landmark, and the club was denied permission to demolish it. Unable to afford to repair the old building, the club disbanded.

Today, the Pogonip property is owned by the city of Santa Cruz, and is popular with hikers. Several hiking trails lead to the abandoned clubhouse, which is surrounded by cyclone fencing and posted with "No Trespassing" signs. Weeds have taken over the former tennis courts, and the outline of the former swimming pool, which was filled in after the club closed, is still visible. ♣

#### For Your Library



*Pogonip: A History of Santa Cruz*  
by  
John Vincent Martin  
and  
Colleen  
McInerney Meagher



*Santa Cruz: The Golden Age of Western Polo 1931-1967*  
by Colleen McInerney-Vascher