

## Vanished Resort's Glory Days Recalled

*By Ross Eric Gibson*

An overgrown, two-tiered fountain near the south entrance to Ben Lomond stands as a relic of the glory days of a long-lost resort. Near it, a street sign on a heavily rutted dirt road bears one word: "Rowardennan." In the early 20th century, this name was better known outside the county than Ben Lomond. Yet today, its vast acreage and historic past are little known, even to most county residents.

Lumber and shingle mills once stood where Ben Lomond is today. But unlike other lumbermen, mill owner James Pierce deliberately left groves and corridors of redwoods, so the land could be developed for tourism at a later date. Pierce co-founded the town of Ben Lomond in 1887 with mill superintendent Thomas Bell, who became its postmaster.

In 1895, Bell purchased 300 acres of forest between Highlands Park and the Ben Lomond bridge and established a resort called Rowardennan Redwood Park. Scottish place names were predominant in these mountains, as evidence of many early Scottish settlers. Rowardennan (row-ar-DEN-nan) combines the name of an enchanted Scottish flower which drives off evil spirits with a derivation of the Celtic arduos, or ardeuenna, for "high woodland," to mean "enchanted forest."

Unlike the whitewashed hotels and manicured grounds of other retreats, Bell wanted a resort that gave visitors the wilderness experience. He rented horses and equipment for camping in the woods or touring his extensive bridle trails. He built Rowardennan Hotel with 150 rooms housed in 16 cabins, and the main lodge contained the lobby and 200-seat dining hall. The ballroom was a separate lodge. The log-cabin Club House contained the unusual combination of a library and bowling alley! Books were checked out, to be read in the cabins or the woods.



*[Above is an undated, hand-colored post card of the Hotel Rowardennan.]*



*[Undated post card showing the path and entrance to the main dining room.]*

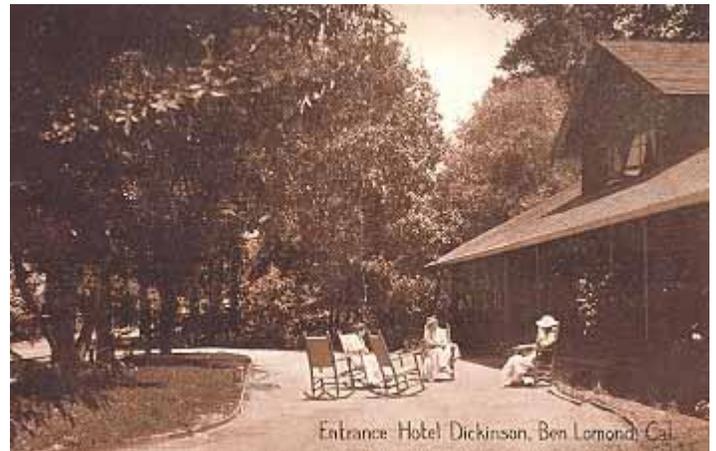
The architecture emphasized natural materials, such as river rock fireplaces and foundations, and redwood and oak in their natural colors. Because of nearby shingle mills, redwood shingles were \$1 a bunch, or 10,000 for \$5. The log cabins and shingle buildings all had log porches, with rails and spandrels of fancy log grills.

The hotel grounds were on the river perimeter of the redwood park, east of the main road. This formed a peninsula surrounded on three sides by the river. The grounds contained croquet and tennis courts, and a river trail named Lover's Lane which led to a boating and swimming pond. This river-pond was formed by a dam, which generated electricity for the hotel, in an age before electricity was available to the general public.

When Bell's house burned in 1897, he sold his Ben Lomond property, bought 400 acres around the confluence of Zayante and Bean creeks, and built his 1898 Zayante Inn, later called Mount Hermon Inn. In 1899, the new operator of Rowardennan was the Santa Cruz assistant postmaster, Benjamin Dickinson, a former lumberman from Nova Scotia. He expanded the hotel with a new cluster of cottages near the bridge in the same shingle and log style, and called the new cottages the Dickinson Hotel. The cottage by the road had such a fancy log porch it was nicknamed the Cuckoo Clock.

The Rowardennan and Dickinson hotels had many famous guests, but the most legendary event was when heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries made Rowardennan his training camp in 1910. The undefeated Jeffries was lured out of retirement to fight Jack Johnson for a \$101,000 fee. The 315-pound fighter needed to work off the 95 pounds he had gained in retirement, and some of his training methods were rather unique.

Jeffries filled sacks with wet sand and built a dam on the San Lorenzo River, and when it was done, he took it apart and reassembled it at another location. He also cut redwood trees with an ax, and built a log cabin with the lumber. He sparred with visiting fighters every Sunday, one of which was retired champion Gentleman Jim Corbett.



*[This undated post card shows ladies sitting in front of the Hotel Dickinson.]*

The announcement that the fight would be held in San Francisco prompted the organization of a national coalition of businessmen and church people to stop it. When California's governor heard it was hurting San Francisco's chances of hosting the 1915 world's fair, he canceled the fight.

Betting interests stood to lose big, so the fight was moved to Reno. When he reached Nevada, Jeffries dodged one attempt to drug his food, but a "friend" served him doped tea, and he had to be helped into the ring in a drugged stupor. Through 15 rounds he was described as moving in slow motion, until he fell through the ropes and was counted out.[1]

The overwhelming popularity of Rowardennan Redwood Park prompted the sale of sections of the campgrounds west of the public road for summer cabins. Hotel expansion entailed a main lodge for the Dickinson Hotel, opened in 1914. Rowardennan Hotel was sold separately in the late 1920s, and renamed Ben Lomond Lodge. It burned in 1932, and its ballroom in 1933; the remains of the 300-acre park were subdivided for housing. When Dickinson died in 1945, Gordon

Perry bought the Dickinson Hotel and ran it as the Town & Country lodge until 1967. It still stands, but its redwood shingles were recently painted white when it became a boutique.

Now only a song recalls its romantic past:

*Magic enchants Rowardennan,  
Here, where the moonlight  
Gets caught in the trees,  
And a river of stars  
Flows out to the seas,  
And echoes this haunting  
Refrain in the breeze, that  
Magic enchants Rowardennan . . .*

### **Editor's Note**

1. *There is some disagreement among sources whether Jeffries was actually drugged or not.*

### **Sources**

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