

The Pogonip

By Ross Eric Gibson

Today, as the city of Santa Cruz decides its fate, the famous Pogonip Clubhouse stands vacant on a panoramic site of 614 acres.

Pogonip, once named among the nation's top scenic golf courses, also had polo grounds that headquartered the first United States Women's Polo Association. The club attracted international sports figures and was popular with Hollywood personalities such as Darryl Zanuck, Spencer Tracy, Roy and Walt Disney and Mary Pickford.

Many mistakenly believed "Pogonip" was an acronym for PO-lo, GO-If and a NIP at the clubhouse bar. But the area was named for Pogonip Creek, after an Indian word meaning "river fog."

Pogonip's stone kilns are from the 1853 lime industry. The lime works were owned by Henry Cowell and once included the site of the University of California, Santa Cruz Big Trees and part of Graham Hill. Cowell died in 1903, and son Harry Cowell took over the ranch.

As a conservationist, Harry established "Henry Cowell Big Trees Park" in 1906. In 1911, boardwalk founder Fred Swanton persuaded Cowell to lease the Pogonip portion of Big Trees for a golf course, on condition it remain in a natural state and revert to the park if discontinued.

Swanton wanted an affordable version of Monterey's Hotel Del Monte and built the Casa del Rey next to the boardwalk. Under the lease, Pogonip became the Casa del Rey Golf and Country Club, with a clubhouse designed by L.D. Esty after the type of rustic golf lodges at Del Monte and Pebble Beach. Log structures emphasized its natural setting, where elk and buffalo herds roamed. Yet fees were kept low to make it the working folks' golf course.

The golf course became independent of the hotel after the hotel's financial problems during World War I. But when Marion Hollins established her Pasatiempo course nearby, the club could not compete, and closed in 1935.

Hollins even brought polo champion Dorothy Deming Wheeler to establish a polo field and racetrack near Pasatiempo on a portion of Big Trees Park leased from horse-enthusiast Harry Cowell. This is today Graham Hill Showgrounds.

But the grounds were undersized for regulation polo and international matches. In 1936, Wheeler created the Pogonip Polo Club, with stables designed by famed Pasatiempo architect William Wurster. The Pogonip hills included a Hunter Trail course, where an annual steeplechase with the Pebble Beach Polo Club brought participants such as Mary Pickford and Mrs. Spencer Tracy.

Wheeler kept Pogonip prices low and extended the sport to women and children. Santa Cruz enjoyed her coed polo matches, which were elsewhere controversial. The men's National Polo Association rejected a women's association, so Wheeler established the first United States Polo Association, serving as its president for many years. She even led the women's polo team to the Pacific Coast Circuit Championships several years in a row.

The club closed during World War II, and Pogonip was used to train a women's mounted corps for the Red Cross. Wheeler gave riding therapy to patients in the naval hospital that took over the Casa del Rey. The club reopened in 1948, but its equestrian days were over. Bicycle polo took its place, while the club expanded its social activities to include tennis, skeet, bridge, dances, weddings and fashion shows.

At least three movies were filmed there, and the proceeds from one created the club's pool in 1936. But in 1986, the club demolished Wurster's Polo Stables, had the clubhouse condemned and proposed replacing the pool. They planned a new clubhouse with similar facade features except for the log porch. Two former club members, Doug Deitch and Colleen McInerney-Meagher, believed the landmark could be rehabilitated, and its location in the city's greenbelt required an environmental impact report before demolition.

Pogonip's 614 acres became city property in 1989. A lease obliged the club to repair or rebuild the clubhouse, which would remain private for 28 years and revert to the city in 2020. But the club's drive to sell 200 \$5,000 memberships, with \$80-a-month dues, netted only one membership. This and declining membership forced the club to close in 1993, leaving the city ill-equipped to restore it.

Monday was the city's deadline for Pogonip Clubhouse use proposals. Deitch was the only applicant, with a revised version of the Pogonip Club proposal. Deitch wants to put up \$100,000 of his own money to start a non-profit corporation, restore the clubhouse and place it on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sources

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