

Lydon, Sandy

Santa Cruz Sentinel — Sunday, May 26, 1991 — B-3

✓ For sale: military base with ocean view: \$1

That was circa 1948; Monterey Bay Academy worth millions in 1991

THE DREAM OF everyone who shops second-hand stores, flea markets or war surplus is that Big Buy. A one-dollar painting that turns out to be a long-lost Rembrandt. Well, how about the \$1 war-surplus purchase made in 1948 which is now worth over \$2,000,000? (Sounds like a real capital-gains nightmare to me.)

Following World War II, the responsibility for disposing of surplus material and property rested with the War Assets Administration (WAA). From mess kits to military bases, the WAA auctioned off items declared surplus by the military, and generally, the agency gave priority to veterans and non-profit agencies when doing so.

Camp McQuaide was the largest surplus property sale in the Monterey Bay region following World War II.

Camp McQuaide began in the 1920s as a National Guard artillery camp just east of Capitola on the flat area bounded roughly by Park and Monterey avenues. Each sum

cessfully returned to active duty. The other 10 percent was dishonorably discharged.

Hundreds of civilians worked at Camp McQuaide and Watsonville businesses provided a number of services to the camp, including publishing the camp newspaper, "Overs and Shorts."

Camp McQuaide's military prison functions continued until the spring of 1947 when the post was closed, declared war surplus, and turned over to the WAA for disposal. By that time the camp contained over 600 buildings on 407 acres, including a theater, gymnasium and hundreds of 16- by 48-foot hutments.

Though the army had over \$2,000,000 invested in the camp, they placed a market value of \$643,000 on the property.

Thomas S. MacQuiddy, Watsonville's superintendent of schools, had been pushing for a local junior college since the 1920s, and he believed that Camp McQuaide offered a wonderful opportunity for a junior college. In

early 1948, MacQuiddy led a county-wide effort to acquire the property, and local educators made an application to the state Department of Education for approval. (This county-wide coalition was one of the first times that all geographical segments of the county had ever agreed on

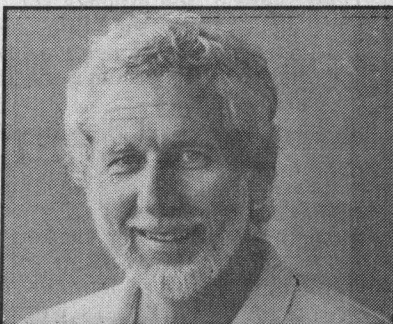


WWII photographs from Sandy Lydon collection

TOP — Troops from Camp McQuaide march in San Andreas district during World War II.

LEFT — Cemetery stands as one memory of the army camp.

Hindsight





ical segments of the county had ever agreed on anything.) The state turned down the proposal, noting that the buildings were well below state standards, the proposed campus was not centrally located, and the access to the site was limited. (I have never forgiven the state for that decision because it would have been a magnificent collegesetting. Just think. Beach front faculty offices. Sigh.)

Camp chapel was part of '48 purchase.

mer, the 250th Coast Artillery of the California National Guard would assemble out there and fire their cannons out to sea. The noise annoyed nearby residents, however, and they complained that the concussion of the guns knocked dishes off the shelves and scared their hens so badly that they would not lay.

In 1938, the National Guard purchased a 400-acre, ocean-front home for Camp McQuaide between Zils Road and Sunset Beach off San Andreas Road and the cannon moved there that summer.

The army took over the camp in September, 1940, and during World War II it housed a number of different functions including an education center for illiterate GIs. Camp McQuaide also was the West Coast Processing Center for rehabilitating United States military prisoners (AWOLs and disciplinary cases) and getting them back into regular Army life. There was a low-security prison in the northwest corner of the camp (local law-enforcement officers apprehended many McQuaide escapees during the war), and each prisoner went through a 30-day regimen of counseling, training and route marches before being reassigned to overseas duty. According to the Army, an amazing 90 percent of the prisoners sent to McQuaide were suc-

cessful.

The WAA then offered the property to the state of California for a beach park, but the state declined. When no other government or non-profit agency expressed an interest, the camp site was put up for public bid. The WAA brochure prepared for the auction described the property in glowing terms: "Gently rolling land sloping up from the bayshore ... unusually attractive for a country club, private school or for home sites ..."

The WAA was disappointed when the highest bid in the first auction was only \$141,000. Meanwhile, the Central California Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists expressed an interest in acquiring the site for a boarding high school. When the second auction saw the highest bid rise to only \$151,000, the WAA sold the property to the Adventists for what they described as a "100 per cent discount." One dollar.

The logic of rejecting a bid of \$151,000 to sell the property for \$1 may be difficult to understand, since, after all, the government doesn't need the tax deduction. But the underlying philosophy behind the WAA sales was that there be some public benefit. The Advent-

Sandy Lydon

ists had a higher claim to "public benefit" in the case of Camp McQuaide than real estate developers; and, given the thousands of high school students who have received their education at the Monterey Bay Academy, the WAA's philosophy seems to have been borne out.

I visited Monterey Bay Academy the other day to see if the place still had the feel of World War II. Bob Wisdom, the Academy's Plant Service Superintendent, gave me a delightful briefing on the property. Dozens of the old camp buildings are still in use, including the Plant Maintenance headquarters which once housed the army's quartermaster. Wisdom showed me the heavy, pine walls and in one place I could still see the army's instructions for its quartermaster: "Step No. 1 — Check Freight Bills Against Freight." It's rules like that which helped win the war.

The Academy still uses the water, electrical, drainage and sewage system installed by the army and there are concrete gun mounts out on the bluff above the beach. On top of the knoll where the Camp McQuaide "bowl" (a sunken amphitheater) was located, there is still a concrete post with the words, "250th Coast Artillery Bowl, 1941, Col. D.P. Hardy" etched into it.

At one time there was a plaque commemorating Chaplain Joseph McQuaide attached to a rock sticking out of the ground opposite Wisdom's office, but the plaque was gone long before Wisdom arrived in the early 1970s. Wisdom informally renamed the rock "The Blarney Stone" because Academy students have focused a quarter-century of graffiti on it. (It read "Class of 94 Rules" the day I saw it, but it has probably been painted over by another class by now.)

Wisdom says that many veterans who spent time at McQuaide have stopped by over the years and he has learned a lot of informal camp history from them.

Ironically, at the very moment that the WAA was selling off its Santa Cruz County properties (Watsonville Auxiliary Naval Air Station and Camp McQuaide) for a total of \$3, it increased its Monterey County presence by purchasing the old Del Monte Hotel for the Naval Post Graduate School for \$2,500,000. (The hotel had been losing money for years.)

Let's see. They sold three properties for \$3 and paid \$2,500,000 for



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

my camp.
BOTTOM — Monterey Bay Academy staff puts the old army movie house to new use.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

another. That's our government. Always hard at work.

Santa Cruz County has appraised the Monterey Bay Acade-

my's land (less buildings and improvements) at \$2,136,923. Not a bad return on a \$1 investment.

Sandy Lydon is an author on

matters historical and is a member of the history faculty at Cabrillo College — the college that almost had beach front faculty offices.



Bayonet practice at Camp McQuaide.