

Days of wine and polo

Women's championship play gave Pogonip national recognition in the '40s



Octagon Museum exhibit recalls polo glory days for Colleen Meagher.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

Living section editor

TIME IS ON the run for Pogonip. Soon it will be 1990 and the 'Greenbelt' ordinance will no longer be in effect. What then? The ordinance has been a protection to the 614 acres — or, an inhibitor to growth, depending on your viewpoint.

The future of Pogonip's rolling, verdant acres excites interest, even passion. Everyone has an opinion, it seems.

Pogonip — a place where the F. Scott Fitzgerald myth abides. The name evokes thoughts of summer whites, languid afternoons, manners.

Among the people passionate over the future of Pogonip are club members, who played golf on its greens, frolicked in the pool, leaned at the glossy bar. Is the rustic clubhouse closed forever? They wonder. Development. A university short-cut road. Parkland. The best use for the people of Santa Cruz. They listen to the ideas. Ears perk when someone mentions the current owner, Cowell Foundation.

Among the listeners is club member Colleen McInerney Meagher of Aptos, one of a rare breed, who has been instrumental in developing a historical exhibit on women's polo which opened Friday at the Octagon Museum. She was a member of Pogonip Women's Polo Team, and for a woman to play polo in the '30s was considered avant garde.

Pogonip was home to the "Mother of Women's Polo," Dorothy Deming Wheeler, who founded the U.S. Women's Polo Association and was its first president. She acted as mentor to her nieces, Colleen and her older sister, Elaine.

The girls grew up in Hollywood; their mother was a swimmer at Hollywood Athletic Club who divorced their father when the girls were young. Wheeler offered mother and daughters residence at her Windy Hill Farms near Pogonip. The girls attended local schools and spent all their free time raising and grooming polo ponies and playing the game against

REFERENCE

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Wheeler archives

Argentine consul toasts Colleen, right, and Elaine McInerney, 1940.

clubs in Pasatiempo, Santa Barbara, Riviera. Wheeler's women's team won the state championship for seven consecutive years.

The sisters, young, blonde, beautiful, moved easily in an international social set. A photo above the ersatz bar shows the sisters, after a ride, being served champagne by the consul of Argentina, Fernando Mahanovich. Colleen was 15. "He proposed marriage to me, but I declined. Then when I was 23, I saw him again and he said he no longer was

interested, that I was too old and would have a mind of my own."

Romance and glamour were the key to the girls' life. Even "Look" magazine featured Pogonip's women's team. "But, we were poor, if you can believe that," Meagher reminisces. Since a polo player needs about six horses, they depended on the Wheelers stables and film star Spencer Tracy and his wife, who had become enthralled with Elaine and provided horses for her.

It was a dream life, interrupted by a nightmare war. Meagher left Santa Cruz after high school to find work, and eventually married and raised a family.

When she returned to live in Santa Cruz County a few years ago and heard about the uncertain fate of Pogonip's acres, her interest in the history of Pogonip was piqued. People of Santa Cruz, she discovered, didn't really know about the town's polo history. This would be her work. She would help develop a museum exhibit.

"Comin' Through," the exhibit at the Octagon, tells the story of Pogonip from times of the Ohlone Indians through the days of Wheeler and the McInerney sisters.

Museum exhibits, under director John Lisher, reach into many facets of the community. "Our purpose is to involve more and more people," says Lisher. For "Comin' Thru," he built facsimiles of stables, of the Pogonip bar and the clubhouse fireplace and decorated them with authentic furnishings. Central to the exhibit is a life-size horse figure rigged for polo. (It's the same creature that once stood atop the former Arabian Motel in Aptos and now resides at Hansen's Feed and Pet Supply.)

Meagher takes her own involvement seriously; when she stops by the museum, she moves among visitors like a hostess, pointing out a newspaper clipping here, explaining the use of a polo mallet there.

"This is terribly exciting," says Meagher. "Especially envisioning all this." She leans to hear, for the umpteenth time, the newscaster on a 1940 newsreel that a nephew, Paul Kozak, found in the UC-Los Angeles archives.

"That's me." She points out a video image of a girl in her early teens, strong, controlling the horse, racing down Del Monte playing grounds, leaning into the play.

A museum mannequin models polo gear; the knickers are tan and should be white, Meagher explains. The hat is made of cork. Kneepads are leather. It's a tough sport, says the former athlete. "And you have to be in shape."

Pogonip's history provides a backdrop for enticing snips about Wheeler, polo and wartime Santa Cruz.

That Wheeler — "Aunt Dot," to Meagher — was a woman ahead of her time is apparent from her involvement with health and Alaskan Eskimos in the '20s, the numerous articles she wrote and her forming of an International Women's Mounted Patrol during World War II. Her archives are at UCSC; her story will be featured at a new Polo Association Museum in Lexington, Ky.

Polo was an almost-daily item in The Sentinel, which isn't surprising since the news editor, Lowell Bready (who later was killed during the war in France) married Elaine McInerney when she was 18.

And regardless of polo, horses made news: During the war, Meagher's uncle wrote to the editor proposing a parking lot for horses in the city. "Car rationing is certain," he wrote. "I foresee a day when fine saddlehorses will be used for transportation."

Meagher realistically doesn't expect the polo days to return to Pogonip, but her hope is that "the clubhouse can be saved and renovated. My motivation with the exhibit was to show the community this important history. I'm not really sure what I can do next."

Donors for "Comin' Thru" included Pogonip members; Dorothy Deming Wheeler's great nephew and niece, Deming Stout and Katie Law Meloon; and the Tanner and Marge Wilson Endowment Fund of Santa Cruz Community Foundation.