

# the shadow over Tamalpais is gone, but 'it will never be the same'

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"It was like hiking through a minefield," Skinner told me Friday in the living room of her San Anselmo home. Mt. Tam loomed gloriously in the distance, visible through sliding glass doors.

"There was an atmosphere of constant concern. Everyone was suspicious of everyone else. When we passed a single man hiking alone, we'd rake him with our eyes. Was he the one? Could we describe him to police later? I heard stories of single men hikers feeling the energy and calling out, 'I didn't do it!'"

Skinner herself took a women's self-defense course. "I read that he made victims take their clothes off and beg for their lives before shooting them. I wasn't about to go out on my knees, begging for my life. I wanted to take him with me."

The lurking specter of death doesn't make for a fun nature hike.

"I had been on the mountain to be serene, to be still," says Skinner. "Now I had to treat it like a city street, to hold myself ready for combat or flight at a moment's notice. It was no longer a place to restore my soul."

There are supposedly two buried treasures on Tamalpais. According to legend, Civil War deserter Bill Williams came to the Bay Area with a hoard of Confederate gold and buried it somewhere near today's Bill Williams Gulch. Williams died before he could share his secret location, and the treasure has never been found.

Some years later, around the turn of the century, two bandits stole a huge haul of gold coins from a bank in San Rafael. Escaping over the mountain to Willow Camp (now Stinson Beach), the bandits buried the treasure for safe-



Examiner/Eli Reed

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Then, on Friday, came word that a suspect had been arrested.

"It was such a tremendous relief," says Nancy Skinner "I rushed outside for a run on the mountain. It was such a high! The sky was bluer and the clouds were whiter."

She holds up her right palm, which is scraped and bloody "I fell on some sharp rocks, but I didn't care."

Outside Skinner's hilltop home, fog was beginning to shroud the summit of Tamalpais. An answering cloud passed across Skinner's strong, open face.

"It will never be the same on the mountain, I think," she says, measuring her words. "You can't put things back the way they were before. Even if the suspect is the guy who did it, I'll never walk certain trails alone again. Never. There's something that's gone now: a feeling of serenity, of stillness. I'll never feel so free and alone again. Ever."

Skinner recalled a "Reclaim the Mountain" ritual staged by Anna and Lawrence Halprin in mid-April. At one point, Anna Halprin, a semi-mythical Marin dance teacher and spiritual leader, turned to the mountain, spread her arms and said, "Here's healing energy for Tamalpais."

"Tamalpais doesn't need healing," says Nancy Skinner with resignation. "We do."

When the desperadoes got to Willow Camp, the residents promised not to hang the thieves if they divulged the location of the money. One bandit said, "It's buried under a rock between two big trees." The townspeople hanged the thieves anyway, and went to look for the gold. It was never found.

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Deep concern turned to stark terror last Thanksgiving, when two hikers at Point Reyes National Seashore were shot to death. Authorities searching the area for clues turned up two decomposed bodies nearby. The victims had also been shot.

Although Point Reyes is miles from Tamalpais, the gruesome Thanksgiving discoveries sent fresh shivers of fear through the foothills of the mountain, which range from Mill Valley through Corte Madera, Greenbrae, Kentfield, Ross and San Anselmo. Marin authorities were by then seeking a single killer: one individual terrorized half a county.

On weekends the normally busy slopes of the mountain were nearly empty, except for those jumpy, suspicious hiking parties. There was a deep sense of loss, violation, and the end of a precious, elysian innocence.



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They embraced the softly rising thrust of land and rock, carving trails for hiking, building "the world's crookedest railway" to take tourists to the summit, establishing inns where visitors could be astounded by nature's bounty.

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"Edda's murder didn't stop us from going out onto the mountain," recalls Nancy Skinner, an expert hike leader who teaches Tamalpais history at the College of Marin.

"We thought it was an isolated incident. The idea of some guy running around shooting people just never occurred to us."

Then, March 8, 1980, the body of Barbara Schwartz, a 23-year-old Mill Valley baker, was found on a mountain hiking trail.

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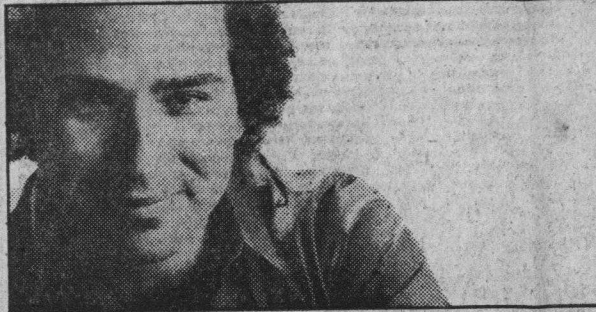
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