San Rafael Heights, “The Beauty Spot of Marin”

By Judy Coy

San Rafael Heights in San Anselmo’s southeast corner was first subdivided in 1908, one year after the town’s incorporation. It encompasses Greenfield Avenue from Matteucci’s at #114 to the town limit just before Ross Valley Drive, Greenfield Court, West Hillside Avenue, Spring Grove Road and Terrace Avenue. A map of San Rafael Heights Subdivision Two was drawn in 1910; it encompasses an area east of Ross Valley Drive in the City of San Rafael.

The area was known as the Hayes Tract or Hayes Ranch. Patrick Hayes, a native of Ireland, came to San Rafael in the 1850s where he married Mary Tighe in 1865, raised six children and became a popular and enterprising resident. In the 1860s, he purchased 150 acres, a portion of Rancho Punta de Quintin from the estate of James Ross. While still in his early 40s, Hayes had an unfortunate accident that left him an invalid for the next 18 years; he died on his San Rafael ranch in January 1890 leaving a sizable estate to his widow, Mary.

In January 1893, Mary Hayes sold the 150-acre Hayes Ranch to Martin B. Magnesen, a San Francisco commission merchant and Ross resident. Magnesen was a principal in companies in Alaska as well as a steamer line. He traveled to his native Norway for extended visits.

It took Magnesen several years to fully develop his plan for the property. He leased the ranch shortly after purchasing it for use as a picnic and camping resort, and then in 1904, he had the property surveyed and had roads laid out and graded as shown in the above photograph.

In 1908, Atthowe & Studley Real Estate of San Anselmo started running small advertisements in the
San Francisco Call and produced an illustrated brochure describing the choice suburban homesites in San Rafael Heights Subdivision One.

SAN RAFAEL HEIGHTS

In offering the first subdivision of San Rafael Heights to the public, we realize that many are more or less familiar with the general characteristics of this Natural Park, the most desirable and picturesque of Marin County holdings. For beauty of landscape it stands unrivalled; sunny and sheltered, it is just the spot for a cozy family home.

Its picturesque surroundings are too well known to metropolitan residents to need any particular description. Winding roads lead to the higher lots through stately redwoods, rearing their giant heads above the surrounding country, and Live White and Black Oaks with massive trunks and verdant foliage and which are always so green and bright. Here you also find a veritable forest of Madrones, Mountain Ash, California Golden Maple, and other grand old trees yet you are only five minutes walk from San Anselmo or West End Station, San Rafael.

The portion of the tract that was open and level was divided into 50x150 foot lots, and the wooded and hillside lots were divided into lots from one-half to three acres. No house costing less than $2,000 or any grocery, saloon, resort, livery stable, laundry or other objectionable buildings were permitted to be built on the tract.

One of the earliest homes built was that of Frank Stadelmann, a San Francisco dry goods merchant. He purchased lots in 1909 and completed construction of his substantial home at 4 Greenfield Court in early 1915. The home, now apartments, was two-stories and seven rooms with landscaping, retaining walls, a concrete terrace and a sleeping porch on the roof. In 1923, Stadelmann divorced his invalid wife and constructed a small home at the upper end of his property. He is listed there at 91 Spring Grove in the 1930 census.

With growth along the corridor between San Rafael and San Anselmo, the Northwestern Pacific Railroad added a new station at Ross Valley Drive in 1913. The station was named Highland because San Rafael Heights would be confusing to strangers who might think that they had arrived in San Rafael proper. With the naming of the new station, the area in San Anselmo and San Rafael became known as Highland, The Highlands or Highland Park.

In the spring of 1915, the San Anselmo Herald published three curious articles about the discovery
of gold in San Rafael Heights. San Anselmo resident Dominic Ferrero claimed to have found gold while excavating for a construction project and had it assayed in San Francisco. The newspaper reported that "this was not the first discovery of gold in San Rafael Heights and it is a well-known fact that gold exists in the San Anselmo portion of the tract."

Ferrero planned to work his find, and hardware stores were reported to be doing a brisk business in picks and shovels. Rumor had it that the location was somewhere near the "Wessell" lots, which would be in the vicinity of today's 32 Terrace, 60 Terrace and 189 Spring Grove. Ferrero wisely would not divulge the location. The last of three Herald articles indicated that Ferrero planned to sell stock in his mine. With no further mention of the gold mine in the Herald or any mention of it in any of the other Marin newspapers, one can assume that the mine did not pan out for Ferrero as he hoped and immense wealth did not come his way.

While numerous lots were sold between 1908 and 1920, the Sanborn Map of 1924 (below) and the photograph from the early 1930s (next page) show that development overall in the tract was slow. By 1923, Magnesen sold the remaining unsold lots in both San Rafael Heights Subdivision One in San Anselmo and Subdivision Two in San Rafael to Winfield Scott Davis of Ross, the president of Highland Realty. Magnesen died in his hometown in Norway in 1931.

With the onset of the Great Depression, home and lot sales in general declined. In June 1931, 135 unsold lots of Highland Realty went on the public auction block under a big tent at Highland Station. It was reported to be one of the greatest auction sales of urban property ever held in Marin. One third of the lots were sold on the first weekend at "bed-rock" prices, and the auction continued the following Sunday.
Depression era prices were still being offered for the remaining 35 Highland Realty lots in May 1937 with prices ranging from to $200 to $650. Thomas Minto Real Estate’s advertising read, “Why not take advantage of PRE-BRIDGE prices while you can?” The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge was just days away.

Most lots in the flat section of San Rafael Heights were developed by 1950 with many of the charming bungalows surviving today on tree-lined Greenfield Avenue. It would take many more years before some of the steep and heavily wooded lots off from Spring Grove were subdivided creating buildable homesites.

The commercial zone along Greenfield Avenue was extended eastward in the 1920s. Braverman’s Fine Furniture was a fixture at 208 Greenfield (where the Mini Storage is located today) from 1945 to 1996. The building was originally built in 1925 for Nelson Furniture Company and then occupied by
Wilford Peters Furniture and Western Home Furnishers before Braverman's.

Nelson Furniture Co. opened in 1925 at 208 Greenfield.

Braverman's was at 208 Greenfield from 1945 to 1996.

Shoe Fair opened in 1966 in a new building at 222 Greenfield where Sport & Spine is now located.

Black Market Imports, 1965

The Elan Fitness building at 230 Greenfield dates from about 1950. It was an automobile showroom and repair shop until Black Market Imports moved there in 1964. Black Market, like an early Cost Plus, sold all sorts of imported decorative items and clothing, such as batik bedspreads, beaded curtains, wicker baskets and furniture, candles and ceramic pots. Many remember the smell of incense and the room in the back with black-light posters. Elan Fitness opened in 1984.

The names of Patrick Hayes, Martin Magneser, Winfield S. Davis and Highland Realty came back into the news in a legal case in the 1950s. Patrick Hayes had granted the railroad a 30 foot right away to extend its line from San Anselmo into San Rafael in 1875. When the railroad abandoned the tracks in 1941, residents in both San Anselmo and San Rafael started using the strip for a roadway that officially became the eastbound lane of Miracle Mile in 1948.

Heirs of Davis as heirs of the Highland Realty Company filed suit claiming that the property reverted to them when the tracks were abandoned. San Anselmo and San Rafael disagreed, and the legal battle continued for 10 years.

After an appeal and reversal by the California Supreme Court, a decision was reached at the end of a second trial that Highland Realty did hold title to the strip of land but could make no use of it since the cities had established an easement by public use of the road for more than five years before the suit was filed. To avoid another appeal and a second Supreme Court trip, the parties agree to settle in 1961 with both San Anselmo and San Rafael paying Highland Realty $5,000.

Join the Historical Commission on free docent-led tours through downtown. Remaining dates for 2022 are August 14, September 11 and October 9. Meet at Creek Park at 9:00 a.m. The tour ends at the Historical Museum for refreshments. No reservations are required.