

## Peripatetic in Portola Valley

**Our Town** is fascinating, full of nooks and crannies. And big. To get around and see everything it helps to be able to run intrepidly along trails, through the brush and up and down hills. That way one can see a lot, explore its history and get there before time - and man - erases the evidence.



*Western Slopes of Town*



*View from Windy Hill*

For more than five decades, I've been a resident of this place or an adventurous student down the road at 'The Farm.' For much of this time I have managed to search this vast environment and satisfy my half-vast curiosity by using half-fast running as a vehicle. It is indeed possible to run for exercise and still stop to smell the flowers and see the sights. In Portola Valley, there are lots of both and all it takes is a curious mind and a good pair of legs.

The Town covers more than 11 square miles, varies in altitude from a few hundred feet to two thousand feet and has an ample array of flora, fauna, faults and cultural features. So much to see and so little time!

Running down the western slopes through the open grasslands of upper Windy Hill, I hop from log to log through the old 1860s homestead nestled in the clump of Cypress trees. As a geologist, I remember seeing the old official topographic maps that identified this hill as Spring Ridge, for the numerous springs on the slopes. Just downhill, I stop for a drink (no Giardia, so far) at one of these old springs formerly used to fill the trough for the cattle that grazed the meadows. This open slope used to be forested but was cleared for pasture and was, not so long ago, the site of our Town's last vestige of cattle, a kind of remnant ruminant.



*Water trough, Spring Ridge*



At the crest, a blue heron, airborne but motionless in the wind, has no better view than I, for this is the top of the world and in all directions I look down. To the West are soft rolling hills and forest all the way to the cloud-covered ocean 20 miles away. In all other directions, I see the prominent peaks of the Bay Area,

Mt. Tam, Mt. Diablo, Mt. Hamilton and Black Mountain. There must be others like me on each of those pinnacles scanning their panorama.

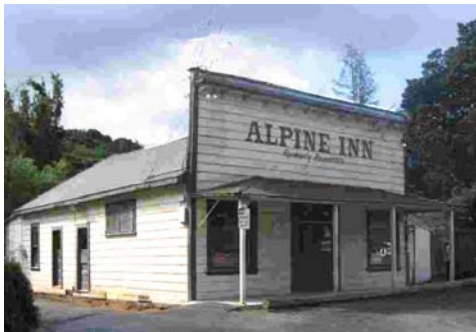
From this vantage point, I see our famous landmarks but from a perspective so unfamiliar that it requires concentration before they are recognized: the Dumbarton, San Mateo and Bay bridges, the downtown buildings of San Francisco, the cities of Oakland and Berkeley, Hoover Tower, Moffett Field, Jasper Ridge Preserve, Searsville and Felt lakes, SLAC and the loop of Alpine-Portola-Sand Hill roads.



**El Mirador Farm entrance**

Needing assurance that I am not actually airborne, I look down to see my feet and find myself standing next to a survey benchmark, a bronze seal fixed in concrete. This is the takeoff point for miniature radio-controlled airplanes and hang gliding daredevils who hitchhike a ride on the air on their way down to the valley floor. Taking an alternate route down from Windy Hill, I run through the thick redwood forest of the El Mirador Farm and retrace the old route of a far different means

of getting down the hill: a cable car. Yes, the pilot test of the famous cable car later built in San Francisco was conducted on the hill across from the Parkside Grille in about 1875 by Andrew Hallidie who lived near Skyline. I once stumbled across a 2" thick piece of cable which, until recently, protruded from the ground in the redwood grove on Portola Road.



**Alpine Inn** (formerly, Rossotti's)

The plans for this engineering project could well have been worked out down the road apiece on the carved tables of the oldest, continuously inhabited saloon in the State, the Alpine Inn, better known as Zott's. In the 50's, the local saloons, often frequented by Stanford students, also included Rudy's (the stone building at Alpine Tennis Club and later our first Town Hall), Mama



**Rudy's Bar**

Garcia's (where the smell of garlic bread still emanates from that spot at Alpine near Nathorst) and Art's 'Fashionable' Portola Club (now an insurance office on Portola Road), home of the "Apple Knocker". The latter is a deceptively pleasing, but dangerous drink concocted from a tincture of apple juice preserved in a shot of vodka, the apples carted from the Jelich orchard across the road.



**Art's Portola Club**

Zott's, actually, short for Rossotti's, had many names in the past, even the Blue Goose Saloon, referenced in Stanford Professor John C. Branner's personal notes in April, 1906 when he drove past it to investigate the surface rupture from the major earthquake on the then-called 'Santa Cruz' fault. At the southern end of the soccer field, we now call Rossotti's field, was a large, white-washed structure we called Mangini's Barn, the venue for an annual

party our Stanford fraternity, ATΩ, put on every year. Called the Hog Wallow, it was promoted on campus by letting loose to run free on the Quad, a small well-greased pig. The party featured a concoction we called, "Sanco Poco" (origin, I never knew) brewed in a bathtub and comprised of equal parts of grape juice, rum, vodka, soda and such mood-inducing elixirs.

Touring Portola Valley always includes some time along the bifurcated spine of the Town, Alpine and Portola Roads. Many runners and bikers skirt the



*Gate House, Willowbrook*

congestion along Portola Road near the intersection of these roads by taking the longer-but-more-scenic bypass, Willowbrook Road. The road was built about six decades ago. Before that it was a fertile agricultural valley for the 1500 acre Lauriston Estate (later, the Neylan Estate) and used in the '20s for growing medicinal herbs. Immediately south of the first major turn in Alpine Road near Corte Madera School, is the track of the

original road into Willowbrook Valley, now a pleasant trail that winds down past a small quarry to Willowbrook Road. This whole area of the Lauriston Estate, its villas, the splendor of the times and photographs of the Portola Valley of yesteryear are chronicled in *Lauriston* by its author, the late Skip Bogart, a Portola Valley resident of many years.



*Frog pond at Corte Madera school after winter rains*

Some of my wanderings include trails that, for a variety of reasons, are not generally accessible except to those who are bold, speedy or stealth-like.



*Meadow at the Sequoias*

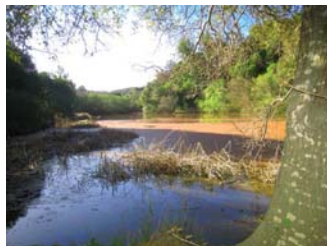
Almost all the major roads are bordered by horse trails that are wonderful for walking or running and you see so much more just a few feet off the road. A few others have been withdrawn from easy access, such as the Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve of Stanford (bordering Portola Valley at Mapache and Escobar) which includes Searsville Lake on Portola Road, until the 1970's, the only public beach and swimming hole around. Flowing out from the dam which forms Searsville Lake is San Francisquito Creek where in the '60s, I worked at a geophysical research field site. On weekends, I would wander along the banks of the creek with a magnetometer (similar to a metal detector) to find square nails and other remnants of structures from this outlier settlement of the 1850s. Evidence of ancient man from 8000 years ago was also found by anthropologists along the banks of the creek not far from Webb Ranch, our local vegetable farm. I'm still searching for a cave from these peoples which may have the original Town plan drawn in burnt umber upon the walls.

Exploring these dendritic trails offers many surprises including unusual vistas of the terrain and passageways through cathedral-like groves of aromatic bay trees, massive red madrones and giant gnarled Douglas firs. The most impressive discoveries, though, and ones which make me feel like Dr.

Livingstone coming upon Victoria Falls, are the first views of any one of the many sylvan lakes which are found in all parts of the Town: the Arastradero Preserve, above El Mirador Farm (encircled by a miniature train track), Old Spanish trail at Lake trail, Sausal Lake behind the Sequoias and other secret spots I'll not disclose lest I spoil the pleasure of your own discovery.



**Lake, top of Spanish Trail**



**Sausal Pond**

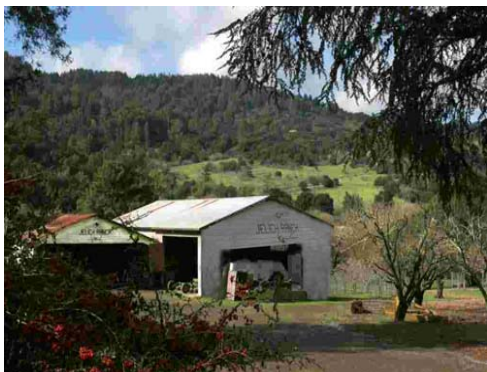
On the subject of discovery, it is rumored that an old Russian cannon was found near Page Mill Road obtained no doubt at a garage sale early in the last century from the Russian settlers near Fort Ross. Another discovery, this time coal, or at least lignite, a very low- grade form of coal, was found years ago on the ridge (apty named, Coal Mine Ridge) above upper Alpine Road.

Not a name that inspires beauty, Coal Mine Ridge is also the locale of Toyon Trail, one of the more popular and scenic hiking trails in the Town. As a member of the original chain gang, I remember the many volunteers of the Town who in the early 70s painstakingly cut this trail and cleared poison oak every other weekend for four years for the whole town to enjoy.



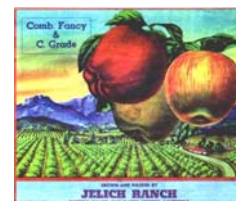
**Toyon Trail gang**

A special treat for me, depending upon the time of year, is sampling the fruits of Portola Valley. Apples, sugar plums, Chinese plums, pears, crabapples, and, of course, blackberries can be sampled on the run, but you must know through your explorations when and where you can get the



**Jelich Barns**

low-hanging fruit. For a taste of hospitality, good jokes, and a variety of other fruit, I recall the many folksy visits with the person who, to me, most symbolized the Town—the late Walter Jelich—at his ranch on Portola Road. As a colorful member of a pioneering family in this Valley, I always left his presence with a warm feeling in my heart and a fullness in my tummy.



Certainly the oldest, largest, and arguably the most dominating feature I encounter in my deliberate or speedy wanderings is also the one which, both figuratively and literally, help shape the valley, the Town and the way we live in it. As of late, it is also the most costly. Neither my fault, nor yours, it is the San Andreas Fault (capitalized out of deference).



**San Andreas fault shear 1906  
Alpine Road, near Willowbrook**

Within the Town, it passes just east of Wyndham Drive, crosses Portola Road, transects the site of the former Town Center and cuts through the field north of the Sequoias. Just west of and then crossing Willowbrook Road, it forms the base of the steep embankment (scarp) between Alpine and Willowbrook, crosses Alpine, passes above the pools in Portola Valley Ranch, traverses the large boulders near the lake on Buck Meadow in the Blue Oaks Subdivision, and passes through Los Trancos Woods to

cross Page Mill Road through the Los Trancos and Monte Bello Open Space Preserves. (In reality, the Fault through the Town is two separate parallel faults, the Woodside trace on the West and the Trancos trace, the former being the more active.)

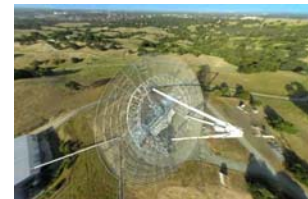
The land on the West is, tectonically speaking, the Pacific Plate and on the East, the North American Plate. One side has slid past the other at a rate of 2"/year, now totaling 300 miles, bringing rocks from Northern California in contact with those from Los Angeles. One of these days, the two plates will again slide past each other, suddenly, in jumps as much as 10 feet, realigning property lines and furniture alike! Even a town ordinance will not prevent that. (Hmm, did anyone try epoxy?)



**Felt Lake in winter**

The Western slopes of the Town are underlain by young rocks a few million years old exhibiting a very different type of terrain and relief compared to the rest of the Town which sits on the Franciscan formation over 90 million years old. This differential terrane (no, not a misspelling, but a geologic term) has had a de facto impact on the density of homes and streets – and thus where most of us live. On a satellite photo, one can easily note the fault as the straight-line demarcation of the Western hillsides, more-or-less along Portola Road.

If the prospects of a temblor cause one to want to exit the town, try some of the interesting and sometimes surprising paths used by runners and hikers who regularly radiate from the town. For example, one might consider hiking across Arastradero, around Felt Lake (private property) and under a massive tunnel under I-280 (just north of Page Mill Road) to the

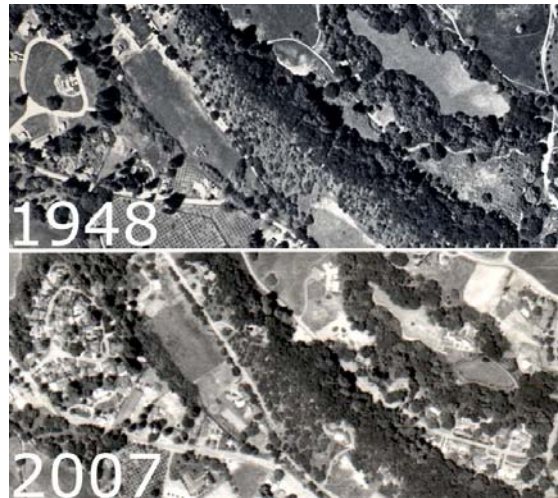


**The "Dish" - from a kite**

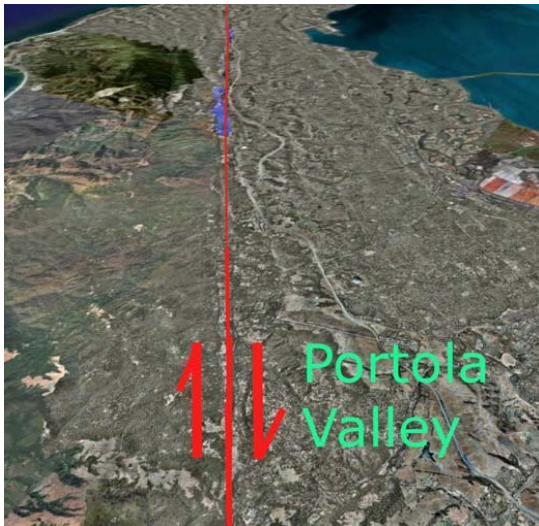
"Big Dish" on the hill behind Stanford; across Los Trancos road through the back door to Foothills Park (beware, it's for the exclusive use of Palo Alto residents); or through the Arastradero Preserve up the ridge to the West to a point overlooking the Interpretive Center in Foothills Park. Going to the South or West are many trails to Page Mill or Skyline or north to Woodside. Bikers, runners, walkers and equestrians are most common on upper (dirt)

Alpine and the trails immediately adjacent to Portola, Sand Hill, Alpine and Arastradero roads.

An interesting alternative way to see the Town is through the use of aerial photographs available from the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park. To investigate new routes to explore and "let my eyes do the running", I use such photographs including stereographic pairs to see the Town in glorious, colorful 3D. From the government agencies responsible for these photographs, I have assembled pictures each measuring three feet across for every ten year period since 1943 graphically depicting the growth of the Town over this period. This collection has now been donated to the Town.



**Town Center area -- 60 years growth**



**San Andreas fault on Google Earth**

Having escorted a French television crew on a flight along the trace of the San Andreas fault, I then used a tech solution to accomplish the same, but with more elegance. Using Google Earth, I made a movie simulating the same flight along the San Andreas fault all the way up to Point Reyes, stopping along the way to look out my virtual window at geologic features of particular interest.

Such growth has given rise to new cultural effects such as roads and homes and dramatic changes in the vegetation. Of course, the Town as an entity was, itself, formed 44 years ago. What these photos do not show is the considerable increase in people and traffic. To ameliorate the conditions brought on by these manifestations of growth, the people of the Town, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and the Peninsula Open Space Trust have seen fit to create many trails, athletic recreation fields such as Ford Field, a ball park and soccer field at the Town Center and natural spaces for foot and visual access such as the Windy Hill Open Space Preserve and the Portola Valley Ranch trails, to name a few.

Touring these natural environments by foot, whether slowly or speedily, is certainly the best way to appreciate them. The sights, the air and the quest to see even more drives me to cover more ground. Sometimes traversing a path in the opposite direction under different seasons or times of day can be a completely new experience, as anyone can attest when watching the ever-changing show put on by the summer fog that spills over the ridge at Windy Hill. Running very early or very late frequently allows a glimpse of a bobcat running the trails with me. I keep looking for his big sister, the cougar, but

have not yet spotted one. Has one already spotted me? On many occasions I have also run across, almost literally, deer, coyotes, skunks, fox, raccoons, rabbits, hares, opossum, rattlesnakes, tarantulas, just to name the most memorable.



It is *de rigueur* for any Town resident when



entertaining visitors to invite them for a stroll outside, exposing them to what we have in abundance – lots of nothing that equals quiet, peace and lots of undisturbed Nature. Without any prompting, this always elicits a response as it softly soothes their senses, to wit, "everything *smells* so clean and fresh, everything *looks* so natural and I *hear* the silence of the outdoors."

***Poppies near Arastradero Road***

Whether seen at high speed on a run or as a still life on a walk, there is always another bit of history or another slice of nature to be seen in the *viewshed* of this Town. That's why you live here, isn't it?

*Go for it!*

Sheldon Breiner  
Portola Valley, CA  
July 3, 2008

(revised from its original written in 1996 to benefit the renovation of the historic Old School House)

