

Dry Creek Cottage & Gardens



Walking Tour

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Introduction

The Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens is located off of Mission Blvd at the end of Whipple Rd. It is owned and administered by the East Bay Regional Park District. The property was the summer home of upper middle class family, that lived in Alameda, but had family ties to Alvarado and Decoto. The cottage and other buildings were built in 1900 and were modified as the needs of the family changed. The character of the property has remained unchanged since 1900. The gardens, started in 1928, take up most of the property, have a number of paths that meander through the garden, showing off the different flowers and trees.

This walking tour discusses the history of the property and the individual buildings. The tour is self-guided so that you can take the tour any time Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens are open.

Part 1 - History of Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens

Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens is a parcel of land that was part of a larger parcel owned by the May and Meyers family. The land was originally part of Rancho Arroyo de la Alameda, granted to Jose de Jesus Vallejo in 1842. By 1862, Jonas Clark owned a large portion of Rancho Arroyo de la Alameda including the land around Dry Creek Cottage. In 1868, the Cosmopolitan School District was formed. Jonas Clark donated the land for the school house from his property near Dry Creek. The school house was located close to Mission Blvd just south of May Road.



Dry Creek Picnic Grounds

During the 1860's and 1870's, Jonas Clark leased an area of land for local promoters to host picnic events. This included the land encompassing Dry Creek Cottage and the flat land right in front of it. The picnic grounds were used by different fraternal and other organizations from the local area. These included the Ancient Order of United Workmen, Scandinavians of Alameda County, Pioneer Society, Washington College and Odd Fellows.



Dry Creek Picnic Grounds

A building was built on site to house a dance floor. Popular days for picnics were May Day and the 4th of July. The picnics were well attended with anywhere from 1,000 to 1,200 people attending. Stage coaches were run between the picnic grounds and the Decoto trains stations, encouraging visitors from all over the East Bay.

Events held at the picnics grounds included speeches by local dignitaries, pyrotechnics, competition shootings, dancing, and the firing of anvils. Days before the events, the American flag would be raised on "flag hill" a rise just east the picnic grounds and now part of the Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens.

May Ranch

On December 27, 1883, August May, a butcher and rancher from Alvarado (the other west side of Union City), purchased 1,700 acres of land, covering land from Mission Blvd and back into the hills. This parcel included the picnic grounds, and the now vacant school house August turned the schoolhouse into a home for his son, Henry. The land was mostly used for raising cattle for August May's butchering business. Only a hay barn was built on the property. August and workers traveled from Alvarado to the property to manage it.



August May, a native of Prussia, came to California in 1852 at the age of 21. August worked as a butcher in San Francisco from the time he arrived until October 24, 1854, when he moved to Alvarado, going into business with A. Main. In 1874, August sold his meat company to Frederick Wiegman and William Jung. Wiegman and Jung consolidated with Philip Hellwig to create the Hellwig Meat Company. This consolidated company became one of the largest meat companies in Alameda County and was a core business in Alvarado for many years.



Dry Creek Cottage.

August had four children, George, August Jr., Bertha and Henry. George May moved to San Jose and was involved in the hay and grain business. August Jr. was in the banking business and was President of the Bank of Alvarado (later Bank of Alameda County) for many years. August Jr. married Jennie Decoto, a daughter of one of the three Decoto brothers for whom the town of Decoto is named after. Henry married Clara Whipple, another prominent Decoto family for who Whipple Road is named after. Henry continued the ranching business of his father and lived in a house that was converted from the Cosmopolitan schoolhouse just outside the grounds of

August May's daughter, Bertha, married Henry Haight Meyer, the well-known architect, in 1894. In 1897, Henry Meyer designed his own house in Alameda, and had his father, Jacob, build it in 1897. In 1900, Sophia May, Bertha's mother, had Henry Meyer design and build Dry Creek Cottage utilizing a tree shaded area near a bend in Dry Creek. Henry also designed the modifications to the buildings between 1928 and 1932.

Henry Haight Meyers

Henry Meyers entered the San Francisco firm of Percy & Hamilton as an apprentice around 1890 and by 1900 was chief draftsman. Following the deaths of Percy (1899) and Hamilton (1900), Meyers succeeded the partners as the principal of the firm and supervised the completion of unfinished projects. By 1903, Henry was in business with Clarence R. Ward, designing about 75 buildings before the partnership ceased in 1910. Most of the buildings were to replace buildings destroyed by the earthquake and fire of 1906. After that partnership ended, Henry practiced alone, but did occasionally work with George R. Klinkhardt and even had his daughter Mildred join him in the 1920's. Henry started working with the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 1912 and eventually became the official architect for Alameda County. His work for Alameda

County included Highland Hospital (1926), Posey Tube Portals (1928), and ten Veterans Memorial Buildings for Alameda, Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Hayward, Livermore, Niles, Oakland, Pleasanton, and San Leandro.

For Washington Township (Fremont, Newark, Union City), where Henry was born, Henry designed the following buildings; Irvington Branch of the Bank of Alameda County (1910), August May Jr. residence (1913), Henry May's House (the old schoolhouse) (1927), Alvarado Grammar School (1926) and Washington Union High School (1924). Three buildings designed by Henry have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places; Washington Union High School on October 5, 1981, Alameda Veterans' Memorial Building on September 27, 2007, and First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary Building on November 25, 1980. The Alvarado Grammar School was torn down in the 1950's to make way for a new school. The August May Jr. residence in old Alvarado still exists and has been deemed historically significant by the City of Union City.

Henry also completed the Hahnemann Hospital and the Kohl Building, which was the first steel frame building in San Francisco. Henry designed over 200 buildings in the San Francisco Bay Area, Northern California, Hawaii, and Guam.

Meyers Ranch

Bertha Meyer inherited the property from her mother. Henry and Bertha had three daughters, Mildred (1898), Edith (1900), and Jeanette (1905). The family used the home as a summer getaway from the busy life in Alameda. The three girls grew up in Alameda, but they spend a lot of time at Dry Creek Cottage. Portuguese workers performed the labor on the property and the gardens. They took the opportunity to teach the girls about the plants and the gardens, as the girls were growing up.

All three girls attended the University of California at Berkeley. Mildred graduated with a degree in architecture in 1921, at a time when there were few women architects. Mildred worked with her father during the 1920's and 1930's. She continued practice until she retired in 1950. Edith graduated from the University of California School of Medicine in 1926. Edith was on staff at Oakland Children's Hospital until 1960. After she retired, she donated \$50,000 for a meeting hall, which still bears her name. Jeanette attended classes, but did not graduate. The sisters lived together all of their lives. In 1928, Jeanette started designing the gardens around the cottage. Gardening was Jeanette's passion. Footpaths and a footbridge were installed. The front gate was made by Pacific Iron Works and was installed in 1930.



In an interview from 1986, Jeannette describes how the family used the cottage; "We'd send a trunk out and we'd stay all summer long. My father would commute to San Francisco; he'd take his bicycle and ride down to the station in Decoto and go to San Francisco every day and come back in the evening." From the same interview, Jeanette mentioned that the extended May family would come to the cottage for family gatherings including the fourth of July.

In 1928, the first changes and additions to the cottage were made. Soon, plans were extended to the grounds and gardens. By, 1930, the entrance gate was completed, a new vehicle bridge was finished, and the main part of the gardens were done. During the 1930's, the gardens were a work in progress with the gardens

expanding and changing as suited the whims of Jeannette and the family. In 1941, with the advent of World War II and the lack of labor, major work to the gardens came to a halt. Mildred assisted her father in his business, designing the interior of the veteran's buildings that he designed. Mildred designed an office for Dr. Douglas Stafford in Alameda.

In 1950, after the death of their parents, the three girls completed the final major change to the property, the swimming pool and cabana, designed by Mildred. After this, there were not major changes to the property, just minor alterations to the cottage and garage. In 1952, the first fund-raiser for the Alameda Welfare Council was hosted by the sisters at Dry Creek Cottage. This fund-raiser was held every August from 1952 to 1972. The Oakland Tribune reported on the event; "Each year a different theme is chosen for the decor, but the part follows the popular format, a bazaar with many booths and interesting things to buy, and box lunches served beneath the trees, followed by swimming and cards in the afternoon." The first year the fund raiser has 415 attendees. The average attendance over the years was 500-600. In 1963, there was nearly 700 at the event. In 1971, Edith passed away and the next fund raiser was the last to be held at Dry Creek Cottage. Both Mildred and Jeanette were presidents of the Alameda Welfare Council. Edith was a founding member of the Girls Club of Alameda.



The sisters leased the ranch land for grazing. The sisters realized the importance of the land and put a provision in their wills that when they passed way, the entire ranch and Dry Creek Cottage would be donated to the East Bay Regional Park District.

During the 1961, there was a proposal for a hillside freeway to be built from Hayward to Fremont. The freeway would pass through the Meyers land. The sisters were very much against the proposed freeway. At a hearing of the State Highway Commission, the sisters said that the freeway would destroy then ranch land and it's value as a regional park, and that if this happened, they would not give it to the park district. Edith said, "We are three sisters with no immediate heirs, three women who wrote this plan into our wills five years ago and who have refused fabulous sums of money so as to keep our land intact for the use someday by all of the people."

After Edith passed away, Mildred and Jeannette decided to donate the 1,200 acres of the ranch to the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), creating Dry Creek/Pioneer Regional Park in 1973. The sisters wanted the park to be named Dry Creek for the creek running through it, and Pioneer, for the pioneers that were their grandparents. The park is next to and is linked to Garin Regional Park and the park district runs the two parks as one property.

In 1986, Mildred passed away. Jeanette stopped coming to the cottage and gardens every day. Jeanette passed away in 1993. In 1995, Dry Creek Cottage was donated to the park district. In 2007, after 36 years of being closed off to the public, Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens was opened to the public, three days a week. In 1995 the agricultural land fronting the property was bequeathed to the East Bay Community Foundation.

Part 2 – Walking Tour

Directions

Dry Creek Cottage and Gardens is located at the end of Whipple/May Road, just east of Mission Blvd. Start the tour at the East Bay Regional Park District parking lot on May Road.

1. Former Schoolhouse

This building was the original Cosmopolitan Schoolhouse built in 1868. It was moved to this location after the May family purchased the land. It was turned into a house for Henry May, his wife Clara, and daughters Gertrude and Marjorie. In 1927, the building was reworked with stucco covering the clap-board siding. The building is not part of the park property.

2. Entrance Gate

The entrance to Dry Creek Cottage is comprised of a double wrought iron gate, created by Pacific Iron Works, mounted to ivy covered concrete pylons with large concrete finials. The right pylon has the words "Dry Creek Cottage" on it. There are additional stone covered concrete pylons on both sides of the front gate, connected to the main pylons with wrought iron fencing. The pylons on both sides of the gate are covered with a creeping ivy vine. Architectural drawing from the Liberty Ornamental Iron Works, dated June 23, 1930, place the building of the entrance gate in late 1930.

3. Entry Bridge

This bridge crosses Dry Creek allowing vehicle access to the Cottage. A flood in 1998 destroyed the original bridge. The bridge was replaced and rebuilt to look like the original bridge. The bridge is wide enough for a car, but was designed for horse and buggy.



4. Laundry Shed

The Laundry Shed was built in 1900 and located just to the west of the Cottage, next to the exit from the kitchen. The original dimensions was 7 feet by 13 feet. It is a wood frame building with a gabled, asphalt shingled roof. In 1939, a Women's bath room and shower, a small Men's toilet, and a room for a water softener was added to the shed. The newer building has a concrete foundation with shingled walls, metal sash windows, a cross-gable roof, measuring about 12 feet by 21 feet.



5. Cottage

The Cottage built in 1900 was designed by Henry Meyer as a craftsman style bungalow with a wrap around deck. It is south facing, sitting on an excavated earth shelf on the north side of the canyon over looking Dry Creek. The building is primarily single-wall wood-frame construction. Originally the building had no foundation and was resting on mud sills. The main sills, floor joists, plates, rafters, flooring (including porch) and roof boards are pine. The posts, ceiling joists, window and door head, paneling of perimeter walls, siding of interior partitions and ceilings are redwood. The exterior roof, walls, and porch were sheathed in cedar shingles. The window were double-hung. Only the sash, sills, outer sides of two outer doors, walls, and ceilings were painted. The fireplace and chimney are made of brick, but exposed surfaces in the house and above the roof are covered in clinker brick.

The original cottage measured 40 feet long and 35 feet wide (front to back). The hip roof flares out toward the front (south) and sides (east & west) to cover a wrap around porch. The roof has a central hip-roofed dormer. The interior measured 30 feet by 25 feet, totaling 750 square feet. The porch is 10 feet wide. There were four rooms; the main living/dining room in the southwest corner, the kitchen in the northwest corner, a small bedroom in the southeast corner, and a larger bedroom at the northeast corner. The front entrance opened up to the living/dining room. The fireplace and a built in china cabinet are on the rear wall of the dining/living room. Doors to the right led to the two bedrooms. A door next to the



fireplace led to kitchen. The kitchen had a wood burning stove, a pantry, and a door exiting to the west porch.

The cottage has been altered over the years. The primary alterations took place in 1915, 1928 and 1957. In 1915, an extension was built on the west end of the cottage, creating room for a dining area off of the main room and a partial bathroom. The extension added 7 feet to the building. The west porch was taken over by this extension and the porch posts were removed. A third bedroom was added to the east rear-end of the cottage. In 1928, this third bedroom was enlarged and a fourth bedroom/sleeping porch was added to the southeast front of the cottage. Stained and varnished pine boards were used to panel the bedrooms. Doors were put in place, between the different bedrooms. A concrete retaining wall was added behind the house so that a rear extension could be added, comprising a small bathroom (sink, toilet, tub). The old bathroom was reworked into a larger pantry for the kitchen. In 1957, the kitchen was enlarged and the back bedrooms had bay windows and closets added to them. In total, about 500 square feet was added to the cottage, for a total of 1,250 square feet of space.

Minor alterations to the cottage has been mostly replacing cabinets and shelves in the kitchen, newer flooring in the living and dining rooms, and paint in three of the bedrooms. The roof has been re-shingled with green asphalt shingles. A finial was added to the roof peak. In 1999-2000, a foundation was added under the front porch, when the front porch was rebuilt.

6. Garage

The Garage, built in 1900 once used for the horse and buggy, was originally built as a 10 foot by 19 foot shed, with a gabled roof and board-and-batten sides. It was enlarged in 1930, by adding a second 10 foot wide stall and an 8 foot tool room. The final dimension was 28 feet by 19 feet. Later the roof was extended to create an open shed area in the rear. On the east side of the garage, an open lean-to was added for additional storage space. The wood frame structure has a concrete foundation, with double doors on both stalls with iron strap hinges. There is



a single door for a store room on the west side. The original wood shingles have been replaced with the same green asphalt shingles as seen on the cottage. Two cupolas have been added to the roof.

7. Pool

The Swimming Pool was constructed at the east end of the property, between 1947 and 1950. The site is elevated above the driveway and opposite of the garage. The pool, made of concrete, measures 17 feet by 37 feet, with a concrete patio around the entire pool. On the north, or uphill side of the pool is a concrete retaining wall. The pool area, along with the Cabana, is surrounded by a grape stake fence, with the entrance near the Cabana.



8. Cabana

On the east end of the swimming pool, is the Cabana. It is a 12 feet by 19 feet wood-frame rectangular building, with an included a shed porch 6.5 feet across the front, and was built in 1950. The building has a gabled roof with green asphalt shingles and a concrete foundation. The walls are clad in unpainted redwood boards and battens. Facing the pool are two large double doors with glass panels. On each side of the doors are steel-sash casement windows, and a similar type window on the back wall of the cabana, overlooking the creek. The north side of the building has several dressing stalls, recessed under the roof. The stall at the side rear of the building has a shower. The building has a single room inside with a kitchen alcove to the south.



9. Outhouse

Behind the garage is a rustic looking two-hole outhouse. The age of the building is undetermined, but it does show signs of age. It could possibly date back to before the restrooms were installed in the laundry shed.



10. Gardens

The grounds of Dry Creek Cottage has a land area of about 4 acres. The gardens are comprised of thirty-four planting beds, containing over 255 species of trees, shrubs, vines and herbaceous plants. The part of the gardens are on a gentle slope from a small hill down to the creek bed. The rest of the gardens run flat long the creek. Live oak, sycamore, eucalyptus, and cottonwood trees tower over the gardens and provide shade. Various paths meander through the garden, providing a way to wonder through the garden, seeing all of it's plants. Two restored wooden bridges cross Dry Creek, connecting the area with buildings to the gardens. Two of the three ornate water fountains are operational. Non-functioning gas lanterns flank the cottage, and portions of the picnic barbeque still remains adjacent to the creek. Large river rock faced concrete retaining walls channel the creek through the property.

The following plants are seen in the garden: Agave, Shasta daisy, contoneaster, ivy, roses, toyon, princess flower, echeveria, ferns, daylilies, columbine, English laurel, oakleaf hydrangea, flowering quince, jasmine, iris, wisteria, aloe, boxwood, paperwhite narcissus, and ginkgo biloba. The following trees are seen in the garden: Coastal live oak, sycamore, cottonwood, eucalyptus, orange, and others.



Historical Papers on Union City

Downloadable from the Museum of Local History

Alvarado Elementary - History Report

History of the Alvarado School District and Alvarado Elementary School, from 1850 to about 1965.

Alvarado in 1850

A detailed history of Alvarado (Union City & New Haven) from its beginning in 1850 until 1870. Includes descriptions of Alvarado from contemporary personal letters.

Charles S. Eigenbrodt - Civil War Hero

Charles Eigenbrodt was a Civil War hero from Alvarado. Charles was also a County Supervisor before he volunteered for war.

Crash of Flight 615

The crash of United Airlines flight 615 in 1951 in the hills above Union City, remains one of California's worst air disasters.

Early Families of Union City

Details notable persons, and their families, of Union City from the 1850's until about the 1940's.

Homes of Vallejo Street

From 1860 on, the west side of Vallejo Street, in Union City, was the place to own a home. This paper documents the homes and their well-known owners.

Looking Back--Early Glimpses of Union City

Originally published by the City of Union City in 1978, this history book has been digitized and made publically available.

Scandinavian Oystermen of Alvarado

The commercial oyster industry in the San Francisco Bay area started in 1869 with the importation of eastern oysters and the establishment of oyster beds on the bay.

Two Courthouses

In-depth analysis of two pictures of the Alameda County Courthouse in Alvarado.