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# La Peninsula

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San Mateo County's  
Polo Legacy

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**Cover:** Playing polo in San Mateo County. SMCHA 0000.484ZB.004, George Bartlett Collection.

# San Mateo County's Polo Legacy

by Mitchell P. Postel



Playing polo at the Carolan Polo Field in Burlingame. SMCHA 000.0484ZA.005, George Bartlett Collection.

## A. Introduction

### I. The Winter Home of Polo

In 1911, British Army Captain E.D. Miller, who learned how to play polo with the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers in India, came out with the third edition of his classic book *Modern Polo*. By this time, the sport had become a decidedly English pastime. However, its popularity was spreading to far-away places like California. He noted: "In California, Burlingame is headquarters of the game."<sup>1</sup> Back in England, polo was thought to be a spring or summer sport. Players there were anxious to sharpen their skills during the "off-season," and at Burlingame, Miller writes: "...they have made great efforts...to have good polo by inviting English teams to spend the winters there and play with them." He explained that "the

climate is lovely and the grounds exceedingly good...."

Of course not just English teams, but "good players from the Eastern States" were being encouraged "to go there in the winter" to prepare for "the May Tournament inaugurated at Burlingame, on Mr. [Francis] Carolan's private ground and at Coronado Beach." In fact, polo was being played at all the great coastal resorts from Coronado (San Diego) to Del Monte (Carmel), plus cavalry units throughout the West "followed the example of the English by practicing the game in order to improve riding skills." Impressively for those of us from San Mateo County, Miller reveals that at the 1909 All-American Champion Cup competition at Coronado (open to clubs from around the world), the winners were the Burlingame Four which consisted of Richard M.



Tobin, Thomas A. Driscoll, John Lawson and Walter S. Hobart, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking about the sport in California, Miller tells us: “All the players who have been there speak enthusiastically of the climate and the polo played there, and of the hospitality they received.” He names the best of the California poloists as “Messrs. Tobin, Driscoll, Hobart, Carolan, Breese and an English resident, John Lawson....” All of those men were part of the Burlingame – San Mateo polo scene. How is it that this sport, born in Asia and popularized in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, made it to far-off California? And how is it that the mid San Francisco Peninsula seemed to become the “Winter Home of Polo”? The answers are the subject of this article.

## II. The Origins of the Game

In his *Modern Polo*, Captain Miller states that the game was first played in Persia some 2,700 years ago. Other theories about its origins have been advanced before and since, but he is absolutely authoritative in documenting how English Major General Sherar witnessed polo in India’s Manipur Valley in 1854. The General then introduced it in Calcutta by bringing a native team there. By 1861, military officers were playing in Punjab, and by 1867 it had spread throughout the British Army in India.<sup>3</sup> Miller explains that after 30 years of play, “military authorities” recognized polo “...as one of the most important parts of the training of an officer; for there is no better riding school than the polo ground, and there is no game or sport which calls into play so many different good qualities, such as coolness, decision, command of temper, pluck, horsemanship, strength, condition, tactics, drill and organization.”<sup>4</sup>

Miller writes that polo was first played in England at Aldershot by the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars. The first “regular match” was played in 1871, on Hounslow Heath between the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars and the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers. There were eight players on a side that day riding on small horses. Miller quotes the *London Morning Post* on the sensation caused by the exhibition, “Nearly all fashionable London



*Polo at Hurlingham, 1890. Painting by Henry Jamyn Brooks, in the public domain.*

journeyed from town to Hounslow on Tuesday, to witness a new game called ‘Hockey on Horseback’....”<sup>5</sup>

Miller describes how the first English improvement in the game was to reduce the number of players on a team to five (and still later to four). He continues: “Soon, regular polo sticks replaced hockey sticks..., the size of the ponies was increased, and the old-time game gradually developed into the fast-galloping, hard-hitting, and scientifically worked combinations which now constitute Modern Polo.”<sup>6</sup>

The first polo tournament in England took place at Hurlingham in 1876. This inaugural Champion Cup contest was won by the Royal Horse Guards. The first Inter-Regimental tournament was also staged at Hurlingham in 1878. By 1891, a private club at Hurlingham had made itself the center of British polo, the only club near London where it was “in full swing.”<sup>7</sup> There was always a match on Saturdays during the season, followed by a members’ game and sometimes a match on Wednesdays.

It was at Hurlingham in 1883, that the English set the number of players to four on a team. Miller insists that the “modern game of polo” was actually initiated by John Watson, who on return from India began to teach players better forms of teamwork. Miller explains, “Instead of the old dribbling and scrimmaging game, in which every man played more or less for himself

with but little idea of combination, we have now a carefully arranged organization, in which every player has his own particular duties clearly defined, so that the success of a side depends more on the ability to work as a whole, than on the individual good play of the different members.”<sup>8</sup>

Polo was introduced in the United States in 1876, and a year later the first polo club in America was founded at Newport, Rhode Island. In 1879, the first American inter-club match occurred at Prospect Park Brooklyn, and in 1886, the first American International Polo Cup contest was played at Newport where an English team led by John Watson won.

By 1893, polo had become the sensation of the English-speaking world. There were by that time more than 50 clubs in England, while American teams were being organized in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States. In California, as the Burlingame Country Club was being formed, the sport was just emerging.<sup>9</sup>

### III. The Game Itself

The object of polo, a game in which players are mounted on horses, is to drive a wooden ball through the opposing side’s goalpost by use of a wooden mallet. The game starts with both teams positioning themselves in the middle of the field. An umpire then throws the ball

into the center of the grounds to start play. Of course as the years wore on, there were many changes in the way that the sport was played.

Back in 1911, Captain Miller described the primary functions of the four members of a team. He wrote that the main responsibility of a No. 1 player “...is to interfere with the back of the opposing side...” in order to “...clear the way for his No. 2...”<sup>10</sup> The No. 2 was to “...attack hard and stop the opposing No. 3.”<sup>11</sup> The No. 3 needed to assist the Back in a defensive role and push the ball forward to the No. 2 and No. 1. The major role of the Back was to defend his team’s goal. The skills involved for all players included dexterous riding and mastering eight different strokes of the mallet, from the basic forehand shots to the more difficult under-the-horse’s-neck and tail shots. Importantly, each hitter had to learn how best to work with his team.

In English play, two umpires were used.<sup>12</sup> American requirements were different. Fouls were called for a variety of reasons, but primarily were applied when a player endangered or impeded the speed of a member of the opposition. In the early days, fractional points were taken from the offending team’s score. Later, free shots were awarded instead.

English rules originally stated that the game was to be one hour in duration divided into six periods of ten



According to the California State Library, this photo shows players nearing the goalposts of the C.W. Clark polo field. San Mateo County Historical Association staff believes this is the El Cerrito field. SMCHA 000.005B.004, California State Library.

minutes, with intervals of three-minute timeouts after each period, except at halftime when the recess lasted five minutes. Play was continuous, with any change of a pony “the risk of the player.”<sup>13</sup> American rules allowed for eight periods of seven and a half minutes each, and other differences. For example, American rules were strict on substitutions, specifying that there could only be one, and the player having to be replaced could not return to the game.<sup>14</sup>

In the early years the size of the field could vary, but as time went on, it was more or less agreed by the English and Americans that a proper field ought to be 300 yards by 150 yards with goals eight yards in length.<sup>15</sup> While the English and Americans could agree on this point, Captain Miller noted some basic differences on how the nationalities conducted themselves on the field: “The American game as played when I was there in 1910 was undoubtedly more dangerous than our game, but this, I think, was due to the fact that until this year there have been practically no umpires in America, and the game has not been stopped for a foul, and that, therefore, players have not been taught to play carefully....”<sup>16</sup> However, Captain

Miller admitted that “the American game being faster and looser is a more exhilarating spectacle for the onlooker....”<sup>17</sup> Miller in this 1911 edition of his book was smarting from the 1909 “visit” of the Americans to England for the international matches: “The American never missed an easy shot, and brought off many difficult ones.”<sup>18</sup> The ensuing American victory was much brooded over throughout the text.

Miller’s descriptions of aspects of polo leave the reader without doubt that the sport was for the elite of English society. For one thing, a good player needed to set aside plenty of time for it: “Most men, even the busiest, can generally manage, if they live in the country, to get an hour or two, three times a week for practice.”<sup>19</sup> Along with having this leisure time, one also had to have a degree of wealth to purchase the equipment and possess an adequate string of polo ponies.

At the minimum three ponies were necessary, but four were preferred while many players had far more animals. The number of ponies also implied having staff to care for them. Captain Miller suggested a daily routine that began with the horses being watered and fed at 6 a.m., while the stables were being cleaned. From 6:30 a.m. to 9 a.m., the ponies were to be exercised and then at 9 a.m. they were watered and fed again. At noon there should be a third watering and feeding. At 3 p.m. began their time actually on the polo grounds followed by a 6 p.m. final watering and feeding. About the number of employees involved, Miller felt one “good groom can look after three ponies well during the polo season.” However, he suggested there should be “a boy every polo day to help to hold the ponies on the ground.” He judged this as preferable to hiring two men to look after three ponies, which might “encourage idleness.” However, two men would be necessary when four ponies were “regularly played.”<sup>20</sup>

International play, of course, required travel and even more expense. Miller suggests the following for feeding one horse every day onboard ship: 14 pounds of hay, three pounds of oats, three pounds of bran and five pounds of carrots.<sup>21</sup>



Aerial view shows the size of the San Mateo Polo Field, 1927. Note Coyote Point in the distance. SMCHA 1971.166.001.





Tom Mulhall cared for the horses at Selley's Stable at Monte Diablo Avenue and El Camino Real in San Mateo, 1914. SMCHA 1978.289.8, Catherine Mulhall Collection.

Ponies had to be carefully selected. Horses that reacted slowly, shied off the ball, seemed timid when alongside other ponies or lacked “pluck” in the face of a back-hand shot were all traits that limited a ponies value, and, of course, “...a slow pony is absolutely useless in a first-class polo match.”<sup>22</sup>

Miller advised his readers that the proper age to break-in polo ponies was at three years. He also suggested that the height of a polo pony be no more than 14 hands and two inches (a hand being about four inches).<sup>23</sup>

## B. Why San Mateo County?

### I. Horse Flesh

San Mateo County had a few characteristics that came together to make it an important center of polo. Its environment was suited to become a place where the sport could be pursued in the winter. Its geographic placement made it ideal for San Francisco's great families to conveniently play the games of European aristocracy. It also became a superb location for the breeding of polo ponies.

Horse breeding in San Mateo County goes back to Gold Rush days. Stephen Whipple was first to recognize

the San Mateo area as a fine place to establish a horse farm. In 1851, he began purchasing parcels, sometimes buying from the Arguello family, the original Las Pulgas land grant family. By 1858, he possessed enough property to establish a proper horse ranch. His main house sat at the site of today's St. Matthews Catholic School on El Camino Real in San Mateo.<sup>24</sup>

There were certainly other people who understood that this part of San Mateo County was, as *Sunset Magazine* put it, “well adapted for the breeding of horses.”<sup>25</sup> However, Whipple was the first in California to equip his ranch as well as the famous breeding farms in the east. For a time he was certainly the best horse breeder in San Mateo County. With his skilled staff of 12, he raised his most famous race horse Hambletonian. Whipple was once offered \$10,000 for this stallion, but he refused to sell. By “gentlemen's agreement,” Alvinza Hayward, whose estate was just east of his on the highway, allowed Whipple the use of his one-mile track to work out his racing stock. Hayward's track was considered one of the finest in California.

When Whipple became ill in 1873, he auctioned off some of his best horses. Hayward bought the mare Lady Blanchard from him for \$22,500. This famous trotter was the fastest of its kind in California at that time.<sup>26</sup> Some \$180,000 worth of horse flesh was sold altogether. In 1884, K.O. O'Grady took over the property for a trotting and pacing ranch until 1890, when Walter Hobart, Sr. bought the place for his country estate. Eventually Charles Clark owned the spread.

Besides Whipple, there were other well-known breeders. This included Hayward, of course. *Sunset Magazine* claimed his estate “...without hyperbole, superb...the very best.” It explained, “The soil in the vicinity of San Mateo is admirably adapted for racecourses and trotting tracks.”<sup>27</sup> Regarding Hayward's one-mile track, it was “...protected on three sides by trees and a dense undergrowth, the opening being to the southward so that while the prevailing winds were cut off, there is the vivifying sunshine to inspire the horses.”

At the same location as the Whipple ranch, Walter Hobart, Sr. continued to breed horses. After Hobart's death in 1892, his executors sold 66 of his horses for \$207,780. North of Hobart and Hayward, John Parrott bred hackneys, and still north of him, Prince Poniatowski in the Burlingame area specialized in thoroughbreds.

However, of all the breeders that came along after Whipple, none had a more prestigious reputation than William Corbitt. Just after Whipple began selling his best stock, Corbitt came on the scene in 1875, buying an initial 166 acres from William Sharon in today's Burlingame High School area. By 1877, he had built lanes through his San Mateo Stock Farm, planted trees and started construction of barns, stables and other support buildings.<sup>28</sup>

A little more than a decade later, Daniel Geary writing in *Wallace's Monthly*, described Corbitt's place as possessing 400 acres, "nearly all choice and pasture land," complete with a three-quarter-mile track and 100 "excellent" and "roomy box stalls." He goes on to claim that the trotter, Guy Wilkes, who was bred at San Mateo Stock Farm, "the greatest young horse in the world."<sup>29</sup> A year later, *Wallace's* declared Corbitt "one of the foremost breeders in the United States."<sup>30</sup> An example of the reputation earned by Corbitt and his Farm is illustrated by an account of how John H. Schultz, a renowned horse owner from New York, offered Corbitt \$500,000 for his place and the horses on it. Corbitt refused the offer.

By the 1890s, Corbitt was breeding polo ponies. He was joined in the mid – San Mateo County area by Walter S. Hobart, Jr., Richard M. Tobin, Joseph Tobin, and Major J.L. Rathbone. In fact, throughout California horse breeders had begun the business of producing polo ponies that, according to *Sunset Magazine*, became "the marvel of the polo world."

They bred their thoroughbreds and racing ponies, characterized by speed, with working western cow ponies, characterized by agility, to create a "clever" horse, sensitive to a rider's signals. The California polo pony was larger than a cow pony, but smaller

than a thoroughbred. It maneuvered like the first with the speed of the second. Polo players immediately recognized this animal's quick acceleration, nimbleness and efficient motion.

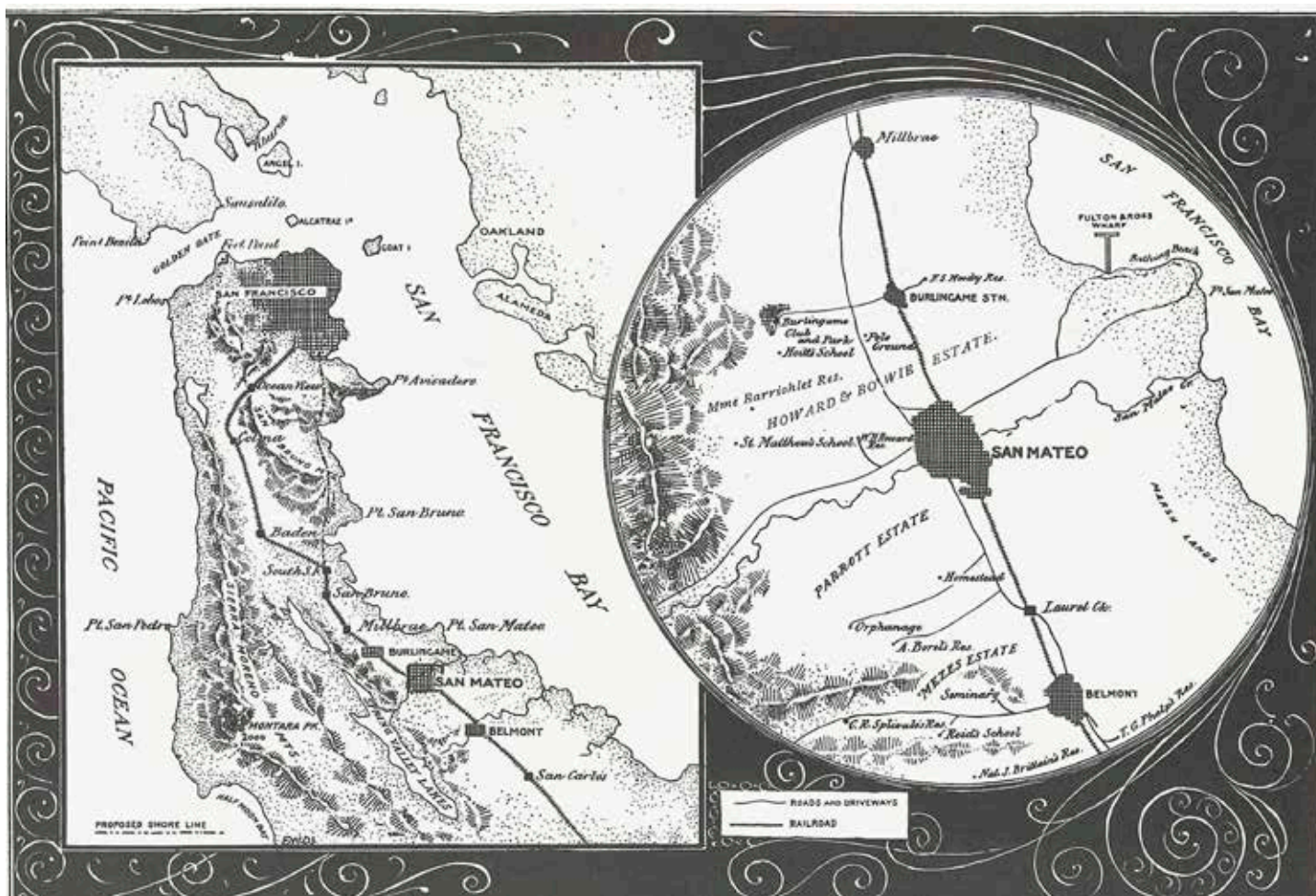
*Sunset* gushed, "To the cow pony's natural hardihood...was added the proud racing blood of the great sires." *Sunset* pointed out that the California pony, which was permitted to "...range over mountain and plain almost in a wild state until they were two or three years old," was a horse with "...bone like ivory, great depth of chest and superb muscles that seemed untiring." On the playing field, the California polo pony displayed a "dazzling flight of speed" that more than once broke "the heart of the stall-raised eastern or English pony."<sup>31</sup>

As early as 1896, the *San Francisco Newsletter* (of September 5) declared, "Some of the fastest polo ponies in America are owned on this Coast." It explained breeders were cashing in as "...animals selling here at fifty dollars fetch in the East five hundred dollars, and in England sometimes double that amount." During the years leading up to World War I, many of the best polo ponies anywhere came from the ranches of mid – San Mateo County, and these animals were performing for teams all over the world.

## II. The Setting

The history of polo in San Mateo County properly begins with the birth of the Burlingame Country Club in 1893, and when the Burlingame COUNTRY Club was established it was truly a club in the country. Although 124 years had passed since the Spanish had first explored the San Francisco Peninsula, San Mateo County remained mostly rural and unpopulated. For San Franciscans, the region immediately south of them was ideal for recreational pursuits. After all, the Peninsula was already noted as having a climate as favorable as any in America, with mild temperatures the year-round. Possessing less than 10,000 residents, San Mateo County could boast being an excellent location for hunting and fishing. A promotional real estate brochure published by the Sharon estate spoke





Note the prominence of the Burlingame Country Club in this map created by the Sharon Estate for its real estate brochure. SMCHA Collection.

of how bicyclists “sprinkled” Peninsula roads. It extolled the fine bathing beach at Coyote Point. It also pointed to the “amusements indulged in by the members of the Burlingame [Country] Club...polo, golf, [horse] racing, shooting, driving [carriages] and the joys of club life....”

In short, this setting was perfect for the elite families of San Francisco to indulge in European-type leisure activities that were becoming increasingly popular in America, polo, of course, included.

### III. The Sport of Society

The Sharon estate’s real estate brochure insisted that the Burlingame region (meaning today’s Belmont, San Mateo, Hillsborough and Burlingame) was destined to become San Francisco’s premier suburb. After all, it proclaimed this area “much more accessible than

any other place of suburban residence around San Francisco.” It explained, “...in order to cross the San Francisco Bay to the north or east bay communities, one had to catch a streetcar to the ferry and then catch another train to get home.” However, “To commute to Burlingame all that was required was a five-minute tramway ride from Market Street to the railroad station, and then in thirty-five minutes, one could be in Burlingame.”<sup>32</sup>

But beyond convenience, the Burlingame area offered something much more. In the days when America’s upper classes desired to capture the aristocratic English lifestyle, the Burlingame region seemed ideal. *Sunset Magazine* explained:

There is not the least hazard in asserting that in no section of the United States — or in this

hemisphere, in fact — [is there a place] where an Englishman of sporting proclivities would feel so much at home as in San Mateo County. This section is nearly a counterpart of the most favored parts of the mother country, saving that in place of baronial halls and castles, built centuries ago, there are palatial residences of later date.<sup>32</sup>

In a later piece, *Sunset* went even further:

Everything is decidedly English in Burlingame and its immediate neighborhood. Horses anglicized, drags, traps, harness, saddles of English manufacture, the prevailing garb the handiwork of the best London tailors, and graduates of Oxford and Cambridge are here to recount the glories, to tell tales of college life and pay glowing tributes, in the best English vernacular to these great universities.<sup>34</sup>

And according to *Sunset*, the Burlingame Country Club itself had succeeded in becoming a bastion of European civilization, where: “Princes, barons and counts are residents and frequent visitors.” *Sunset* listed many of these aristocratic Europeans and even mentioned a couple of presidential visitors: William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.

And so, with great polo ponies in the vicinity, a commodious environmental setting and a membership

set on recreating European society in far-off California, the Burlingame Country Club was ready to become the “Winter Home of Polo.”

### **C. Polo’s Early Years at the Burlingame Country Club: 1893 – 1901**

#### **I. Organization of the Burlingame Country Club**

It is said that the organized club, formed for individuals holding common interests in leisure time activities, is an English invention. There were city clubs in London before the birth of George Washington, and the great proliferation of clubs in that city occurred after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>35</sup>

For the English aristocracy, city clubs became immensely important. When on business in London, men of landed nobility had a place to enjoy off-hours and spend the night, under suitable conditions in the company of individuals of similar station. Outside of the city there were clubs that specialized in certain sports; at Hurlingham, as we know, it was polo, and at St. Andrews it was golf.

Social clubs in America go back 186 years to the founding of the Philadelphia Club in 1834. Clubs in New York and Boston followed soon thereafter. On the West Coast the first two city clubs, the Pacific Club (1852) and the Union Club (1854), were formed in San Francisco.<sup>36</sup>

The country club was an American innovation. Why in the United States? The English aristocracy ruled their Empire from London, but lived at their country estates. The American elite were not landed nobles. For the upper crust in England, the hunt was enjoyed on an individual’s game preserve, and polo grounds and golf links might be laid out on one’s private property. Americans, on the other hand, were tied to their business in the cities where they resided. One club historian described how American businessmen “... were so conditioned to working together as a group that they moved to the country in clusters.”<sup>37</sup> The Country Club, at Brookline, Massachusetts, was established in 1882 as the first of its kind. Bostonians now had the opportunity to engage in many of the sporting activities



Cadets from St. Matthew’s School greet President Theodore Roosevelt at the Burlingame Country Club, May 1903.  
SMCHA 0001.686.001.

of the English all at one place. Other American country clubs began to appear outside of principal cities of the East Coast.

The idea for establishing such a club at Burlingame was born in the mind of Francis Newlands, who was Senator William Sharon's attorney and son-in-law. After Sharon died in 1885, Newlands and his brother-in-law, Fred Sharon, inherited the major portion of the Senator's estate. This included 1,000 acres in what we would call the Hillsborough area of today. The estate included many other holdings, including substantial real estate just outside of Washington, D.C.<sup>38</sup>

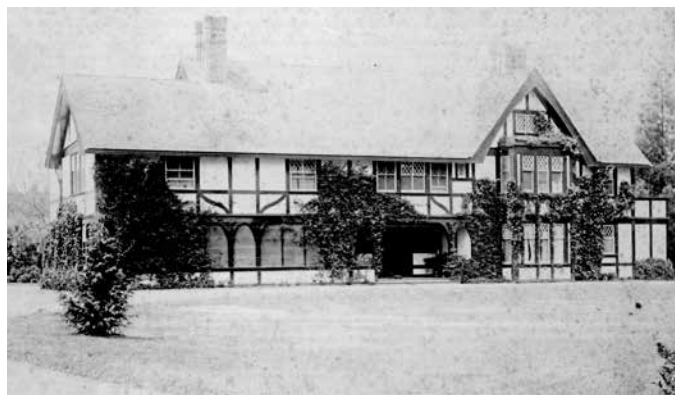
In 1890, in an effort to sell some of this land, Newlands worked to develop a planned community at Chevy Chase in Maryland. As promotional momentum was building and buyers were materializing, Newlands decided to enhance sales by establishing a country club. On March 23, 1893, the Chevy Chase Club was officially organized with financing from the Sharon Estate's Chevy Chase Land Company. Newlands was the first president of the Club.<sup>39</sup>

During that same year, Newlands became a congressman from Nevada. At this juncture, he felt time was right to sell the Sharon Estate's 1,000 acres in the mid – San Mateo County area. He hoped to repeat the success achieved at Chevy Chase.

The idea of building a suburban community catering to wealthy San Franciscans in this location went back to 1866, when Anson Burlingame bought the land. Burlingame never got around to making improvements. He died in 1870, and William C. Ralston purchased it with the same idea in mind, but he died in 1875 after which William Sharon acquired the property.

To get real estate sales underway, Newlands had a half dozen "country cottages" (designed by A. Paige Brown) constructed in Tudor Revival architectural style. The *Redwood City Democrat* surmised:

With six fashionable residences as a nucleus, it is the belief of the Sharon estate that additional tracts can be improved and find quick sales, and that in a few years a summer community of the leading families of San Francisco can be built-up at Burlingame....



One of the "country cottages" designed by A. Paige Brown. SMCHA 1976.091A.002.

When a hundred or more homes shall have been completed, the Sharon estate will erect a clubhouse, finish a racetrack and other features as may be suggested....<sup>40</sup>

Newlands's idea was to start the campaign by selling 16 acres near El Camino Real, between today's Floribunda Avenue and Bellevue Avenue. However, for a variety of reasons, sales were slow. As a result the congressman moved to reverse the Chevy Chase strategy by establishing a country club before developing much more of the acreage.

To get things going, Newlands invited a select group of young sporting enthusiasts for a picnic under some oak trees near the six cottages. Here, he launched the idea of starting up a country club, offering one of the cottages to act as the new clubhouse. Club legend has it that as drinks were liberally served, the potential first members received the proposal with considerable enthusiasm.

At a second meeting at San Francisco's Palace Hotel (also owned by the Sharon Estate), an agreement, favorable to the early membership, was hammered out. The new clubmen agreed they would organize a club with at least 50 members with an entrance fee of \$50 and annual dues of \$30. Besides the use of one of its cottages for two years, the Sharon Estate would provide the necessary furniture, 20 acres of land, supplies and staffing from the Palace and transportation from the Oak Grove train station to the Club for 12½ cents per trip. Thus was formed the first country club on the American





Members of the Burlingame Country Club helped fund the building of the Burlingame Train Station, shown in 1903. SMCHA 0001.517B.001.



Hunters and hounds participated in an English-style hunt in the Burlingame area. SMCHA 0000.484ZA.008, George Bartlett Collection.

## West Coast.

By the summer of 1893, the Burlingame Country Club was functional with 112 members. Reflecting the youth of many of the original members, comes the fact that some of them had trouble meeting their financial obligations. It was well-known that a few had their property on the Club's premises seized and sold to balance books and that many polo ponies changed hands in this manner.<sup>41</sup>

Transportation to the club from the Oak Grove Station was generated by a telephone call for pickup. However, some well-heeled club members were almost immediately negotiating with the Southern Pacific Railroad to build a closer station. It was completed by October 1894 and called the Burlingame Train Station.

Early sports enjoyed by the members centered around the horse, and the largest segment of the Club's staff was dedicated to running the stables, including a foreman, coachman, two grooms, five assistant grooms, one teamster, four harness cleaners, two attendants for the "shooting field" and a cook.<sup>42</sup>

Early members who would come to be important to the playing of polo at the club included Joseph S. Tobin and his brother Richard M. Tobin of Hibernia Bank, the McCreary clan, whose fortune came from their mercantile business initiated during the Gold Rush, and early Board secretary, Francis Carolan.<sup>43</sup>

From the start, club members partook in a potpourri

of sporting activities including horse racing, tennis and skeet shooting. Permits for fishing at the Spring Valley Lakes could be obtained at the clubhouse. Golf was available, but there was only a three-hole course. The members enjoyed English-style hunts. Walter S. Hobart originally provided the hounds but later Francis Carolan did. At first the members would chase fox and even coyote. After this became impractical as the landscape was being taken over by homes and businesses, prearranged "hunts" were organized by laying a trail using anise seed; sometimes "paper chases" were routed through the country side at which time the riders would follow traces of confetti.<sup>44</sup>

## II. Polo from the Beginning

Polo was the Burlingame Country Club's favorite early sport. From the very first conversations about creating the Club came plans for a polo field. In September of 1893, a month before the Club was officially organized, a letter went out to the future members telling them that a polo field had been laid out and space was available within the Club stables for polo ponies. An indication that the Club was committed to the sport was the appointment of noted horseman, riding instructor and poloist G.W. Ryder as foreman of the stables.<sup>45</sup> Within only a few weeks of the Club's inception, organized polo matches were scheduled twice a week, on Wednesday and Sunday afternoons.

Joseph D. Grant, one of the original Burlingame Country Club board members, took it upon himself to help establish polo and golf, not just for the Club, but for all of California. Grant was born in 1858, the only son of a successful San Francisco merchant. After a formal education, he traveled the world. When he returned to California he became involved in a variety of enterprises including hydro-electric power, petroleum and steel manufacturing. His interest in the future of California took many avenues. At age 33 he became a life trustee at Stanford University. With three others he founded the Save-the-Redwoods League and served on its board for 20 years. He was a man willing to express his opinion. In his memoirs he wrote, "If I have said anything to offend anybody...justifying personal violence, let me mention, modestly that I have put on the gloves with James Corbitt, some-time heavyweight boxing champion of the world."<sup>46</sup> In short, Grant was the perfect man to promote the popularity of polo among the members of the Club and eventually throughout the state.

In his memoirs, Grant tells us that while the English used specially developed pigskin saddles for the game, during the first days at Burlingame, "...we used Mexican saddles ill adapted to polo."<sup>47</sup> As far as other equipment needs, the Club's first manager, Captain A. Fane Wainwright, who was recruited by Richard M. Tobin in London for the job, located an Indian source for the essentials. He had Shaik Abdul, the renown "stick maker of Calcutta,"<sup>48</sup> send nine dozen mallets and sixteen dozen balls. San Mateo County historian Frank Stanger tells us that the Club's first polo field was located on Howard Family land in today's Burlingame, between Peninsula Avenue and Howard Avenue and Park Road and Highland Avenue.

During the first years of the Club's existence, polo was its favorite sport; no other came close to being as popular. For the individual, the game allowed one to enhance physical strength and character. As the Sharon Estate's real estate brochure stated, the player needed to exercise "intelligence, courage and equestrian skill and talent...." Polo was very much a team sport, which

was invigorating. Acting with comrades in common purpose was spiritually rewarding, and winning became that much more exciting.

Not only would friendships build between teammates, but visiting other clubs and those teams coming to play you, offered yet more opportunities. Teams routinely traveled throughout California — sometimes from coast to coast, and occasionally opposing teams crossed oceans to play in California. Burlingame was famous for its hospitality. Sometimes the Club helped defray the heavy costs associated with traveling with a string of polo ponies. Club members volunteered to host players from out of the area. Parties were thrown in honor of the visitors at the clubhouse and at the homes of Club members. At times these visits might last weeks and even months.

Of course, the "Burlingame set" was also attracted to polo because it allowed participation in the most wondrous of English sporting activities, something that was not lost on non-playing Club members and the outside, curious public. Polo became a spectator sport in America during the 1890s and stayed popular until the 1930s. At Burlingame (and later at San Mateo), large crowds in the hundreds, and sometimes thousands, came out to witness matches. Local newspaper accounts were sure to report on the "beviess of charming young ladies" who came to watch poloists dubbed "dashing" and "debonair."<sup>49</sup>



Crowd at the San Mateo Polo Club before World War I. SMCHA 0000.005B.014, William Parrott, Jr. Collection.

Even practice matches were well attended. By 1894, San Franciscans had joined locals to watch polo on the Burlingame Country Club's field. By the next year, the Burlingame Boys had sharpened their game enough to play in West Coast tournaments.<sup>50</sup>

### III. Early Matches

The first Burlingame Country Club tournament took place over a three-day period in April 1895, when the Fourth Cavalry Polo Club of Walla Walla, Washington, and a team from Riverside, California, came to play. Expenses were, in part, underwritten by the Burlingame Country Club. Burlingame's most experienced player, John Lawson, played No. 1, while Harry Simpkins and a smattering of Tobin and McCreery brothers filled out the ranks. The *San Francisco Chronicle* was on hand and covered the entire tournament. It described the "Burlingame Boys" as "daring riders."

Burlingame played the Walla Walla club first. The *Chronicle* described the opening period or chukker:

The clubmen rushed the soldiers from the start, sending the ball across the field and dangerously near the Army goal. But the Walla Walla Lieutenants chased it back, but not without doing considerable damage to the air in swiping at the ball. Then Joe Tobin and Harry Simpkins cut the sphere out of the main body and Joseph shot it through the goal posts.

Owing to the remoteness of the goal, no one knew just what happened until the umpire signaled the frigid individual in the tower. Then a blast on the horn announced the joyous event.

Walla Walla succeeded in scoring a tying goal, but for the rest of the game, "the clubmen had the game pretty much their own way."

Two days later, Burlingame faced a much more experienced and better equipped Riverside Club. This team consisted of English orange grove ranchers, plus an American rancher named R.L. Bettner, riding his sensational pony, Cigarette. In previous years, Riverside had achieved a reputation as the best team on the West



Poster from the first Burlingame Country Club tournament in 1895. Courtesy of the Burlingame Country Club.

Coast. Burlingame's easy win over Walla Walla created much interest, and a large crowd came out to see the contest. According to the *Chronicle*, "The clubhouse, lunchroom and veranda were crowded with merry little parties before the time for the game arrived, and as anticipation mounted, wagers both great and small were put upon the result." As the game progressed, the *Chronicle* reported that "several of the young ladies said they did not know what to do with themselves they were so excited."

The *Chronicle* declared the Riverside team rode like "Comanche Indians and their teamwork was perfect." Nevertheless, near the end of the first chukker, the teams were locked in a 1 to 1 tie. Unfortunately, at this juncture, Richard M. Tobin broke the head off his mallet, and the Riverside team, too good not to capitalize, scored and led 2 to 1.

The second period was as exciting as the first. At one point, Joseph Tobin chased a ball out of bounds



and inadvertently ran down a newspaper photographer. The man turned out to be fine, but the camera was destroyed. At the end of the second, Riverside still maintained a one-point advantage.

Burlingame tied things up in the third, lost the lead and tied it again at 5 to 5. However, as the game wore on, it became evident that Riverside's Bettner and Cigarette were starting to take over the game. Although the Burlingame Four lost 7 to 10, their effort against a crack team drew much admiration from the audience. The *Chronicle* commented that at the end of the game:

The San Mateo constables on their piebald plugs could not restrain the crowd, which broke over the dead line. Ladies who talked small gossip during the Walla game left the grandstand and stumbled over the clods in order to hold the players in view.

Even the Riverside men were impressed. The *Chronicle* quoted one as saying, "I had no notion these men had such a strong game... Their team play surprises me."

The great skill of John Lawson and the élan of the rest of the Burlingame Boys proved good, but not good enough to prevail over Riverside. Recognized was the need for a great player to take over the defense in the Back position. The polo squad found that caliber of player in Walter S. Hobart, Jr.

Hobart came from a famous California family. His father, also Walter S. Hobart, had made a fortune in the mines at Virginia City, Nevada. Senior had an interest in horse breeding and took over the Whipple Stock Farm in 1884. His son's career interests included horse racing, mining and real estate. However he was far better known for his activities as a society figure. In his obituary, the *Chronicle* said he was San Francisco's "Beau de Lux" at the turn of the last century, he being "handsome, dashing, of fiery temper and restless disposition...." The newspaper used this example to describe this colorful character:

On one trip to Europe he brought home enough paraphernalia to set himself up in the estate of an English country gentleman, and it was a common

sight to see him riding to the hounds across Hillsborough meadows in scarlet coat as the trumpet of his grooms rang out over the countryside.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, Hobart was an incredible horseman and skilled poloist. He joined the Burlingame team and helped develop the other players, especially Richard M. Tobin and Walter McCreery. When the Riverside ranchers visited Burlingame the next year, the improvement of the team was evident with Burlingame winning 12 to 2. One newspaper wrote of Hobart as a decisive factor:

Walter Hobart opened the first inning with much dash for the Burlingames, throwing his yellow cap aside and dashing hatless and at full speed over the field.... As he had a fine string of ponies, the fervent riding in the first inning did not deter the dash of subsequent efforts, for no sooner had he winded his steed than he again charged into the field on a fresh one.<sup>52</sup>

#### **IV. Burlingame's Country Club and Polo at the End of the Nineteenth Century**

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Burlingame Country Club had established itself as a financial, social and sporting success. The *San Francisco Examiner* extolled its good health in an article and congratulated it on keeping up with its "polo, golf, shooting, racing and other sports."<sup>53</sup>

At that time Francis Carolan became a force for improving polo and other sports at Burlingame, not because of his great play as an athlete, but because of his generous support. In 1898, he was an important member of a Club committee to finance and build a new clubhouse.

#### **D. Golden Years: 1901 – 1917**

##### **I. Francis Carolan and Crossways Farm**

The Golden Era of San Mateo County Polo began when Francis Carolan purchased William Corbitt's San Mateo Stock Farm in 1901. Carolan came from a middle class background. He grew up in Sacramento and then

went to San Francisco to open a dry fruit market. Here he met Harriett Pullman, an heiress. Harriett's father was George Mortimer Pullman of Pullman railroad car fame. The two were married in 1892 and at first lived on Franklin Street in the City. After a few months, they leased one of the A. Paige Brown designed, Tudor Revival cottages from the Sharon estate, and Francis joined the Burlingame Country Club.<sup>54</sup>

In 1897, George M. Pullman died, making Harriett and her older sister, Florence Lowden, two of America's richest young women. That year, the Carolans purchased a five-acre parcel of land at today's Willow Road and Sharon Avenue in Hillsborough; and later bought another 25 acres for the establishment of a proper estate, complete with a "Normandy country house," stables, greenhouse, tennis court and kennels. The couple were admirers of American sculptor Saint-Gauden's *Crossways*, a statue of Diana, the goddess of the hunt. They commissioned the creation of a replica, placed it within a fountain in the new courtyard and named their estate *Crossways*, honoring the artwork.<sup>55</sup>

Francis Carolan can hardly be called a self-made man, but he was certainly affable enough. Ray S. McConnell, a student of county historian Frank Stanger, interviewed many local people who were acquainted with Carolan and described him as "warm and human," "handsome," "immaculate," plus he had "twinkling eyes," and the 5'10" man had a "friendly smile for all." Although never achieving the status of a great polo player, "...he never stopped trying; nor was he the poor sport some men can be in similar positions." Admirably, "He loved his horses and dogs," and managed to maintain an even disposition while "under a handicap by being married to a wealthy woman."<sup>56</sup>

By 1898, Francis had become ensconced within Burlingame society. According to McConnell, it was his friendship with such sportsman as Walter S. Hobart, Jr., and John Lawson that led him to become "another polo convert," plunging in "...with all possible enthusiasm."<sup>57</sup> His active interest led to his 1899 appointment as the first Chairman of the Pacific Coast Polo and

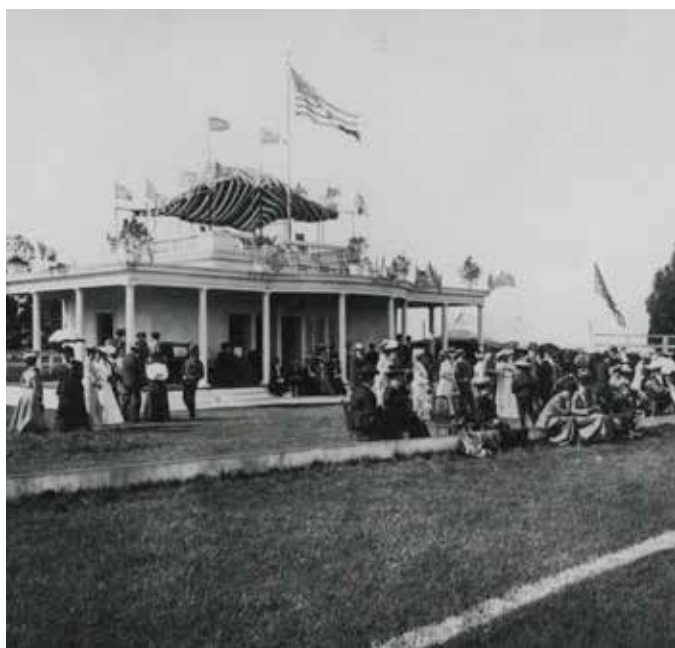


Francis Carolan with one of his thoroughbreds. SMCHA 1972.224B.001.

Racing Association, whose purpose was to promote competition between teams from Santa Monica, Riverside, Santa Barbara and Burlingame. In order to do so, it planned to organize two tournaments a year.<sup>58</sup>

As Carolan was building his interest in equestrian sport, a tremendous opportunity arose. William Corbitt's San Mateo Stock Farm came up for sale. As described previously, Corbitt had spent his life building up this property, specializing in breeding trotters and racehorses. The Farm had achieved international status for its famous blood lines. However, in 1898 Corbitt died, and now his estate was looking for a buyer. In 1901, Francis Carolan bought 122 acres of the Farm. A real estate map from 1905 shows the property existed north of Burlingame Avenue and east of the railroad tracks. It included today's Burlingame High School campus. The property still had a ¾-mile track in its southeast corner. Corbitt's two-story white house sat along the northern perimeter where the High School would eventually build its amphitheater. The townspeople called it "the Cottage," and for some years Carolan allowed poloist John Lawson to live there.

The Carolans themselves would never reside at



Crowds at the Carolan Pavilion for a horse show, April 1904.  
SMCHA 1972-224B-6.

this location as a couple, but changed its name to Crossways Farm (not to be confused with their mansion, Crossways, southwest of the Farm).<sup>59</sup> Francis allowed Crossways Farm to become a virtual extension of the Burlingame Country Club. Its breeding sheds, barns, stables and other facilities became available to selected club members. Carolan placed a polo field within the race track and, to accompany it, constructed a white-columned pavilion with an awning for spectators. He also built a judge's stand, which stood 20 feet high, and a small cottage for the superintendent of the property.

Not long after these improvements were made, Burlingame Country Club poloists were playing on a vastly superior field. Now teams from the eastern states began to travel to Burlingame, and occasionally even English teams would visit. In 1905, the original Club field was sold off to be subdivided. Meanwhile, the Hobarts sold 200 acres of their property on El Camino Real in today's San Mateo to Charles Clark, and he began building his own polo field called El Palomar. Nevertheless, Crossways Farm was at this point the center of Peninsula polo.<sup>60</sup>

## II. Increased Prestige

The *San Mateo News Leader* of December 30, 1903, announced mid – San Mateo County had achieved international stature in the world of polo:

Burlingame seems without doubt to be getting more and more the center of winter polo. Players from England, France and the Eastern States are coming each year in larger numbers.

The newspaper reported that at that very moment, poloist C. Raoul Dural of France was on the scene with his brother Maurice on the way. From London were listed a few players including Frank T. Mackey from Hurlingham, along with his 20 ponies. The *Leader* observed that three local teams were ready to compete for the New Year's Day Cup sponsored by the Burlingame Country Club. It added, "Last year at this time it would have been difficult to get up two teams." The article spoke of the presence of three fields in the area, the Club's field (which was going to be sold), Clark's field (which was still too small except for practice games — this would change as El Palomar would be vastly improved) and the "full-size" Crossways Farm. The *Leader* described Crossways as "one of the...best polo fields to be found anywhere," and "Mr. Carolan deserves the hearty thanks of the community for all he has done to help and foster the sport."

The *Leader* noted a busy lineup of scheduled matches. The Pacific Coast Championship Tournament in late March highlighted the plans. There would be one team from Honolulu, the Hurlingham team, another English team from Rugby, two southern California teams and one team from the eastern United States.

It was not just the climate and great fields that were attracting worldwide attention but the ponies as well. As mentioned previously, as early as 1896, eastern poloists were buying local ponies. Soon international interest developed as well.

The February 18, 1903, *Leader* reported that Walter S. Hobart, Jr. had trained a number of California polo ponies and intended to sell them in England that April. The newspaper surmised that "there is money in the





W. McCreery on California pony Follow Me as shown in the 1911 edition of the book *Modern Polo*.

training of polo ponies,” and gave an example by describing how a New York “polo enthusiast” in recent times “visited San Mateo and secured a number of animals that had been frequently seen in the game at Burlingame.” He paid \$200 to \$300 per pony from an owner who had previously purchased the horses for \$50 each. This New Yorker took the animals east and sold them without problem to George Gould and others for “prices ranging from \$1,500 to \$2,000.” Captain Miller in *Modern Polo* admitted, “There have been instances of some wonderfully good California ponies playing in England during the last decade, for instance Mr. W. McCreery’s Follow Me.” Miller also mentions “Mr. Carolan” and his breeding activities: “by himself on his own ranch.”<sup>61</sup>

In fact, Carolan was establishing himself as quite a skillful horse breeder. He was known to have sold polo ponies for as much as \$2,500 each. His personal favorite was the mare Arabella. He played his best polo while riding her. His other favorites included Rhyme and Reason. He bought the latter in 1902 for \$500. At that time, at his Crossways Farm, Carolan possessed

94 trotters and polo ponies plus six fine carriage horses.

After 1906, he reduced the number of horses boarded there to 50.<sup>62</sup> As late as 1913, Carolan was still wheeling and dealing horses. That year he sold the famous Selena, bred and trained at Crossways Farm, to Englishmen Leslie St. Clair Cheape.<sup>63</sup>

In San Mateo County, and throughout California, interest in polo was peaking in the era before World War I. *Sunset Magazine* commented on its popularity among high society’s young women: “...part of a debutante’s social equipment [is] that she...tell a No. 1 in polo from a Back and... recognize an off-side play.”<sup>64</sup>

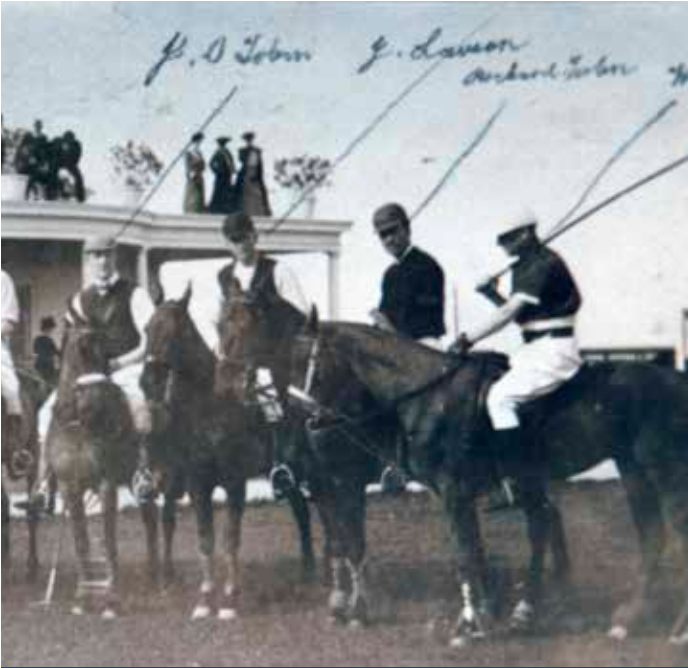
At no time was interest higher than when the British came to Burlingame. Frank Stanger’s student Ray McConnell quipped:

Now, nobles and royalty are the meat of rich Americans. Nothing can make a person socially prominent easier and quicker than merely entertaining them.<sup>65</sup>

McConnell wrote that no one seemed more taken by such visitors than Francis Carolan. When the British poloists came to play, “Frank practically begged” to host the match-ups at Crossways Farm. During 1904 and 1905, the great Hurlingham team came here amidst great excitement. The English did not disappoint, showing expert skills. They defeated the locals in both years, the second time being a total rout.<sup>66</sup>

Despite being humbled by the English, polo continued to increase in popularity among the “Burlingame set” and those who watched them. Even practice games drew crowds and the attention of local newspapers. Whimsical team groupings included the Tobin family in March of 1906, taking on any who dared, which ended up being the proficient Walter S. Hobart, Jr. and John Lawson, supported by Francis Carolan and P.D. Martin.

In April of 1908, married players Francis Carolan, Edward W. Howard, Thomas Driscoll and Walter



The Burlingame team of Joseph Tobin, John Lawson, Richard Tobin and Walter Hobart, shown in front of the Carolans Pavilion, won the California championship tournament in 1907. SMCHA 0000.484ZB.005, Burton Klose Collection.

S. Hobart, Jr. took on bachelors Joe Parrott, Joseph O. Tobin, Richard M. Tobin and John Lawson and beat them soundly 7 to 0.

Burlingame practice games at times drew international attention. During the winter of 1904 – 1905, Baron von Wulffen of the imperial house at Potsdam and kin to the German Emperor stayed at the Burlingame Country Club in order to watch the local boys play.<sup>67</sup>

As the years went by, the skills of California poloists increased, and Burlingame continued to be one of the state's top teams. In March of 1907, the California championship tournament was played at Coronado. Burlingame beat a spirited Riverside team in the preliminaries which allowed them to play against the Santa Barbara Cracks in the finals. The Burlingame team consisted of Richard M. and Joseph Tobin, John Lawson and Walter S. Hobart, Jr. Burlingame overwhelmed the Cracks from the start, racking up an easy victory.

A party followed the tournament for all five teams that participated. This particular celebration lasted for

more than a week and moved by train from Coronado to Burlingame. Local newspapers enthusiastically covered these occasions as much as they followed the games. On the night of March 11, according to various local sources, 37 quarts of champagne were consumed by players and friends. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported in some detail how toward the end of the night Walter S. Hobart, Jr. rode a horse into the clubhouse and, while mounted, burst into a sleeping room occupied by elderly clubman A.B. McCreery.<sup>68</sup>

In February of 1908, the *San Mateo News Leader*, continued its boosterism of the local game by proclaiming: "Burlingame the center of polo playing in the state."<sup>69</sup> At that time there was indeed much to boast about considering a new field had just been finished. The year before, polo players and the sport's supporters began planning for the construction of new grounds, and a clubhouse to be called El Cerrito. The *Leader* proclaimed that these facilities would become "the finest on the Peninsula." Contractor Caldwell & Co. situated the improvements within a "natural amphitheater," surrounded by hillsides occupied by the estates of "many of the wealthiest people of the state."<sup>70</sup> Among them was polo player Richard M. Tobin, who built his nearby mansion at the same time.<sup>71</sup> The location in today's world is at Stonehedge Road and El Cerrito Avenue in Hillsborough.

The 1908 season proved a glorious one for the local team, allowing regional newspapers to continue describing the mid-Peninsula as "polo's winter capital." In anticipation of Burlingame capturing its third state championship in succession, the March 4 *San Mateo News Leader* declared on its front page:

The most spirited polo contest probably ever held on a California field will take place soon at Coronado. Almost daily the local players may be found on the Carolan field and at the Clark ground practicing and training the ponies.

The newspaper reported that the Burlingame Country Club was sending "its best team to San Diego which consisted of Richard M. Tobin, No. 1, Thomas Driscoll,

No. 2, John Lawson, No. 3, and Walter S. Hobart, Back. At stake was the coveted Sprekels trophy. The March 25 *Leader* was able to proclaim, “the trophy for the Pacific Coast championship in polo becomes the property of the Burlingame Country Club by virtue of the game won at Coronado last Friday.” In the final game, Burlingame overwhelmed Riverside 11 to 0 and now the Burlingame Four were, after winning the annual tournament three times in a row, “undisputed” champions of the Pacific Coast.

By 1909, not merely mid – San Mateo County polo and not merely California polo, but American polo had come into its own. As mentioned earlier, in his *Modern Polo*, Captain Miller, without doubt in great pain, concedes: “The year 1909 is marked with red letters in the American Calendar, for in this year the [American Polo] Cup, which had been since 1886 in England, returned whence it came.”<sup>72</sup> The Americans had beaten the English at Hurlingham for the first time.

In Miller’s 1911 book, the recent 1909 All-American Champion Cup (also the Sprekels Cup) win by Burlingame is listed. Miller mentioned that this competition was “open to clubs all over the world.”<sup>73</sup> He lists the American Polo Association’s 35 North American clubs (not including military teams). Only two are of California, Pasadena and San Mateo (reflecting some organizational changes that were in the works amongst the mid-Peninsula poloists). The highest ranking handicaps in California belonged to two local players, Thomas Driscoll and Walter S. Hobart, Jr. at six. John Lawson, Cyril Tobin and Richard M. Tobin were fives. William L. Breese and Edward W. Howard were threes. G. Cameron, G. Garrett and Francis Carolan were ones.<sup>74</sup>

After their 1909 victory at Coronado, a highly regarded team from Chicago came to San Diego to challenge the best California squad. After a fiercely competitive game, Burlingame lost to the Midwesterners on a disputed goal in the last chukker. Nevertheless, Burlingame was still judged the best on the Pacific Coast and looked forward to an upcoming visit by a

British team. That April, a crowd of 1,500 were on-hand to watch the game. At the end of regulation, the score was tied 5 to 5. Play resumed with a five-minute overtime. The *San Francisco Examiner* described the action. After a “hot melee”<sup>75</sup> Walter S. Hobart, Jr. scored the winning goal. The Burlingame Four finally beat the English.

By 1912, polo had become so specialized in mid – San Mateo County that local supporters of the sport decided a new organization was required. The general feeling was that the Burlingame Country Club’s facilities had become inadequate for sustaining the caliber of play necessary for international competition. At the same time, Francis Carolan was becoming reluctant to allow large crowds of spectators at Crossways Farm. Thus, the *San Francisco Examiner* announced that the San Mateo Polo Club had filed articles of incorporation on April 27, 1912. Its first objective was to improve the facilities at El Cerrito. Its directors included leading names of Peninsula society: Eugene de Sable, Elliot McAllister, George Howard, Edward W. Howard, Thomas Driscoll, Captain John Barneson, R.G. Hooker, Henry P. Bowie and E.J. Tobin.<sup>76</sup>

### III. The Grandest Season of Peninsula Polodom: 1912 – 1913

There were great expectations among polo fans at the beginning of the 1912 – 1913 season. At its start, the local team gave itself a new name: The San Mateo Slashers. The team now had three fields to practice and play on. There was the “superb field”<sup>77</sup> on the newly improved El Cerrito grounds. Charles W. Clark’s field, El Palomar, had been substantially upgraded through the years, and, of course, there was Francis Carolan’s Crossways Farm.

Helping to inspire enthusiasm, San Mateo publisher Charles Glendower Ellicott decided to print a book documenting the season. He hired young D.A. Raybould to write the piece. D.A. or “Doc” Raybould would eventually become one of the mid-Peninsula’s most renowned real estate promoters.





Playing polo at El Cerrito Field, 1913. SMCHA  
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Doc was but 24 years old in 1912. Born in Salt Lake City, he graduated from the University of Utah and had only been on the Peninsula a year when he received this writing assignment. At the time he was also a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Four years after the great season of 1912 – 1913, he took a job with the *San Mateo Times* but that did not last long. With the onset of World War I that year, 1917, he went into the Army as a first lieutenant. After the War, he returned to San Mateo where he became engaged in the real estate game, specializing in business property development. He is credited as the mastermind behind the development of Third Avenue in the downtown during the 1920s. He moved old mansions aside for improvements like the Benjamin Franklin Hotel. During the 1930s, he turned his attention to Second and Fourth Avenues. He also became involved in residential home building west of El Camino Real and east of the Bayshore Highway.<sup>78</sup>

Those days were in the distant future in 1912, as Doc was but a “cub” reporter. The name of his book was *Peninsula Polo Annual: An Illustrated Record of the Season 1912 – 1913 in San Mateo, Hillsborough and Burlingame*. There was a variety of local advertisers that supported the production of the piece. This included George J. Zehender, the proprietor of Polo Saddles,

Mallets and Supplies at 155 B Street in San Mateo. It is likely that Doc not only wrote the book but sold the ads to pay his salary.

The inaugural match of November 3, 1912, featured a practice game between the “Whites” and the “Reds.” Among the best players were Richard M. Tobin, Walter S. Hobart, Jr. and Thomas Driscoll. A new name, the young Will Tevis, appears on the roster. Doc announced: “...eight dauntless Centaurs rode onto the El Cerrito field and began the grandest season of peninsula polodom.”<sup>79</sup>

Doc recapped the game in some detail. The Whites won 9½ to 4½. Nearly 20 games were played during the season. Some took place at El Cerrito, some at El Palomar and some at Crossways Farm. Doc dutifully gave a description of each. He speaks to the purpose of his book as being an enduring memory of the incredible season: “San Francisco newspapers, although vivid and delineating, were read and forgotten the day of the publication and the impressions of the spectator at one game were soon obscured by new thrills and new mind pictures inspired by more recent contests.”<sup>80</sup> Thus *Peninsula Polo Annual*, complete with photographs and statistics, would be a lasting reminder of the events of 1912 – 1913.

Doc was able to find something special to write about for all the games. For example the third meeting, on November 17, 1912, called the Hillsborough Challenge Match, had this highlight:

Seldom does the single swipe of a mallet outlive the memory of a whole game of polo, but long after the Hillsborough Challenge Match is forgotten the fans will still marvel at the goal Walter Hobart made from middlefield. George H. Howard, who has stood along the El Cerrito boards for years, says there was never a prettier shot made on the field and the players declare that few longer goals are on record....

Hobart rode down on the pellet at full speed. With a powerful swat he lifted the ball into the air, and it did not settle until it was halfway to the goal post. Then it headed deliberately for the opening and passed



Crowd at El Cerrito, c. 1913. SMCHA 0000.005B.013.

evenly between the wickets. The length of the drive was fully 450 feet.<sup>81</sup>

The seventh game, on December 22, was special because it served as a benefit for the Red Cross Hospital (later known as Mills Hospital). Doc points out that since the hospital had been founded by Mrs. Whitelaw Reid, it had become “one of society’s favorite charities” and therefore “San Francisco sets turned out en masse....” Doc described this El Cerrito field benefit as more a society party than a sports event, “Luncheons at the clubhouse preceded the match.” Among the luminaries of local society spotted among the diners were Mrs. Charles Clark, Mr. and Mrs. Christian de Guigne, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Crocker, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene de Sabla, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph D. Grant, Mr. and Mrs. Antoine Borel, Mr. and Mrs. George H. Howard and Count and Countess de Tristan.<sup>82</sup> The *Burlingame Advance* added that “several hundred dollars” had been raised, and quipped, “The villagers rubbed elbows with the millionaires.”<sup>83</sup>

The eighth match was unique in that it allowed Mrs. Harry Hastings and Mrs. Christian de Guigne to pick the two opposing teams. The “Ladies Nominating Match” of January 5, 1913, allowed “the young matrons” to display “great skill in selecting the sides, which were so evenly matched that a single goal in the last period

decided the contest.”<sup>84</sup>

The ninth match held particular interest because it foretold a future challenge. Walter Dillingham, of the All-Hawaiian team, stopped on the Peninsula on his way to join his team at Coronado. The Back skillfully played for one of the local teams despite being mounted on unfamiliar ponies. Doc writes that he “...threw fright into the locals, who know that a whole team of his kind would compete in the tournament” here. Dillingham scored four times, even though he was playing defense most of the time. His team prevailed 10 to 1/2.<sup>85</sup>

On March 27, 1913, play began between the locals and outside teams. At the Annual Tournament of the San Mateo Polo Club: Junior Series, a group of younger Peninsula players took on the Army’s First Cavalry squad. The locals soundly defeated the soldiers 10 to 2 1/2. Doc paid particular attention to the spectators who came to watch the El Cerrito Field event:

Scores of the social elect sat in boxes, others reclined on the clubhouse veranda and in automobiles, while others, still more intent on the play, crowded in front of the sideboards and often on to the field. It was a gala day for the smart set and the peninsula residents, reinforced by hundreds of out-of-town guests, celebrated the beginning of the games which brought with them a round of gayeties.<sup>86</sup>



Merchants' Cup polo match on El Cerrito Field, March 30, 1913. SMCHA 0000.005B.008.

During the season there were a variety of events designed to break the "monotony of the...matches and incidentally give the ladies a chance." This included a "paper chase" on January 13, and polo pony "scurries" (races) for men and women on February 9.

On March 29, there took place "The Gymkhana" to offer "a most welcome diversion after ten days of strenuous polo." The event held at El Palomar featured a "ladies scurry," pony shows and other activities. Doc tells us that this crowd "clad in near-summer attire" represented the "smartest crowd of the tournament." Doc noted that during the polo pony ladies scurry, the following occurred (demonstrating Doc's flare for society writing):

While rounding the turn Mrs. Hayne's cap fell off and she finished with her hair flying behind her. The plucky ride won the plaudits of the crowd, as the rider was more concerned about the race than her hair. She did not stop galloping until she had found refuge in a remote corner of the field, which lacked the equipment of a boudoir, but gave her courage to come back and face the crowd.<sup>87</sup>

On March 30, 1913, the tournament that California polo enthusiasts had been anticipating for months began. At stake was the Merchants' Cup. The All-Hawaiian team had just come off a campaign at Coronado where they had demolished California teams.

The confident Hawaiians held a reputation for great teamwork and an incredible string of ponies. It was known that the Hawaiians had sponsored a three-year search in Australia to line up their horses which some experts claimed to be the best ever seen in the United States. As Doc put it, the All-Hawaiians were believed to be "unbeatable on this coast,"<sup>88</sup> and were out to prove themselves the best of the Pacific Ocean and all the lands that touched it.

However, the Slashers had not lost a match in years plus had the advantage of playing on a home field. Predictably, wagering was lively. Doc tells us everything from a box of candy to \$7,000 were bet on just the first game (this was a best two out of three contest). It was estimated that altogether \$80,000 was at stake. Among those putting money on the Hawaiians were witnesses to their play down at Coronado. The biggest Slasher backer was Charles W. Clark.

According to Doc, something like 3,000 "polo-mad fans" showed up for that first game on a perfect, sunny day. Richard M. Tobin, No. 1, Thomas Driscoll, No. 2, W.B. Devereux, No. 3, and Walter S. Hobart, Jr., Back, represented the Slashers. Walter Hobart started the scoring, but All-Hawaiian Harold Castle soon tied it up. Nevertheless, by half-time the Slashers were up 6 to 1½, and it seemed the Slashers were in control. W.B. Devereux seemed particularly effective until the fourth



period when he collided with All-Hawaiian Arthur Rice. Both men fell, and both had their ponies roll over them. People in the stands gasped in horror as both players lay on the turf. However, after a few minutes break, both returned. Unfortunately for the Slashers, the accident seemed to hurt them more. Devereux's play became uneven, as was Thomas Driscoll's after his last regular pony was injured. By the end of the fifth period, the All-Hawaiians trailed by just one point. At this juncture, Richard M. Tobin asserted himself, scoring twice in the opening moments of the sixth, the second shot being a difficult under-the-horse smash. Devereux, now recovered, also scored twice and the Slashers won 10½ to 5½.

The second game for the Merchants' Cup was scheduled for April 3. In the meantime, on April 1, the Juniors Slashers met the First Cavalry, once more besting them, this time 13 to 2½. Significantly for later events, Will Tevis proved to be the star of the game, having scored 7 goals.<sup>89</sup>

The second seniors game started off looking good for the Slashers, who built a three-point lead by half-time, but Richard M. Tobin was hit by a ball and suffered a knee injury. He was replaced by young Will Tevis. Doc analyzed the consequences, "Tevis...played consistently, but the loss of Tobin upset the Slashers' combinations and plays." The All-Hawaiians went on to win the game. Doc lamented, "For the first time in two seasons the valiant San Mateo Polo Club Slashers met defeat."<sup>90</sup>

Anticipation for the April 6 final game was thick. However, many doubted that this time the locals could prevail. The *San Mateo Times* recognized that "the Islanders are better mounted."<sup>91</sup> Doc agreed, "the Slashers were badly outclassed in the matter of mounts."<sup>92</sup>

The Slashers were going to do what they could to face the challenge. First up was to work with Will Tevis by getting him better acquainted with their plays and the tendencies of his new teammates. Second was to come up with some new ponies. According to Doc, every

horse owner on the Peninsula placed their stables at the Slashers' disposal.

Things still looked in doubt on the eve of game three. W.B. Devereux was discussing the team's chances with Charles W. Clark and wondered out loud, "If we only had Haver Kemp's 'Big Jim' we would be fixed." Clark offered, "I'll get him. Where is he?" Big Jim was in Monterey and the game was only 15 hours away, but Clark was determined, "It makes no difference: we have to have the pony."<sup>93</sup>

In ten minutes time, Clark closed negotiations with Kemp. He paid \$2,000, but Kemp told Clark that the last train from Monterey to the San Francisco Peninsula had already left the station. Clark told Kemp to hire a special train "and charge it to me." Big Jim was at the San Mateo depot by 2 a.m.

Once more the Slashers began the game well. Passing from Walter S. Hobart, Jr. to Thomas Driscoll to Will Tevis resulted in the first score of the game. Tevis's fast start seemed to buoy the entire team. However, the All-Hawaiians then poked in two goals to take the lead. In the third period the Slashers scored three times and took back the advantage, and still led at the half 6 to 4. The All-Hawaiians came on strong in the fifth and led by ¼ point.

The Islanders lost the lead in the sixth, but regained it in the seventh. At this point Walter S. Hobart, Jr. changed the course of the game for the last time by tearing down the field "like a madman" and putting the ball through the goal. The All-Hawaiians were not done yet. They closed the lead to just ½ point, but then W.B. Devereux, on Big Jim, broke the Hawaiians' momentum by stealing the ball, riding the length of the field and scoring to put the game on ice. The final score was 12¾ to 10. The Slashers had proven themselves to be the finest polo team west of the Mississippi and east of Japan in what Doc Rabould described as "the best game of polo ever played on the peninsula, and perhaps the whole Coast."<sup>94</sup>

#### IV. The Panama – Pacific International Exposition and Changing Times

After the 1912 – 1913 season, the face of polo on the Peninsula changed dramatically. The great tournaments and dominant play turned to memories. The Slashers team that went down to Coronado in 1914 had only one player left of the championship team of the year before – just young Will Tevis at No. 2. The others were Robin Hayne, No. 1, J.C. Cowding, No. 3 and in Walter S. Hobart's Back position, Harry Hastings.<sup>95</sup> Yet the mid-Peninsula was still going to have something important to do with the history of the sport on the West Coast.

The San Francisco Panama – Pacific International Exposition of 1915 included polo as one of its attractions. It was proposed that six fields be laid out to support the activity of all the visiting teams. However, in 1914, World War I cut down on many arrangements, and the number of polo fields diminished to just one.

Nevertheless, the Exposition still scheduled a game every day during the fair. Of course the grounds of just one field could not sustain this heavy utilization. The field might handle three games a week at most, so matches would have to be arranged at other places. Exposition organizers looked south to the fields of the mid-Peninsula for possible relief.

Harriett and Francis Carolan were involved with various committees of the Exposition. Francis was hopeful he could help with the polo tournament by offering his Crossways Farm field and facilities. The Wells Fargo Express Company lent a hand by managing transportation. An estimated \$100,000 worth of polo ponies would need to be stabled at or near Burlingame, and Wells provided an all-steel railroad car with ventilation and lighting at the disposal of the organizers. Every day during the Exposition, horses were moved back and forth along the Southern Pacific.<sup>96</sup>

Francis began facilitating things in Burlingame by leasing his polo field at Crossways Farm to the Burlingame Country Club for the 1915 season. That year, the Burlingame Country Club was elected a member of the American Polo Association with Francis



Playing on the Carolan (Crossways) Field. SMCHA 0000.484ZA.004, George Bartlett Collection.

Carolan chosen as a delegate. Now the Club acted as the agency allowing the international matches to take place. The *Burlingame Advance* reported Crossways field in “fine condition” and its “splendid setting on the bay shore amid the races and its commodious grounds and club house will all make a very attractive field.” Because the field had not been used much by the San Mateo Polo Club it was “in much better condition than it would have been otherwise.”<sup>97</sup> Between March 16 and May 1 the games took place.<sup>98</sup> All of the preliminary matches competing for the Expositions trophy were held at what was called the Burlingame Country Club Polo Field. The finals were played in San Francisco.

Nevertheless, for polo and everything in general, World War I was forcing changes. The game was done in Europe, at least until the conflict was over, and in America, which was inching closer to becoming a combatant nation, the time of “Polo Is King” was coming to an end.

#### E. Peninsula Polo Moves South

##### I. Burlingame's Last Days of Polo

When Richard M. Tobin suffered his knee injury after being struck by a polo ball during the second game of the tournament with the All-Hawaiian team, it became a symbolic moment. Although the Slashers went on

to win the Merchants' Cup, Tobin never seriously came back to the game. By 1913, many of the original important poloists were maturing and acquiring heavy responsibility in their family and business life. In a newspaper interview, Cyril Tobin explained that finding the time to practice for polo had become much harder.<sup>99</sup>

Another factor was the increasing popularity of a different sport at the Burlingame Country Club. During its first years, the Club had just a three-hole golf course. Joseph D. Grant and others promoted the past-time, and by 1899, there existed nine holes, and the members had hired its first golf pro. About 1911, Burlingame could boast a full 18-hole golf course, and this sport, without the dangers of injury and the huge expense of polo, was on its way to becoming the most popular sport at the Club.<sup>100</sup>

While the Club was maturing, the town of Burlingame was burgeoning, increasing real estate values that put pressure on continuing the maintenance of polo fields. In early 1906, Burlingame existed as a small village clustered next to the train station which primarily serviced the members of the Burlingame Country Club. The famous April earthquake of that year had much impact. Many San Francisco refugees, looking for a safer place to live, chose Burlingame, in part because its name was known to them as the place where all those polo stars came to play. In two years the population of Burlingame increased five-fold (to 1,000 residents), and the people decided to incorporate into a proper town. The census of 1910 reveals 1,585 people lived there, and in 1914, a special count revealed a population of 2,849.<sup>101</sup>

Moreover, for members of the Burlingame Country Club who still maintained an interest in polo, World War I simply drained the pool of young men willing to play. Of its 289 regular members, more than 70 spent time in the armed services during the War.<sup>102</sup>

Francis Carolan and his Crossways Farm felt the changes. His disdain for neighbors increasingly crowding in on his property was unfortunately picked up by the *San Mateo News Leader* when it quoted him



Hattie Pullman (Harriett's mother), Harriett Lowden (Harriett's niece) and Harriett Pullman Carolan at the Carolan Pavilion, c. 1910. SMCHA 1972.224B.004.

being put off by the surrounding "...ordinary Toms, Dicks and Harrys."<sup>103</sup> The feeling became mutual, as the locals started complaining about his hunting beagles howling at night. In 1919, the town actually passed an ordinance outlawing anyone from possessing more than two dogs.

Francis also felt the changes brought on by the War. Many of his close friends enlisted into the service, and many closed their Peninsula country estates for the duration. From a point of personal finance, the War forced the nationalization of America's railroads, resulting in a tremendous loss of income from his wife's holdings.<sup>104</sup>

And speaking of Harriett, at the beginning of the War the couple separated. Marital troubles had begun at least as far back as 1909, when Harriett started dreaming of building a French-style chateau to replace her Crossways estate as her Peninsula residence. It was no secret that Francis did not like the idea of building the massive Carolands mansion from the beginning. Nevertheless plans for construction went forward. The Crossways mansion and estate were sold off in 1913. By 1914, construction of the Chateau had started. As the War began, Harriett left for New York and Francis took up residence in the old Corbitt cottage



at Crossways Farm. Their estrangement was never resolved.

By 1922, the *San Francisco Bulletin* described “The Farm” (Crossways Farm) as “deserted except for a dozen pensioners and one horse.” It noted that there were 25 old carriages in a large barn: “...some of them were destroyed purposely by fire...” while others were “...sold to junk dealers who used their chassis’ for trailers.” Finally, “All the buildings and all of the old landmarks have since been torn down....”<sup>105</sup> That year, the local school district bought the future Burlingame High School campus for \$62,890.<sup>106</sup>

Francis Carolan died the next year, on November 11. The next day the *San Francisco Journal’s* obituary eulogized, “As a sportsman, Mr. Carolan was at one time owner of the finest array of polo ponies and exhibition horses on the Pacific Coast.”

During the same period that Francis was encountering his obstacles, William C. Clark passed away. His wife then turned a portion of their estate, once the original Hobart property, to St. Matthew’s Catholic Church. She then built a new mansion behind today’s Aragon High School.<sup>107</sup> Only El Cerrito was left of the old polo fields.

However, just after the War, all three fields were still operational, and in 1919 play resumed. The February 18 *San Mateo New Leader* headlined: “San Mateo Beaten in Polo Game.” The Slashers had visited the Del Monte resort and had lost to its polo team. Walter S. Hobart, Jr. was still playing as a Back. However when Burlingame and San Mateo teams played there the next month, Hobart was not listed on either squad.<sup>108</sup>

On March 31, the *Leader* summed up the status of Peninsula polo:

There appears to be a big revival of interest this year in polo — sometimes called the ‘sport of millionaires.’ The game was abandoned during the war, but with the return of peace, the followers of the pastime are once more taking up the game.... It cautioned against high expectations: “None of the teams now playing at Del Monte can compare for

one minute with the famous old ‘San Mateo Slashers’ composed of Richard M. Tobin, Thomas A. Driscoll, W.B. Devereux and Walter Hobart....”<sup>109</sup>

On April 12, the *San Mateo News Leader* announced the local polo season would open on the 17<sup>th</sup>. The first game would take place at “Carolan Field” and then there would be another at “Clark Field.” No admission was to be charged for the entire season, all under the “auspices of the San Mateo Polo Club.” The opening match would be an “entertainment for the wounded soldiers from Letterman Hospital.” A tea in the clubhouse would act as a fundraiser for the “wounded soldiers fund.”<sup>110</sup>

About that same time, the *Leader* reported that G. Maurice Hecksher, the “millionaire polo player of New York” had purchased the San Mateo Polo Club.<sup>111</sup> This meant El Cerrito Field and its clubhouse were now his. From today’s vantage point, it is hard to determine if this was good news or not. However, play did continue with the San Mateo team frequently engaged in tournaments at Del Monte. The April 29 *Leader* showed Will Tevis as the Back, taking the position previously reserved for Walter S. Hobart, Jr. W.B. Devereux, the old Slasher, now played for Del Monte.<sup>112</sup> The June 27 *Leader* featured an unusual story about how the local Mrs. Jane Selby Hayne refereed a game at Del Monte: “Few women in America have the skill and understanding to referee a polo game,” but Hayne was appreciated for successfully taking on “this difficult part....”<sup>113</sup>

Equestrian interest seemed to continue to make a comeback in 1921. On June 1, the *Leader* headlined: “Society Flocks to Polo Field for Gmykhana.” The story featured how “hundreds of motor cars brought the gaily dressed spectators for a pony show.”

On November 1, the newspaper reported the opening of the new polo season at El Cerrito and how it drew “four hundred and then some,” but qualified the excited news noting, “The crowd was not as large as has been seen in years past....”<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, anticipation for the new season was building. On January 20, 1922, the *Leader* headlined, “Strong Polo Four to represent San



Polo players pose, probably at El Cerrito Field. SMCHA 0000.005B.007.

Mateo in Tournament.” Stars Will Tevis and Thomas Driscoll were on the team. They lost their first game on a “muddy field.”<sup>115</sup>

However in March, the team achieved a great comeback in what the *Leader* called a “history-making game” at Coronado. Here they beat Midwick of San Diego that had been previously undefeated in 23 straight matches over two years. The *Leader* gushed like the old days about Will Tevis who “proved himself one of the most brilliant Back on the West Coast.” On Thomas Driscoll “the Nestor of Western polo and out of bed for the first time after a week of influenza,” he “played fully on his nerve and his years of experience....”<sup>116</sup> A few days later the scene returned to El Cerrito as the *Leader* headlined on March 18, “Eyes of Sports World Centered on Polo Field at San Mateo,” for a game against the club from Del Monte. With nostalgic passion the newspaper spoke to how:

The revival of the sport in San Mateo harkens back to many years ago when the greatest players in all the world used to meet in exciting contests at Clark’s field in San Mateo and the Carolan field in Burlingame and when society men and women from every nook and corner of the State responded to... cheer for their favorite teams....

San Mateo went on to beat Del Monte 12 to 8 with Will Tevis and Thomas Driscoll leading the way. The *Leader* reported 1,000 in attendance and commented, “The cheering and shouting of the excited spectators must have shaken the staid Hillsboroughans for the likes of such is seldom heard outside of a baseball park.”<sup>117</sup> While San Mateo lost in the second game at Carolan Field,<sup>118</sup> they came back and beat Del Monte at Del Monte in the third to take the tournament.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the conclusion of a dazzling season, clouds were on the horizon for the San Mateo Polo Club. The *San Mateo News Leader* headlined on May 5, 1922, “Sheriff Puts Padlock on Handsome Door of San Mateo Polo Club.” The article revealed the owner of the Club’s facilities, Maurice Heckscher, had been in “a bout at fisticuffs” with a member of the Club and was expelled as a member. That is when George Gordon Moore stepped in and bought the Club. Moore, like Heckscher, was a “multimillionaire of New York,” at least by reputation. Moore gained much praise for providing funds to refurbish much of the Club’s property. However, according to the *News Leader*’s article, a deputy sheriff surprised the members when after tracking “dirt across the freshly mopped veranda,” he “rudely placed an ugly padlock in the hand-carved front door.” Apparently, “This gross bit of effrontery against the local smart set happened in the twinkling of an eye; today the lords and ladies of the restricted area are still suffering from shock.” The incident was the result of a \$10,000 judgement handed down to Moore by the Supreme Court of New York after finding favorably for the Equitable Trust Company of New York. All of the Club’s possessions, including ponies, clubhouse, grounds and other property were attached. There was no comment from the owner, as Moore was in New York. This was hardly the kind of news that one would associate with the once nearly aristocratic polo community of the mid-Peninsula. Things more or less worked themselves out for the Club.

By 1924, the San Mateo Holding Corporation had taken possession of the Club’s property. The December

23, 1924, *Leader* reported that the Company had come to an agreement with the Club for a ten-year lease which amounted to a \$200 a month rental bill totaling \$24,000. The Club had the option to buy the property at any time for \$70,000. F.J. Tobin represented the Company while Will Tevis represented the Club in the negotiations.

## II. San Mateo Polo

Because Burlingame and Hillsborough were becoming more and more populated, the San Mateo Polo Club began looking south for a new field. In 1926, the Borel Family (whose properties extended from El Camino Real to Alameda de las Pulgas through today's Highway 92 corridor) became interested in letting go some of its property and sold a large portion south of Arroyo Mocho (Highway 92) to the Club which created three playing fields and a grandstand. The Borels felt reasonably comfortable with the transaction considering many Club members were friends of the family.<sup>120</sup>

By the spring of 1927, competitive polo was underway at Beresford, the old placename for the area, just southwest of incorporated San Mateo. The *Burlingame Advance* divulged that on April 20 the first game of the Pacific Coast Polo Tournament would be played between the Burlingame Blues and the San Mateo Reds at the new field. The February 1, 1928, *Advance* announced a game that would feature a combined Burlingame and San Mateo squad against Rancho San Carlos. Will Tevis would play for the locals while George Gordon Moore surfaced again as a player for the opposition. This may have been the last game at El Cerrito. While the venerable field would still be used for practices, the *Advance* of March 2, 1928, promoting a match against Sands Point, stated that competitions formerly played at El Cerrito would now take place at the "Seminary Avenue field" at Beresford. The Peninsula's old hero was still playing. The *Advance* quoted the *San Francisco Chronicle's* famous sportswriter E.G. Fitzbamon ("Fitz"), "Tevis is still right here and right on edge for a fast and hard polo game

anywhere, any time."<sup>121</sup>

During the late 1920s, polo, and all equestrian sports, while not coming close to pre-war levels, were increasing in popularity, especially on the fields at Beresford. On January 28, 1928, the *Burlingame Advance* depicted this in a somewhat whimsical way when it headlined, "Preferred Polo to Her So She Is Awarded a Divorce." According to the story, Mrs. Helen E. Beal, "society matron of Hillsborough," was successful in a divorce from husband, Carl H. Beal, "wealthy mining engineer, explorer and polo player," after she proved "...her husband preferred playing polo to spending any time in her company." Apparently, he also "forced her to make her own clothes." Judge George Buck granted Mrs. Beal \$750 monthly support and custody of the couple's two children.

Polo could still draw crowds. The July 15, 1929, *Burlingame Advance* described how Will Tevis led his San Mateans against an Army team at Crissy Field in San Francisco. The locals lost in front of an audience of 3,000 spectators.

Equestrian interests received another boost in the south of San Mateo area when the Gymkhana Club was organized in December of 1929. In its first published program, the Club described its holdings as "approximately seventeen acres of land..., admirably located with access to the trails through the hills." On the property was a clubhouse, a half-mile race track, a show ring and "adequate stabling for members...." It was located just east of the Beresford Country Club (today's Peninsula Golf and Country Club). Membership to the Club was "proprietary" and members had to be elected by its Board of Directors. The Club's first president was the well-known Mrs. Nion Tucker. Other original organizers included Will Tevis, and various members of the Tobin, Clark, Fuller and McCreery families.<sup>122</sup>

The Club's first event took place on the weekend of May 24 – 25, 1930. Horse shows were the predominant activity. A portion of the proceeds went to charity. Other events followed, but the main attraction for belonging to



the Club for most members were the facilities catering to their horses and the proximity of the grounds to the many trails that led into the hill country.

### III. Last Gasps in Mid-County

Sadly for equestrians, including the San Mateo Polo Club and the Gymkhana Club, similar problems to those that had afflicted horse owners to the north began to manifest themselves at Beresford. As in Burlingame and Hillsborough, residential real estate development was spreading. Soon new suburban neighbors were squeezing the “horsy set.” They complained frequently enough about annoying flies that in April of 1931, the City of San Mateo issued notices to stable owners quoting its sanitation ordinances. City Manager E.P. Wilsey threatened \$300 fines would be levied unless the horse owners made progress in addressing problems. The notices went to such poloists as Will Tevis and Lindsey Howard plus the Gymkhana Club. The equestrians chose to ignore the message and something the local press labeled as the “San Mateo Stable War” or the “Horse Fly War” ensued for some months. The City Council eventually met with the horse owners in a closed meeting (no press) and compromised on some of the issues. Nevertheless, house building continued and the idea that polo fields and other equestrian activities would continue indefinitely was increasingly in doubt.<sup>123</sup>

However, for the time being activities continued. The October 1933 issue of *The Peninsulan*, a monthly magazine, featured a droll set of sketches depicting the Gymkhana Club’s Annual Show. Mrs. William C. Duncan, who had managed the event for some years, was drawn awarding one of the trophies along with a portrayal of Polly Hutchinson “who took the only spill” during the steeple chase. The magazine also covered polo. Matches at Beresford Field were organized for every Sunday during the season. Top players included Selby McCreery (“back from abroad”), Lindsey Howard and his brother Charlie, aviator Frank Fuller, Jr. of the “Five Flying Fullers” (the Fuller Paint Company



Polo players including William Tevis in 1937. SMCHA 0000.484ZA.010, Superintendent of Schools Collection.

family) and Englishman Eric Tyrell-Martin “who led the Burlingame Four to the summer championship of the Peninsula Polo League....”<sup>124</sup>

*The Peninsulan* maintained that Will Tevis was forming yet another team. The magazine tells us that “the old El Cerrito field” was still in use during the mid-week for “practice affairs.”<sup>125</sup>

As the 1930s rolled on, the country’s Great Depression affected the equestrian activities at South San Mateo more and more. Fewer people could afford to maintain strings of polo ponies or even belong to organizations like the Gymkhana Club. For those who could, there emerged an awareness that this type of elite activity had become tasteless while so many people were suffering.

Far more devastating in its effect was the onset of World War II. Up and down the Peninsula, country clubs went into disrepair while equestrian sports disappeared.

During the post-war period, although country clubs returned to offer tennis and golf to their members, equestrian activities diminished even further. In 1955, developer Conway and Culligan completed housing tracks that had once been the Beresford polo fields.<sup>126</sup> About the same time a new Elks Lodge and Serra High School were built upon the acreage once known as the Gymkhana Club. The El Cerrito polo field in Hillsborough was subdivided for houses. Its clubhouse still exists as home to the Hillsborough Racquet Club.

## F. South Country Polo

### I. Creation of the Menlo Circus Club

For the most part, organized equestrian sports in south San Mateo County have their origins with the creation of the Menlo Circus Club. Its amazing story begins in 1919 when a group of pre-teenage girls from the vicinity of today's Atherton formed their summertime "Riding and Driving Club." In 1920, with help from parents, they staged an outdoor equestrian circus as a charitable benefit for Stanford Children's Convalescent Hospital. Its success led to the Club expanding the event the next year with 42 children participating. Some 3,000 people paid to attend the event. Inspired by the children's good works, in January of 1923, 16 families came together to form the "Menlo Syndicate" whose purpose was to purchase property to create a permanent home for the circus. They were aware of some 19 acres once belonging to Faxon D. Atherton. The Hoitt Boys' School had occupied the parcel, but had suffered a devastating fire. While the main house had been destroyed, there still existed two small dwellings and stables. The Syndicate bought the former school and built a ½-mile track, a circus ring and a grandstand. On March 23, 1923, the families officially organized the Menlo Circus Club as a nonprofit

corporation. Incidentally, this was the same year the town of Atherton incorporated, which now became the hometown for the Club.

The original organizers did not stop with the initial improvements. In 1926, the Club installed tennis courts and a swimming pool. Also that year, President Charles Dumphy joined Club founder Alexander Hamilton and financed the construction of a polo field.<sup>127</sup>

The circus performance during the last year of the decade was still successful. A crowd of 3,000 came out to watch 68 children perform. However, in the 1930s, the event was transformed into the San Mateo National Horse Show and later the Tally-Ho Show.

For polo enthusiasts at the Menlo Circus Club during the pre-World War II era, two knowledgeable men who inspired great appreciation for recreational, equestrian activities ran the stables. They were Bud Heaphy, the saddle horse trainer and manager of the Gymkhana Club at San Mateo, and Harold Himmelmen, operator of the trail horse concession at Yosemite National Park.

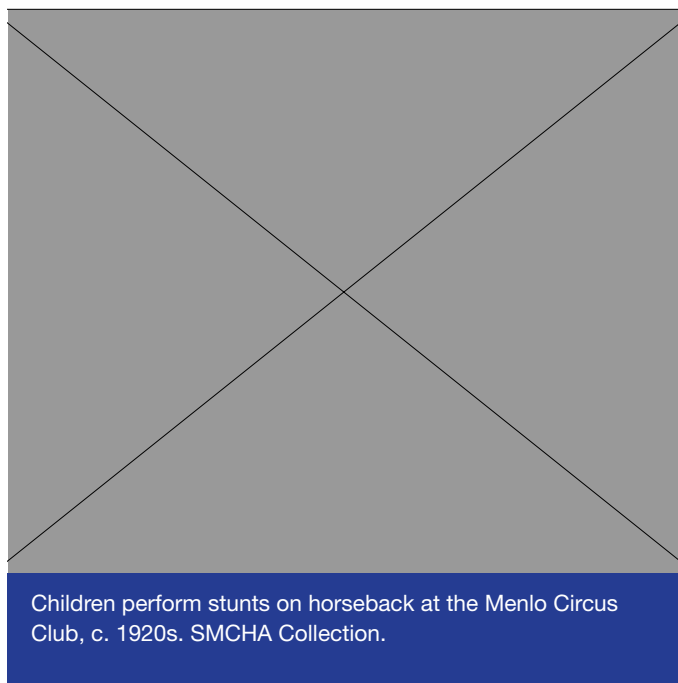
World War II had the same devastating effect on equestrian activities at the Menlo Circus Club as it did on other clubs on the Peninsula. After the War, many of its members preferred other sports such as tennis, which did not require the expense and time involved with caring for horses.

However, as conditions became more difficult on the mid-Peninsula, poloists began to play more frequently on the Menlo Circus Club field. Eventually the old San Mateo Polo Club became the Menlo Polo Club. Starting in the 1950s and clear into the early 1970s, the Menlo Polo Club pulled together teams good enough to gain national recognition for their play.

### II. The Jeff Atkinson Story

Of all the recent polo players, none has been more accomplished than Jeff Atkinson. Jeff was practically born to the sport. He was inspired by his grandfather, Lawrence Clinton (L.C.) Smith, himself an internationally known poloist.

Smith was born in Rutherford, California, in 1903.



Children perform stunts on horseback at the Menlo Circus Club, c. 1920s. SMCHA Collection.

He worked his way up through the building industry and earned a reputation as a key contractor on the Peninsula during World War II. After the War he became a Bay Area force in the construction of sidewalks, streets and highways. Between 1957 and 1969 he accomplished \$250 million in roadwork.<sup>128</sup>

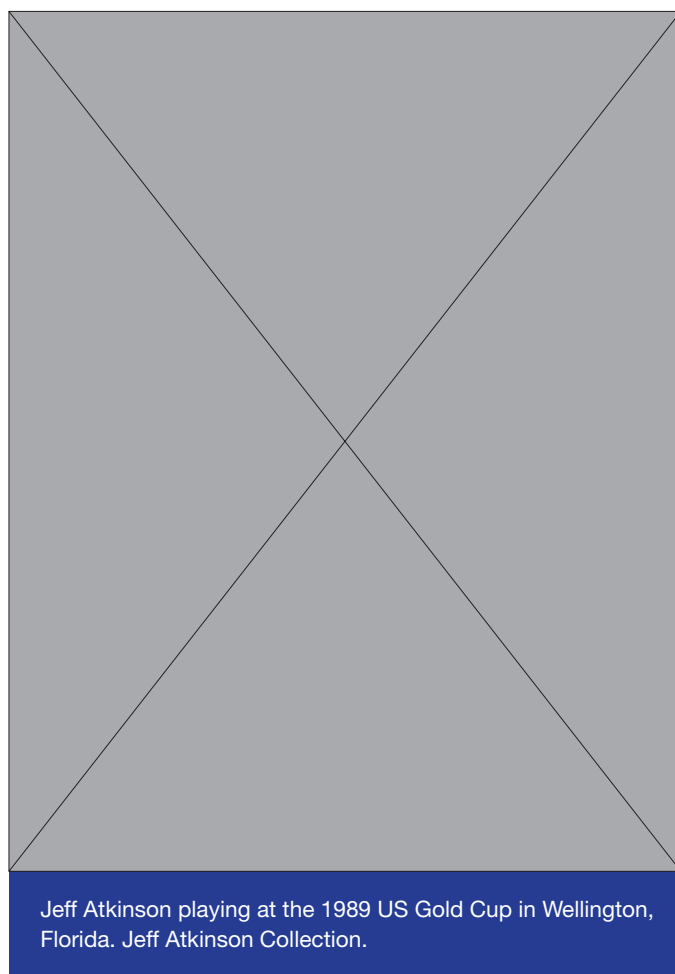
Smith's interest in all things equestrian began when he drove mules in Sonoma County as a teenager. When he decided to settle down in San Mateo County, he bought the Walter S. Hobart, Jr. ranch and residence in the hills between San Mateo and Hillsborough. The love of polo seems to have come with the land.

Smith became a great player and promoter. His sons-in-law were among his first converts to the sport. In an interview for a San Francisco newspaper, Bill Atkinson remembered how Smith introduced him to polo in 1954, while he was on his Hawaiian honeymoon: "The first time I tried it, I knew I was hooked." In the 1979 article, Bill and his wife, Carol, were described as polo pony breeders and trainers on their seven acres of property in Woodside (they also owned a much larger ranch in Santa Clara County). The story explored how Carol had pioneered "the right" of women to play the game, "one of the first three women to break into organized polo."<sup>129</sup>

Smith made a second enthusiast of the game out of his other son-in-law, Glenn Atkinson, and, by doing so, also his grandson Jeff. As a child, Jeff remembers his grandfather, father and uncle playing at San Mateo, but later making the move to the Menlo Circus Club. L.C. Smith organized his own "Team Concar" which competed successfully on the national polo scene. For a time, he was governor of the Pacific Coast region of the United States Polo Association.

Jeff remembers getting his first mallet and playing as an eight year old in 1962, during the same 1962 – 63 season that Team Concar won the U.S. Open. He recalls playing with other kids at the Menlo Circus Club until he was 14. At that young age he began riding with Team Concar in tournaments.<sup>130</sup>

At age 21, Jeff turned professional. In 1976, Jeff moved to Texas and played throughout Texas,



Tennessee, Wyoming, the international high goal winter season in Wellington, Florida, and Argentina. By the late 1980s, he was ranked one of the top 15 players in the United States. On June 9, 1999, Jeff was inducted into the San Mateo County Sports Hall of Fame, the only polo player to have achieved this distinction.<sup>131</sup>

### III. Recent Polo

By 1983, the local south county newspaper, the *Country Almanac*, was able to proclaim that "...polo is alive and well at the Menlo Circus Club." The article described how games were played at 1 p.m. every Sunday and 4 p.m. every Friday from May 1 to the end of October. The club had recently hosted the United States Polo Association tournament. The Menlo Circus Club now encompassed 29 acres and had a membership of 365. The Menlo Polo Club, sort of a club



within a club, had 26 members. Its president, W.M. Jason, was also vice president of the United States Polo Association. Fay Humphreys operated the stables, eight years before one of his ponies won an award for best performance out of 150 horses at a tournament at Palm Desert. The Menlo Circus Club was noted as the only Peninsula club where polo was still played.<sup>132</sup>

The *Almanac* again highlighted the polo scene at the Menlo Circus Club in 2010 when it focused on how the polo field there hosted the first sanctioned United States Polo Association tournament for women. Impressively, 32 players representing eight teams had come to compete over that Memorial Day weekend.<sup>133</sup>

### G. Afterword

Today (2021), the Menlo Circus Club remains the only venue for polo on the Peninsula. It is the last vestige of what had been a vibrant sport demanding statewide and even international attention. Local star players and famous ponies were known the world over. The mid-Peninsula, Burlingame and Hillsborough in particular, saw teams that dominated Pacific Coast play and proved competitive with teams from the islands of the Pacific to England.

As mentioned previously, the San Mateo County Sports Hall of Fame has but one polo player in its ranks — and this a poloist of great skill but from an era far removed from the prime of Peninsula participation.

Not present in the Hall are names like Walter S. Hobart, Jr., Richard M. Tobin, Thomas Driscoll, W.B. Devereux, Tom Lawson and Will Tevis. As the Hall is now a part of the San Mateo County History Museum, someone ought to bring this oversight to the attention of the Museum's director!

### Mitchell P. Postel

Mitchell P. Postel has been the executive director/president of the San Mateo County Historical Association since 1984. He taught history at the College of San Mateo and is a frequent speaker on San Mateo County history. Postel is a member of the San Mateo County Historic Resources Advisory Board, the Board of Directors of the San Mateo Rotary Club and is the immediate past chairman of the San Mateo County Visitors and Convention Bureau. He is the author of seven books on local history.

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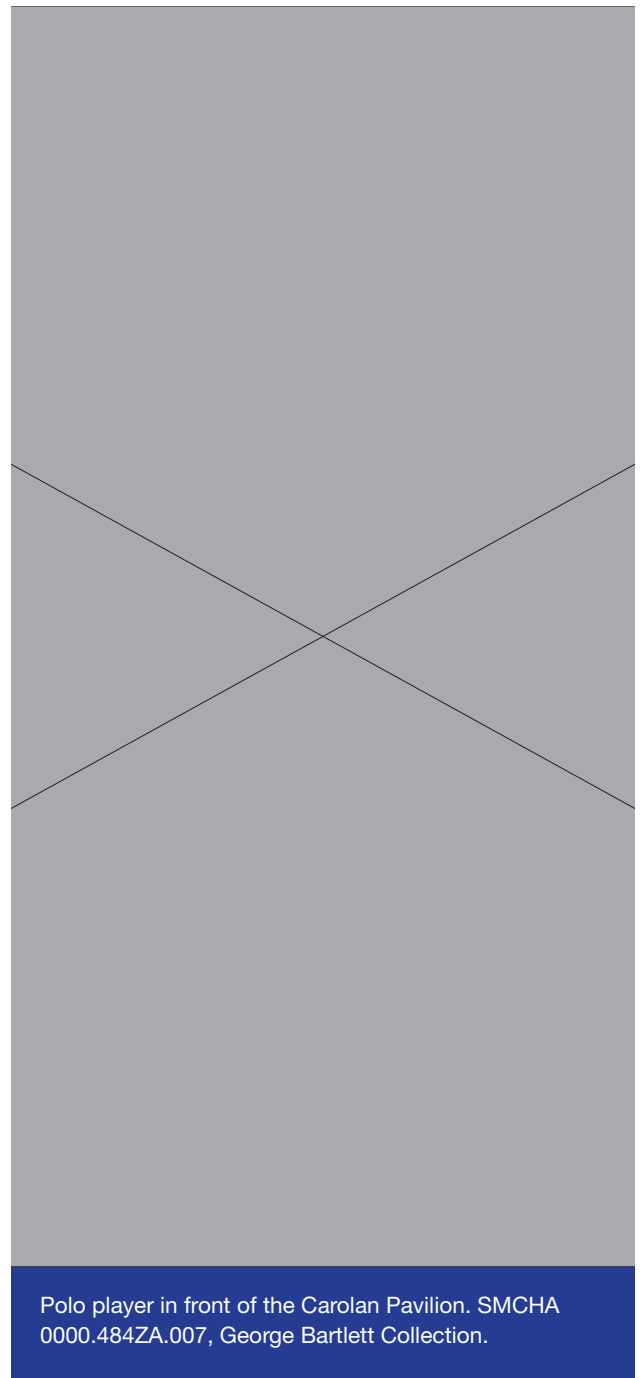
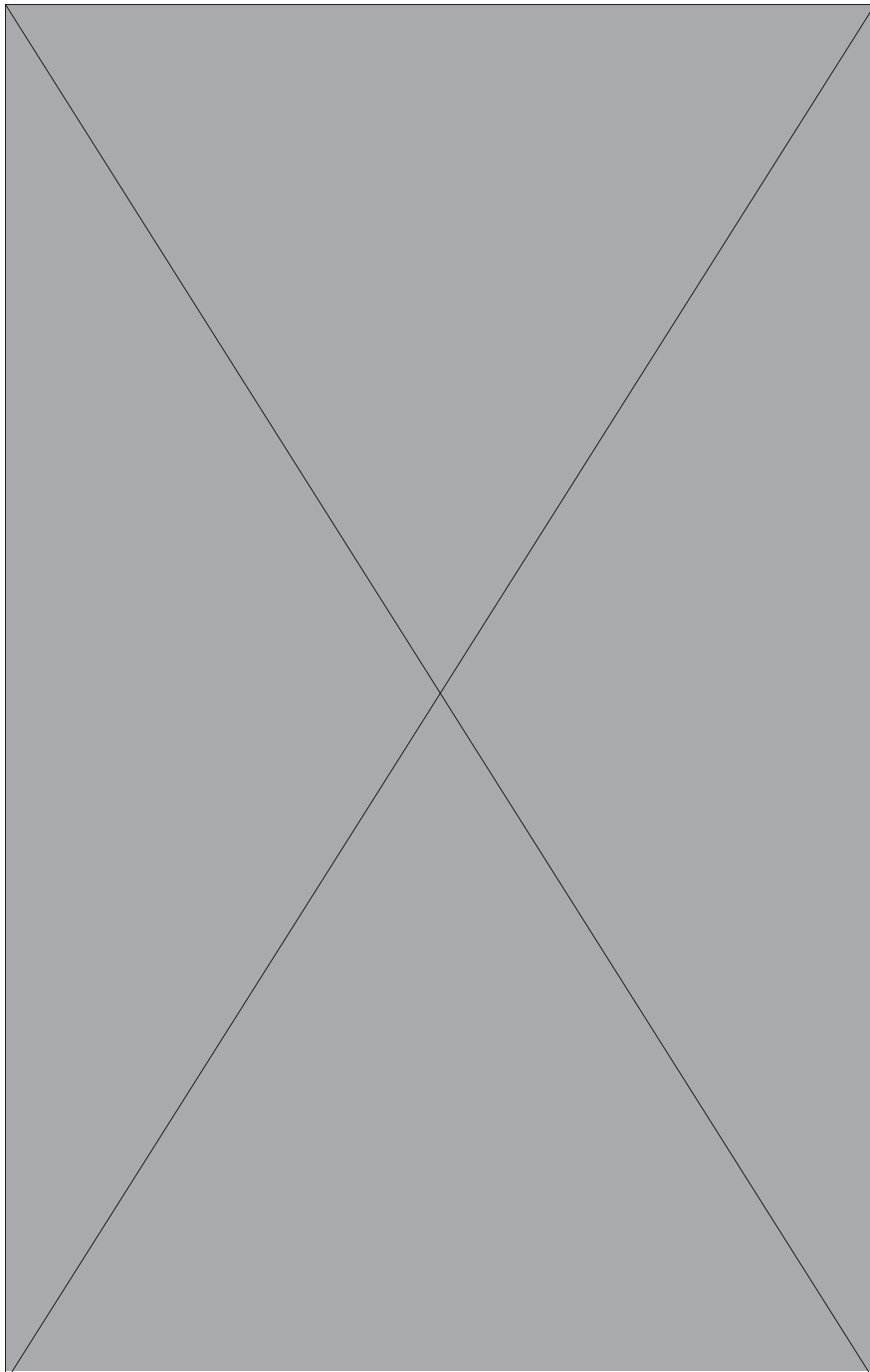
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## Endnotes (continued)

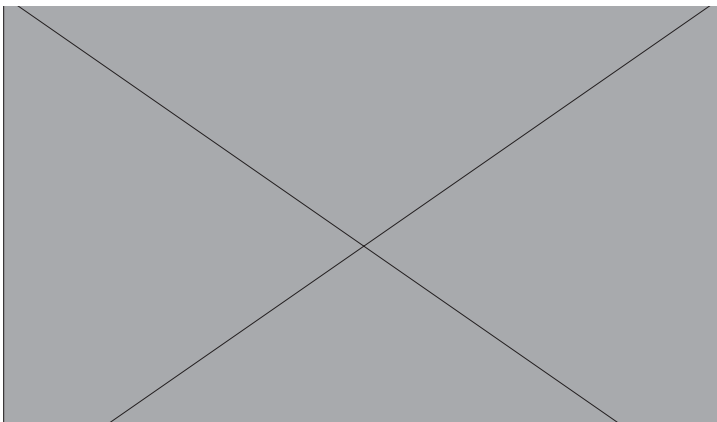
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Polo player in front of the Carolan Pavilion. SMCHA  
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## Dr. Stanger Legacy Society



Dr. Stanger at Millbrae excavation site, 1944.

Dr. Frank Stanger was the first executive director of the San Mateo County Historical Association. Among his accomplishments, he opened the organization's first museum and started publishing *La Peninsula*.

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