



# Foothills

## Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION



### War Relics in the “Valley of Heart’s Delight”

In early 2008, two Palo Alto park rangers patrolling a closed area of Pearson-Arastradero Preserve found a 75mm artillery shell lying next to a deer trail; bomb experts from Travis Air Force Base came down and exploded the shell in place. During the spring of 1990, a ranger found the nose cone of an artillery shell which had been exposed by a tractor disk elsewhere in Pearson-Arastradero Preserve. In the early 1970s, a visitor to Foothills Park found several marble-sized lead balls exposed by recent rains in a park hillside. In 1965, a worker clearing Stanford land for the construction of the children’s hospital found a three-inch diameter rubber plug. Embossed in the plug were the words “REMOVE BEFORE FIRING GUNS.”

In the early years of this century, a community of more than 40,000 existed in what is now part of Menlo Park. The impact of that community on the area at the time can be judged by its size as compared to its neighbors. Menlo Park had a population of 2,700. Palo Alto had about 5,000 inhabitants.

How can a community of this size, located next door, have disappeared, leaving almost no trace of its existence? Why was it here?

In 1917, the U.S. War Department leased 25,000 acres of land in and around Menlo Park to establish a World War I military training center called Camp Fremont. Troops were trained here to fight on the Western Front in France. The camp covered two square miles and was located just the other side of San Francisquito Creek from Palo Alto. It extended to Valparaiso Avenue on the north, to El Camino Real on the east, to Alameda de las Pulgas on the west.

At a construction cost of \$1.9 million, the camp included 12 miles of road, 52 miles of electrical lines, 1000 wooden buildings and 10,000 tents. Facilities included a recreation center, church, theater and post office. It was a small, self-contained city. Menlo Park, which then consisted of only a few square blocks, was engulfed by the camp.

Training for the camp’s occupants consisted of marksmanship, light artillery fire, trench construction, hand grenade and bayonet drills, boxing, and gas warfare

protection. Rifle practice was done in the empty field on the southwest corner of Foothills Expressway and Page Mill Road. The dirt bank on which targets were mounted can still be seen there. Light artillery training was done in and around

the area that has become Foothills Park and Pearson-Arastradero Preserve. Since that time, evidence of artillery activity has been found in several locations.

What was it like for Camp Fremont residents to live in our area in 1917-18? The San Francisco peninsula was a much different place then. Towns were small with their own identity. There were miles of open space between each community. El Camino Real was a beautiful, quiet, tree-lined road. Much of the land was in orchards and in the spring it was impossible to escape the scent of blossoms. The kind of place the San Francisco peninsula used to be is reflected in the title of a film made in 1921 by a San Jose Realtor to promote the area. The title of the film was "The Valley of The Heart's Delight." Believe it or not, in those days San Franciscans used to come to Palo Alto and Menlo Park to vacation and "get away from it all."

Local townspeople went all out to support the troops at Camp Fremont. Social events included a military rodeo and a patriotic songfest. The songfest was held at Stanford and was attended by 10,000 soldiers and 15,000 civilians spectators. It included a band and marching competition as well as a patriotic community sing.



In March of 1918, Russia, in the midst of a civil war, made peace with Germany. The other Allied countries, including the United States, sent troops to Russia to keep tons of war materials out of German hands. Some of the Allies also hoped these troops could somehow be used to put a government in power and restore the Russian war effort against Germany. Five thousand troops from Camp Fremont shipped out via San Francisco and arrived in Vladivostock, Siberia in September of 1918. These men were to spend almost two years living in miserable conditions in box cars. They guarded supplies which had been left out in the weather by the Russian government and so were almost useless.

In November, World War I ended. Camp Fremont was ordered evacuated, and the land returned to the original owners. Many of the building and unneeded supplies were auctioned off, including the YWCA Hostess House which was bought for \$1.00 by the City of Palo Alto. This building had been used as a meeting place for the troops and their friends and families.

The building's architect was Julia Morgan, who was the first woman to earn a certificate in architecture from the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and one of the first female architects in the western United States. She was later to design Hearst Castle.

The Hostess House was moved to its recent site near the train station in 1919. It became the first municipally-sponsored community center in the U.S. During the 1920s, it was the home of the local "little theater" organizations, as well as the site for a variety of public activities, programs and meetings. As the community functions shifted to the Lucie Stern Center in the 1930s, it became a veteran's center. By the late 1970s the building was in such poor condition that it was almost demolished.

In the early 1980s it was restored to its original condition and now houses the local MacArthur Park Restaurant. The building is California Historical Landmark #895 and is said to be the only remaining structure from Camp Fremont. If you dine there, pretend you are a World War I soldier or a family member and look out a window on the Valley of the Heart's Delight.



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