The Big Cut-off
By Don Tuttle

Have you ever heard of the Big Cut-off on the Mad River? Chances are you’ve driven right on it.

During the winter of 1861-62 a series of giant storms pounded the North Coast. The largest floods ever known on most of the rivers were generated, probably even surpassing those of 1964 – although we don’t have gauge readings to confirm it. On the Mad River bottoms many of the farms and trails were inundated for days.

After the floodwaters receded the farmers got together and decided they could reduce future damage by cutting off a big meander of the Mad River. Of course, reclaiming the land for pasture would be a big benefit too.

They decided to eliminate a 1.6-mile-long meander of the river by digging a new channel across its neck. The following description appears in the February 4, 1888 issue of the Arcata Union newspaper under the Then and Now column.

“The summer following the flood...a canal or ditch was cut, commencing near the crossing at the Shaw place that diverted the water of the river from the old channel and made a new one, connecting with the old bed some miles below. Since that time more than 25 years ago (c.1862), the old bed of the river has been dry during the summer seasons, some of it having been converted into fields for pasture and agricultural purposes.”

This meander is shown on the map above, which is a portion of the 1855

Upcoming Events

OLLI Chautauqua at the Phillips House with Jerry Rohde

Saturday, Feb 11 from 2 to 3:30 p.m. The program, Humboldt History Highlights, will feature excerpts from 10 years of OLLI local history programs from Jerry and his wife Gisela. There will also be a short introduction to OLLI and prizes.

HSSA Annual meeting

March 11th at the Plaza View Room, Jacoby Storehouse. Postcards from Arcata: Steve Lazar will discuss his extensive postcard collection and tell us how vintage postcards have the potential to be tools for historical research.
President's Message

From Alex Stillman

The Holiday Tea was lovely, with music by Claire Hashem-Hanlon and Kira Weiss. Fifty-seven mugs from Claudia Israel’s collection were donated to Alec Howard’s Mug Project. Gary Bloomfield shared his editing of a video featuring the Phillips House Museum. The tea, desserts and company were, as always, delicious. It was a wonderful way to honor our world of preservation in 2016.

Claudia and Alec look pleased with the outcome of the mugs

HSSA Board Highlights

- Horel Papers: The process has been going on for 5 weeks and has been organized into groupings. The board voted to donate portions of the Horel collection that do not pertain to the Horel Family, Arcata, or to Northwest CA to an appropriate organization.

- Gary Bloomfield has completed a wonderful video tour of the museum. Be sure to view it on the HSSA website www.arcatahistory.org

- Talks at the museum by Jerry and Gisela Rohde
  - February 11, 2017, Humboldt History Highlights. HSSA will serve tea and cookies. This event will replace the annual Valentine Tea. The museum will re-open February 5th.
  - August 4, 2017, Saloons, Stores and Schools will be presented by the Rohde’s as part of the Pierson Program
  - October 6, 2017, Going Up River: Hark, Hark, the Park

This Place Matters

Claire and Kira played beautiful music for holiday tea guests
**Docents’ Corner**

**Sunday December 4th was cold and raining when I went to the Phillips House to docent.** I didn’t really expect any customers and had taken a good book to read during my two-hour shift. I was surprised to find a car in the parking area with folks waiting for me to open the museum. They came in as I was scurrying around taking the covers off the furniture and setting up. I asked them to sign in, gave a brief introduction and gave them the self-guided tour book. They were an older couple from Eureka, Howard and Gypsy Lamberson, and their adult son.

After I set up the upstairs bedrooms and came back downstairs, Mr. Lamberson approached me in the parlor. He started the conversation by telling me he was last in the house 75 years ago. That got my attention. He said it was in 1940 or 41 when he was about 15 years old. He said that he stopped by to ask Mr. Roberts’ permission to go duck hunting on the marsh below the barns. Howard stated that Roberts always let them hunt, but wanted them to ask for permission each time. He told me that his family home was up Union Street at the crest of the hill and that there was a lot of open ground around the few houses on Union.

I did get him to describe what the area was like in the early 1940s. There was a long milking barn east of Union along what is now Bayside Road where the apartments are located. Where Samoa Blvd., the sports fields and the Creekside Apartments are now was mostly marsh or wetland and, of course, G Street was Highway 101.

Sometimes being a docent can be boring, other times it can be exciting; like when a woman showed up with her four unruly kids and other times it can be really rewarding – especially when you can meet people like Howard.

*Dan Hauser*

**I recently started “docenting” at the Phillips House.** Do you remember the Sunday afternoon in October when it just poured? Well, I was at the Phillips House. While it was raining outside, I was inside enjoying comfort and care, protected from the rest of the world by a structure made of wood. I thought of the concept of “shelter, as in “shelter from the storm.” I could hear the rain buffeting the windows, and I thought about the others who had heard that same sound, same windows, different day, but the same feeling of shelter.

The Philips House has served to provide shelter for so long to so many. They seemed to be right there with me, although I was alone. I felt kinship with the people from the past, sharing that moment as the house transformed for me into a home, and a safe place, a shelter.

Why do I feel that magic of shelter? I am imagining a connection that is not really there, or is it? I am experiencing connection, and transcendence, so important to my sense of being human in this world. I share an experience with people through history as I sit alone, breathing, listening to the rain, in a place where others lived out their lives, worked, cried and touched the door knobs as they went in and out of these rooms. *Nancy Atkinson*
Stories of Place: The Arcata Bottom
Suzanne Guerra and Susie Van Kirk

...it is necessary to know a group’s cultural history and experience in the context of its physical setting. In neither case is it possible to distinguish sharply between cultural factors and the role of the physical environment. The concepts “culture” and “environment” overlap as do the concepts “man” and “Nature.”

Yi–Fu Tuan, Topophilia, 1974

The old barns of the Arcata Bottom and the Eel River Valley are familiar features of the landscape around Humboldt Bay, references to local history. Another way of understanding the Arcata Bottom and, in fact, all of Humboldt Bay, the Eel River delta, and lower Mad River is to view the landscape as an expression of how we deal with water.

This region is traditional Wiyot territory. In 1913, ethnographer L.L. Loud mapped the extent of the Wiyot language, showing village sites overwhelmingly associated with water—rivers, tributary streams, sloughs, and the bay. Sites were identified all along the peninsula from the Mad River to the entrance of Humboldt Bay, the Arcata Prairie and its creeks. Mad River and Liscom sloughs had been the primary transportation corridors across the bottom, used for waterfowl hunting and gathering of materials for food, fiber and medicine.

When planning the Potawot Health Village, on a site that had originally been part of the Mad River floodplain, United Indian Health Services incorporated traditional uses and plantings in its conservation easement and habitat restoration project. This was among the many areas around Humboldt Bay converted to farmland during the 19th century, when the government promoted wetlands reclamation.

Humboldt Bay is one of California’s largest coastal estuaries, estimated to have covered 27,000 acres prior to Euro-American settlement, and about 16,000 acres today. Euro-American settlement had begun in the spring of 1850 in efforts to establish a shipping point for supplies from San Francisco destined for the Northern Mines, and was confined to a narrow coastal strip. The coastal plain surrounding the Bay from the Eel River delta to Mad River was flat with only scattered spruce, while denser forests of cottonwood and willow were limited to riparian areas.

Early Humboldt county agriculture was limited to either stock cattle on the interior prairies or cultivated crops on these flats. Suitable land was quickly appropriated, requiring only the clearing of brush and an occasional spruce tree, and was too wet for redwoods. Sloughs and wetlands were an obstacle, addressed under government reclamation projects to convert “wastelands” which began locally in the 1880s.
In February 1892, Thomas Bair, president of the Bank of Arcata and owner of 200 acres of marshlands west of Arcata, contracted for construction of over 2700 yards of dyke to reclaim all the marsh land and create one farm. That summer the Harpst and Spring Dyke was constructed, beginning just below town and following the course of Butcher slough to the Bay, then to the mouth of Jacoby Creek.

The Arcata Land Improvement Co., incorporated in 1893, began reclamation of 1500 acres near the mouth of Daniels slough. By the fall of 1895, the company was fencing off large tracts into small farmsteads for lease or sale. Under government reclamation programs the state had paid the company $1.25 per acre for land converted from wetlands. Twenty and forty-acre farmsteads, sufficient to support a family, soon replaced the unappreciated biological functions and specialized habitats associated with tidal marshes.

In the last several decades have we begun to study, better understand, and to restore wetlands. As our climate changes and sea levels rise we shall continue to learn how to live with the waterways of home.

---

**The Big Cutoff (continued from page 1)**

Township Plat Map. The south end of the meander was located just north of the current interchange of State Highways 101 and 299, where 299 heads east to Blue Lake. Traces of the meander can be seen in Figure 2, which is a portion of a 1941 aerial photograph. Once the new channel was established and carried the whole flow of the river, farmers cleared the land of the old channel and converted it to pasture. Many acres of wetlands, river habitat used by anadromous fish, and riparian vegetation used by birds and wildlife were changed forever.
Membership Form: Historical Sites Society of Arcata

Name: ______________________________________________________
Address: ___________________________________________________
City: ___________________________ State: ________________________ Zip Code: __________________
Phone: __________________________ email_________________________

___($25) Individual  ___($35) Family  ___($100) Preservation Partner

___(  ) Additional contribution

My gift is (  ) in honor of________________________ (  )in memory of______________________________

Please provide contact information so we can notify honorees.

To join HSSA send your dues to:
Historical Sites Society of Arcata
PO Box 4521
Arcata, CA 95518