

The Flying Y Ranch

Located in Mill Valley, near the top of the Dipsea Stairs, this property was once part of the Throckmorton Ranch. By the time Mill Valley was formed, it was sold off as "Ranch 5" on the Tamalpais Land and Water company's map. It later became the Hillside Dairy.

In the 1950s, it became an 11-acre horse boarding ranch. The 4-H Valley Riders fixed up the buildings on the rundown dairy on Sequoia Valley Road, turning it into the Diamond 4-H Ranch.

In the mid 1960s, Rena Yates leased the ranch and began operating a lesson and boarding program. She named it the Flying Y Ranch.

The ranch had 7 horses when Rena took over, and she started a lesson program with horses that had been given to her. The property had a lower barn with a hay room attached, an upper barn, a ranch house, an arena made out of old tires, a feed silo, several pastures and other structures.

In the 1980s the property was developed as Walsh Estates.

Top photo 1937 by Richard O'Hanlon, courtesy of O'Hanlon Center for the Arts and the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library. Photos of "Lucky" at the lower barn and "Lucky" jumping courtesy of Rena Yates from 1966.



1) 2016 Tamara, Mrs. Yates and Karen.
2) Tinak in front of the hay barn, 1970s.

Memories of the Flying Y Ranch

What I remember most about the Flying Y Ranch was a feeling of excitement. I began riding with Mrs. Yates when I was about 10 years old in the early 1970s. Despite the weather, usually howling winds and fog, it was always an adventure to be there. Part of the adventure was not knowing which horse was your ride that day; it might be Lucky (a descendant of Man o' War), Tinak the naughty pony, Sniffer, Holy Smoke, Feather, Risha, September, Thunder, Ajax, April or maybe Rolls Royce the former racehorse!

Straight from school, our crew of horse crazy girls would race to the ranch by any means available — by foot, car or bus (not always available), occasionally by thumb. Mrs. Yates ran the lesson program with a firm hand. I still marvel at how she kept us all in line, completely outnumbered by our wild band, but she did! We learned to ride quickly — if you didn't fall off at the trot, you advanced to the canter. Stay on at the canter and move up to Quadrille lessons.

At 13, I wore my parents down and we went looking for a horse. We visited one in Muir Beach, a very skinny untrained 5 year old Arabian gelding named Sonny. Sonny hadn't been handled much, never ridden, but he seemed docile and sweet. It was a rainy winter and he was living in a small muddy paddock with no shelter, he had lice and a bloated belly. We felt badly for him, so that day my Mom and I drove to Point Reyes to buy him some hay. Over the next few rainy nights I couldn't stop thinking about him, and convinced myself he'd be the perfect horse.

Later that week, along with a posse of kids led by Mrs. Yates's daughter Blanche, we rode down to Muir Beach and Blanche ponied Sonny back to the Flying Y Ranch.

We began ground training with Mrs Yate's leading the way. After several months of groceries, Sonny was back in good health but not so sweet and docile. His true nature was quite high spirited, thus my riding education began in earnest!

It was a different time for kids, with much freedom and sparse supervision. No helmets or adults required. Often we would breeze out Dias Ridge to Frank's Valley or Muir Beach, jumping our horses over the coyote bushes and galloping full out up the hillsides. A favorite was riding the treacherous Pipeline trail to Mountain Home Inn where we could tie up and head to the bar for lemonade and potato chips. From there we continued up Mount Tam's steep Hogsback trail to Westpoint Inn, or the Double Bow Knot trail along the old Gravity Car tracks.

Linda and Mike lived at the ranch house with their kids Sandi and Scott. Their house was like eternal summer camp and our gang would often migrate into the house before or after our rides. Games to be played, stories to be told. When they moved away, playwright Sam Shepard moved in with his family. Mrs. Yates had met Shepard through their interest in the philosopher Gurdjieff.

I met up with Rena Yates recently, I hadn't seen her since the late 1970s. We shared stories, and the longer we talked the more interesting details she recalled. I was surprised she still remembered which stall my horse Sonny had, "2nd to the left"! We spoke about the adventures of Billy the Goat, Tinak, Lucky, Ghariseyn the stallion, and many other fondly remembered horse and people. She still has the old Flying Y Ranch sign, and now lives with her sons in Petaluma.

- Karen Johnson



Nostalgia: The Flying Y, Ralph the Crow and Billy the Goat

For me, in my twenties, it was an age when I knew more animals than people. In the early 1970s I lived at the Flying Y Ranch with Scott, Sandi and Linda. The Flying Y consisted of 11 acres of hillside, the occasional eucalyptus tree, a tottering goat shack and a three bedroom home that was apparently designed and constructed by the same firm that built the goat shack. You got there by navigating a steep, unpaved road, a good portion of which turned into a sinkhole in the winter.

Just across the house from the top of the road there was an old dairy barn where we kept the horses who merited stalls. Next to that there was a horse riding area ringed entirely by discarded automobile tires. On a hot day the tires heated up. The scent of the hot rubber mixed with the omnipresent and pungent stink of horse manure created an unforgettable summer bouquet.

When we moved into the Flying Y we inherited an ancient, shaggy, oversized, off-white goat named, with a singular lack of originality, Billy. Billy had the disposition of a Stoic, a stomach made of iron suitable for digesting everything from bramble to stones. Also, a taste for poetry. The way it worked was, I'd write a poem, go out to Billy's shack, read the poem to him, then submit it to his literary tastes. As near as I can figure, Billy ate the poems he liked.

We also had a wild talking crow named Ralph who would come to visit us regularly. He didn't have an extensive vocabulary, but the fact that he had a vocabulary at all was most impressive. His vocabulary consisted of the word "ralph". I'd listen while he poured out the chronicle of his day, dreams and aspirations he somehow managed to cram into his tiny little crow heart. And he did so using just his one word, which he combined with an astonishing array of gestures and intonations. Just so, can one sound become an encyclopedia or a symphony.

And there were horses... an endless herd of horses, each unique. My own horse, Tennyson, was a roan Tennessee Walker with a splashy white blaze and three white socks. Tennyson was good friends with Mocha, the floppy eared goat who inherited Billy's shack, but not Billy's position as editor. Mocha loved to ride with Tennyson and me as we cantered across the Dias, dropped down the valley near the slopes of Mount Tam and trotted through Tinkerbelle's Ranch, on the way to Muir Beach.

- Michael Metyer



- 1) Original Flying Y Ranch sign
- 2) Tamara DeBarssi with Sugar, 1970s
- 3) Sandi Soarse with Ohyhee Brave. 1970s
- 4) Suzie Olson and the old ranch house, 1970s



Scott Goldberg: The ranch was a great place to live. You could ride anywhere on your horse. We did this as kids without adults. The house was always wide open with kids and animals running through it. As kids, we would walk down the Dipsea steps to downtown for the heck of it although it was a lot of steps coming back. I can't imagine parents letting their kids do that today.

Some things that about the ranch that I remember are the saddle soap parties where everyone cleaned their gear while sitting around the house. We also slept out in the shavings/rice hulls quite a bit with everyone spending the night. There were dance hops in the house, charades, playing lots of card games, and the hair brushing line where everyone sat in a line and brushed the hair of the person in front of them.

I also remember the kids who would streak topless, or shirts open, in front of the Dipsea runners as they practiced for the run.

The daily riding lessons (and some life ones also) that Rena taught and we joined in whenever we were allowed was a lot of fun. Rena had a voice that could carry forever and you would never want her yelling at you. It was really fun when she had the quadrille class.

I don't know how the adults kept the ranch running as smoothly as it did because when I think about it, I think it was held together with gum, string, and baling wire. In wintertime, the driveway turned into one big mud pit with holes that could swallow a car. I remember quite a few cars getting stuck.

Sam Shepard boarded his horse Red Cloud there and eventually lived there for a while after we left.

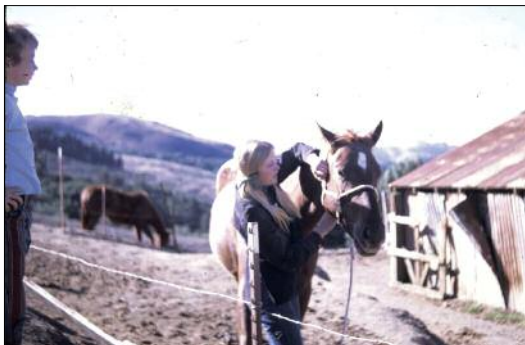
Reflecting back on it, it was amazing place at the time. It was a melting pot where everyone was there because of their love of horses. The Flying Y puts its stamp on all of us by the people who were there and the lessons we learned.

Tamara DeBarssi: I think of the good times at Flying Y every time I drive up Mt Tam. Mrs Yates was eccentric and amazing. I learned some important life lessons from her. Like how to squeeze 9 people, 1 dog and 2 saddles in to a VW bug. And how to sweet talk your way out of a driving ticket when never stopping at a stop sign.

Kathy Balms Kiefer: It was a magical place for me because it was where the horses lived. At first, my family could afford one lesson every other week. If it rained on my day, and lessons were cancelled, I cried. After several years, a miracle happened. Mrs. Yates let me ride a three year old named Chantilly. Only problem was there were not enough saddles. I fell off regularly and that wind blown ring was not soft. Many year later, Hilda Guerney, an Olympic dressage equestrian, commented that I had "an elegant seat". All due to Mrs. Yates, Chantilly, and all the other horses.

Other than the horses, what I remember most was the cold blowing fog. After an afternoon at the Ranch, I usually ate dinner in my jacket. But when it was clear, the "million dollar view" from the Ranch was spectacular.

When I think back, it amazes me how Mrs. Yates kept the Ranch going. Once a group of us painted the lower barn as a surprise for Mrs. Yates. But she pretty much ran the place by herself. My experiences at the Ranch shaped me, and I am so very grateful. It was everything to me as a horse crazy child (who still rides five days a week as she nears 60).



1970s: 1) Scott Goldberg on Kitty 2) Scott and John Yates in the arena 3) Maureen Pinto, Lower Barn Hay room. 4) Jesse Shepard & Maureen above the falling apart Upper Barn.

Flying Y Ranch Celebrity Tidbits

Linda & Michael Metyer met Lawrence Ferlinghetti at a feed lot in Point Reyes. He accepted their invitations to go trail riding from the Flying Y Ranch up Mt. Tam.

Rena Yates recalls giving riding lessons to actor Sterling Hayden in preparation for a movie role. Sterling learned to ride, but did not get the role.

The Doobie Brothers rented horses at the Flying Y Ranch for the album cover shoot of Stampede. The photos of them riding horses were taken on Dias Ridge.

Actor/playwright Sam Shepard and his family lived at the ranch house for several years prior to it being developed into Walsh Estates.

