

# The Novato Historian

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*Preserving Novato's History*

## Feature Section

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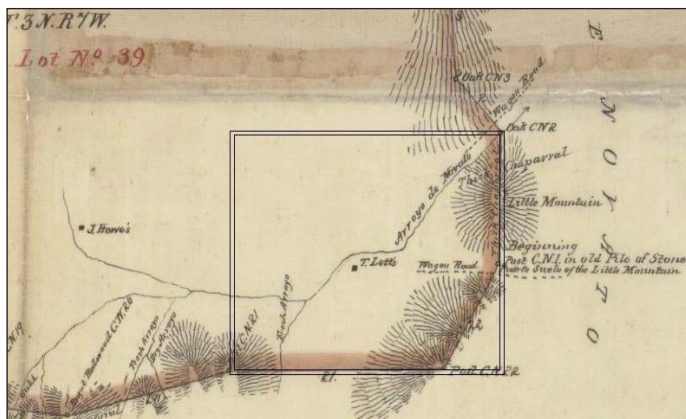
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# The History of Stafford Lake

by May Rodgers Ungemach, 1993

In spring, Stafford Lake sparkling like a jewel in its setting of emerald green hills looks very much like a natural wonder. Actually, until just over four decades ago, that area now covered by the lake was the site of pioneer John Redmond's ranch home and pasture for dairy cattle as far as the eye could see.

John Bernard Redmond, born in Ireland in 1819, went to South America at the age of 26 where he worked for merchants Warlington & Templeman. Several years later, he moved to San Francisco when the firm opened a branch there. In 1850, he started his own mercantile business which he operated successfully for 14 years.



*This map is from the Plat of the Rancho Corte Madera de Novato, dated July 1859. Depicted on the map is T. Lett's home, who was living on the property before Redmond bought the 640 acre parcel in 1864.*

In 1853, John Redmond married Joanna Walsh and fathered seven children, five of whom survived. No doubt the welfare of their offspring inspired Mr. and Mrs. Redmond to leave the big city. In 1864, the family moved to a 640 acre ranch on Hicks Valley Road in Marin County. John Redmond may have been unaware that the land he had purchased was originally part of two Mexican land grants – Corte Madera de Novato and Rancho Nicasio.

In the years that followed his move to Marin County, J.B.

Redmond became known as one of the finest ranchers in the area. In 1888, the Marin Journal reported the Redmond "place is a delight to the eye – 640 acres in a square body, a portion of it under a high state of cultivation. Mr. R. is not at all bashful about using fertilizers. Everywhere about the place one sees indications of nature yielding bounteous returns to intelligent, liberal management – plenty to eat for man and beast. The barn, in which his horses and cows are housed, 104 x 68 feet, is the finest in the county. The walls of his dairy building, two feet thick, are filled in with sawdust with two feet of same on the roof. The temperature within in the hottest days of summer is that of an ice house. Under such conditions butter making is an assured success."

In addition to dairy cattle, there were on the Redmond Ranch "imported Southdown sheep, peacocks, golden pheasants, game chickens, quail and Indian curiosities as well as a number of willows raised from a slip cut from the one over Napoleon's tomb at St. Helena." Near the Redmond home, "two streams of delicious water in close proximity to each other burst forth from the hillside at the rate of 84,000 gallons a day. The flow could easily be increased to 100,000 gallons and there is no abatement of the supply on the hottest days of summer. A gentleman of wealth and leisure could gratify his wildest fancies here in the proprietorship of an artificial lake on 17 acres, filled with speckled trout, bordered with water lilies, and covered with miniature gondolas drawn by swans." As far as the lake is concerned, that reporter of more than a century ago would be amazed today to find much of his or her fantasy has become a reality.

In March 1888, John B. Redmond was appointed Postmaster at Black Point. (Novato Post Office was renamed Black Point from 1865 until 1891.) A Marin Journal reporter wrote: "The prospect is very good that if Mr. Redmond holds office the usual term of four years, he will see it grow to the third post office in amount of business in Marin County."

The 1888 edition of the Marin Journal noted that young Mary Redmond, an amateur astronomer, got up at 4 a.m. to observe Halley's Comet "about 20 degrees above the eastern

horizon, in the square of Pegasus.” She was said to be the first person in Marin County to see the new comet.

After John Redmond’s death in 1893, his daughter Bertha married neighboring rancher, Daniel James Ryan. The bride was 30 and the groom 41. Dan Ryan, a native of Limerick County, Ireland, came to California via the Isthmus of Panama at the age of 21, made a brief stop in Contra Costa County, and then located permanently in Marin County. The 1894 Great Register of Marin County voters describe him as 5’11” tall, with a dark complexion, gray eyes and hair.



*Photo courtesy of the Grossi family: This is an original painting of the ranch painted prior to 1952. The calf barn, lean-to shed and the bunk house were moved across Hicks Valley Road (now Novato Blvd).*

Bertha and Dan Ryan assumed management of her family’s ranch. Their children, Daniel, Jr., and Agatha, were born there and attended Novato Grammar School.

It appears Bertha’s sister Agatha preceded their father in death since she was not named as an heir to his estate. Sisters Mieda Redmond and Mrs. Mary (Redmond) Zicovich became San Francisco residents. Several years after John Redmond’s death, his son John, Jr., relinquished his share of the estate and apparently left Marin County at least until 1930 when his name appeared on the voter registry as a laborer residing in Novato. According to records, Dan Ryan eventually acquired the shares of the Redmond Ranch held by his wife’s sisters.

It was around 1895 that Hermann Rudolff moved onto the Redmond/Ryan ranch, leasing a residence that had been built in 1861. (A fire destroyed the building in 1938.) The following year, Hermann’s bride Martha joined him. After a couple of years of making cheese and butter on the ranch, Mr. Rudolff established his own business, the New York French Cheese Factory on Railroad Avenue in Novato. He became a Judge and one of Novato’s most prominent citizens.

In 1903, Dan Ryan leased his Novato ranch to Dominico Grossi and moved to Santa Clara with his wife and children. Mr. Grossi operated a dairy on the property for 14 years, and then purchased his own ranch nearby.

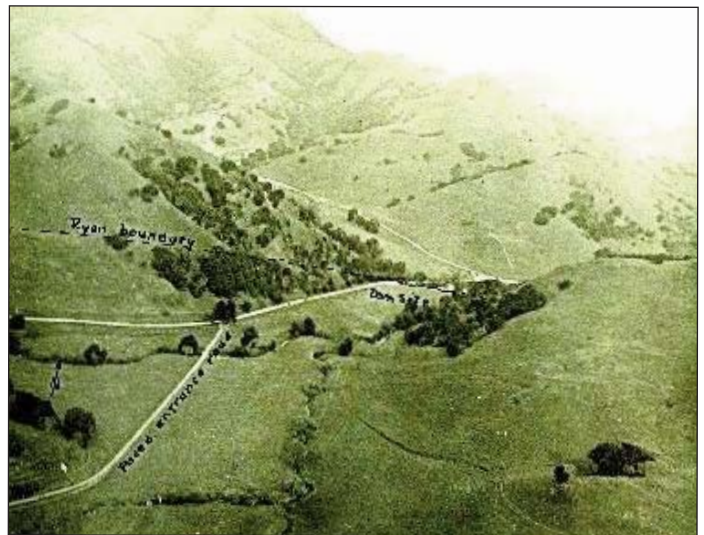
At that time, Mr. and Mrs. Ryan leased their ranch to the

Mendonca family and rented an apartment in San Francisco. Weekends, however, found the Ryan family once again in their ranch home and daughter Agatha riding her horse over the familiar fields, hills and creek beds. Undoubtedly Dan Ryan, Sr., made additional trips to his ranch during the week to fulfill his responsibilities as a director of the first Novato Bank which opened for business in 1913, and as a trustee of the Burdell School District. Dan, Jr., remained in San Francisco where he operated a bar.

In the spring of 1934, Agatha and her parents left San Francisco and moved back to their ranch. Within days of their return, death claimed Daniel Ryan, Sr. His widow passed away the following year.

Dan, Jr., returned to the ranch to supervise the dairy operation. Those who remember him say he was a charming man who had incredibly bad luck with his investments causing him to come very close to losing the Ryan Ranch to creditors. Somehow, his sister Agatha rescued the property and took charge of the dairy with the help of Mr. Mendonca’s son-in-law, Tony Martenz. Dan, Jr., is believed to have left the area. He died in 1964 and is buried with his parents in Mt. Olivet cemetery near San Rafael.

The formation of the North Marin Water District in 1948 to allow for purchase of the Novato Water Company brought permanent change to the Ryan Ranch. Soon after the District was created, voters of North Marin approved bond issues for improvement of the water system and construction of a dam. The excellent watershed and proximity to Novato Creek made the Ryan property an ideal site.



*Photo showing Ryan Ranch boundary; the proposed dam site is in the middle of the picture. The road from the middle of the picture to the left is Novato Blvd.*

Agatha was reluctant to part with her land but the best interest of the community prevailed. About 1950, she sold off the cattle and dairy equipment and built a new home on the hillside. An old friend, Mrs. Frances Bond McGlaulin, paid Agatha a visit which she later described in her column “Down Memory Lane” in the Feb. 26, 1964 edition of the Novato Advance. She



wrote: "My brother and I were guests at the beautiful old Ryan Ranch in the Novato Hills... The sweeping vista seen from each well-placed window of the home looks out on rolling hills and peaceful valleys... Cattle browse peacefully at a distance and

until it became the Burdell School in 1903. For safety reasons, the school was moved away from the dam, across the road onto a



*Bulldozers and carryalls dig into the bed of Novato Creek in construction of the dam.*



*Photo from the Grossi collection: The Burdell School was moved to a knoll on the Grossi Ranch overlooking Stafford Lake. On Sunday, November 23, 1958 a fire destroyed the historic one-room school.*

around all the encircling ring of the distant mountains of the Coast Range. The friendly dogs bounce to the gate to meet you and the surroundings are quiet with the unbroken stillness of good country living."

Miss Agatha, the last remaining member of the Ryan family of Novato, died in 1987, at the age of 91. The Redmond/Ryan ranch is presently owned by the Tocalino family.

Stafford Dam was completed in 1951. Before the new lake, called Novato Creek Lake, covered the valley, a few buildings were moved and the rest were torn down. One of the latter was the home of George and Mary Grossi. About 1953, they sold 66 acres of their land to the North Marin Water District for expansion of the lake. Mr. And Mrs. Grossi moved across the road into a house that had been located on First Street in downtown Novato. The owner was Elsie Andersen whose husband,

knoll on Grossi land. The foundation and its twin sentinel trees still remain at their original location. The little one-room schoolhouse remained active until 1958 when it was torched by vandals.

The new dam and lake were not formally dedicated or named until November 1, 1955, when directors of the Water District unanimously approved the name Stafford Dam and Lake in honor of Dr. Charles D. Stafford. Dr. Stafford was President of the first North Marin Water District Board of Directors elected in 1948 and worked tirelessly throughout the difficult period of constructing the dam and improving Novato's water system. He continued to serve as President until his death in October 1955.



*Photo of the Grossi home, which was moved from First Street to the Grossi ranch next to Stafford Lake. Here the house is about to cross the Novato Blvd. bridge.*

Gordon, opened the first auto agency in Novato in 1926. Mr. and Mrs. Grossi bought the house from Mrs. Andersen around 1950 and moved it to their ranch across from the present Stafford Dam and Lake.

In the shadow of the dam, on David Leveroni's property, stood a small building that had been the Burdell Cheese Factory



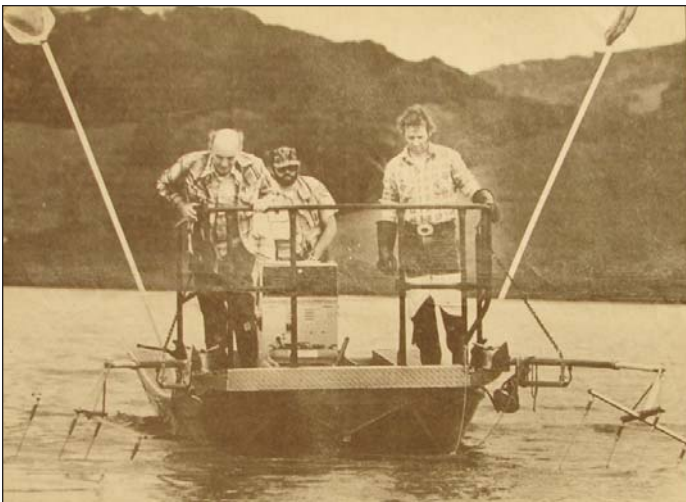
*This recent picture is where the old school house was located when it burned. The location is just east of the entrance to Stafford Lake Park. The chain link fence which was installed around the burned school can still be seen. Look for the sign that says "fire wood for sale"; the school was right behind the Oak tree.*



The Manager of the Water District and the five members of its Board of Directors have been extraordinarily diligent and farsighted in their efforts to protect and expand the water supply for North Marin residents. Development of the ranchlands surrounding Stafford Lake would threaten not only the purity of the lake but the very existence of its 8.3 square miles of watershed. To prevent that from happening, the District has entered into agreements with the ranchers in the area, allowing their cattle to graze on Water District lands and providing the ranchers with water in times of drought. As long as the ranchers are able to continue their family dairy operations, there will be no new development.

A portion of Water District property has been leased to Indian Valley Golf Club, Inc. for 99 years. The club provides an attractive recreational enhancement adjacent to the lake.

In 1971, acreage west of the lake purchased by Marin County and a portion of North Marin Water District property were combined to create Stafford Lake Park. The agreement signed by the County and the Water District allowed the County



*State Fish and Game biologist Bill Cox (center) sends an electric current into the waters of Stafford Lake as Bill Wilson (left) and John Eyer of the North Marin County Water District watch for stunned carp to scoop up, tag and release. It was all part of a survey of rapid increases in the lake's carp population – a sore subject for both anglers and water district officials.*

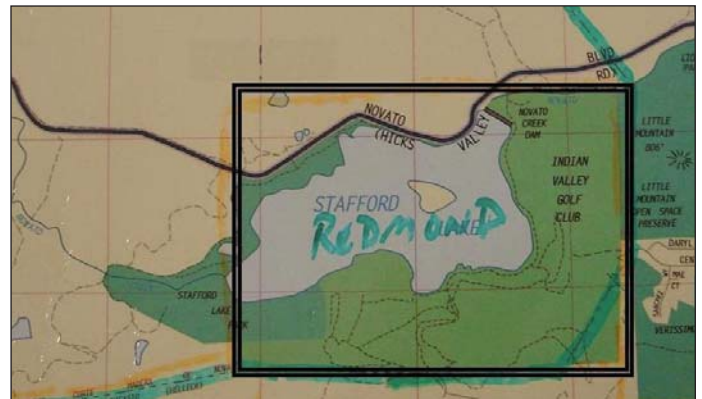
to maintain and operate a park for a period of fifty years subject to strict requirements intended to protect District facilities and the water supply. The 139-acre park can readily accommodate up to 3,000 people and provides fishing, barbecuing, nature trails, a children's play area and other amenities.

In 1984, it became necessary to raise the crest of the dam eight feet and to drain Stafford Lake in order to repair the toe drain at the base of the dam. Manager John O. Nelson had to rely on his ingenuity to solve the problem of removing and disposing of tons of fish, primarily carp that had accumulated in the lake. Many of the fish had at one time been pet goldfish deposited in the lake by people who couldn't or didn't care to keep them any longer. Having read about a former Vietnamese Colonel residing in California who was particularly adept in the art of fishing, Mr.

Nelson suggested giving the Colonel free rein to catch and keep as many as possible from the partially drained lake. The Colonel reaped a harvest of 30,000 lbs. of carp and everyone was well satisfied with the arrangement.

In keeping with the Water District's ongoing concern for the protection of the watershed, an extensive erosion control program was implemented in the mid-1980's.

Employees at the Stafford Treatment Plant began using a computer-based maintenance management program in 1990, to assure the continued excellence of water quality.



*Current map shows where Redmond ranch was and where Stafford Lake is now.*

Recently, the District commissioned a study of the seismic stability of Stafford Dam. An engineering firm concluded that the Dam could withstand an earthquake as powerful as the San Francisco quake of 1906.

From 1948 when there were just 500 consumers, to the 17,197 Novato consumers served today, the Manager and Board of Directors have guided the North Marin Water District with wisdom and foresight. If pioneer John B. Redmond were alive today, he would most certainly approve the manner in which his property has evolved and the thoughtful care that has been shown by its present custodians.

Stafford Dam and Lake will be a source of pride and pleasure for generations to come.



*A view of Stafford Lake from Indian Valley Golf Club looking towards the dam.*