

The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum, and the Hamilton Field History Museum



Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

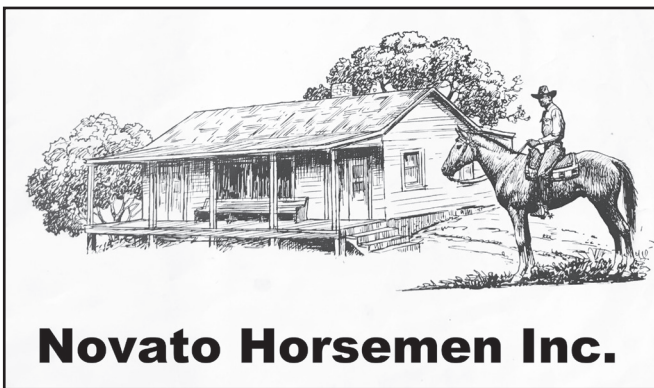
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The Novato Historian

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Novato Horsemen Riding Club



Novato Horsemen Inc.

By Michael Read

During the summer of 1942 a group of horsemen frequently met and many of their meetings terminated with the remark, "We should organize a riding club." Nothing was done about it until one day Joe Patnode, an ardent horseman and owner of several thoroughbreds racing on local tracks, sent forth the word that a meeting was going to be held Sunday morning, November 1, 1942, on the Bar-Kan Ranch. (Hans Barkan ranch would later be owned by Sil Olivas, owner of Exposition Fish Grotto No. 1 on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, called Rancho Del So Lo, it is now known has Parkhaven Estates.)

All interested in forming a riding club were invited to attend and plan its organization. Nine riders met that Sunday

under the huge oak tree near the ranch gates. These nine formed the nucleus of the club. A building on the Tharp ranch was offered as temporary quarters for the club and members promptly offered the necessary furnishings.

Club Formed

The horsemen decided it was a good idea to organize a club for riding, and that was done under the oak trees on the ranch on December 14th 1942. However, it soon became evident that the club could not continue meeting under the trees, especially during the rainy weather of the winters. Among the 16 charter members of the club were Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Tharp of 775 Atherton Avenue. The Tharp's had a long stable on their 24 acres on Atherton Avenue. It was designed long and narrow so that it could be cleaned from one end to the other with a tractor scoop. They volunteered the use of one end of this stable for a meeting place for the club. One stall was removed, and the hay that was stored at the west end of the stable was moved back. The club met there for two years.

On Dec 18, 1942 the *Novato Advance* reported: "RIDING CLUB ELECTS OFFICERS SUNDAY." Following a "ride" on last Sunday, members of the Novato Horsemen's Club (newly- adopted name) met at the home of Mrs. Wayne Tharp for a general meeting and election of officers and signing of the constitution and by-laws. Officers elected were: President, Joe Patnode; Vice President, A. F. Page; Secretary-Treasurer, Mrs. Wayne Tharp; Publicity, Mrs. Dal Ruhlman. Original signers of the club's constitution and by-laws were; Mrs. C. M. Wagner, Mrs. Dal Ruhlman, Dallyce Ruhlman, Ermyl Tharp, Anita Arnold, Mrs. Wayne Tharp, Joe Patnode, A. F. Page, and Mrs. Halmeyer, who drew up the by-laws of the club."



Members of the Novato Horsemen posed for their picture shortly after the club was founded in 1942. Among those present are, from left, Stan Crandall, Dal and Dallyce Ruhlman, Joy Gaston, Vern and Tony Gaston, and Loretta Westcott. At right are Jackie Hunt, Mrs. Joe Mendonce and Joe Jr. Merle Tharp was also a member, and the club met at her home until a clubhouse was built on Bugeia Lane.

Novato Horsemen Riding Club



1944 start of the three day ride on Labor Day. In front of the Military Academy (Fosters Estate) where the lumber for the original clubhouse came from. Dallyce Rohlman Sand is 3rd from the left and Loretta Westcott is 6th from the left.

Interest grew and in no time at all the members were talking about buying a piece of property and building their own club house. A committee with Sid Loewenthal as chairmen, was appointed to find a suitable site. A beautiful piece of land, comprising about four acres, with a wooded knoll suitable for the club house and the remainder a level field, was found on the Bugeia Ranch. A picnic was planned and held on the property so that the members could see for themselves the desirability of this particular spot. In a short time, enough money was subscribed to pay cash for the property. Each of the 16 members of the club donated \$100 and that was enough to purchase four acres from John Bugeia on Bugeia Lane for \$1,600. The club bought the property on October 1944. (The Bugeia's bought the famous horse Kenilworth in 1914 from Stover Estate for use as stud. Kenilworth is buried in a cemetery on the Bugeia Ranch.)

Annual Labor Day Ride

In September 1944 the Novato Horsemen's had a three-day ride to the coast over Labor Day was the high light of the year's activities and became an annual event. Thirty-one riders left San Rafael Saturday morning. Horses had been stabled Friday night in the huge barn on the grounds of the Marin School for Boys. The trail led over the abandoned railroad right of- way to Fairfax thence over Marin Municipal Water District property to Bolinas. At Bolinas the horsemen were given the use of the spacious grounds of the Frederick Waller place, where they spent the night. Sunday morning the caravan rode on to Pt. Reyes. Camp was made on the Genazzi ranch.

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The last lap of the ride was made Monday morning when riders headed back to their various destinations. An impromptu horseshow took place on October 22, 1944 at the new Bugeia ranch. This would give horse loving people an opportunity to inspect the new site and also see the trophy won at N.D.G.W. fiesta in San Rafael. There was no charge for this first horseshow.

More than one hundred members and guests witness the events. The horse-show being purely social, served to acquaint the public, especially the horse lovers in the work the club was doing. A substantial sum was promised at this meet to finance the purchase of the club grounds and to build a club house to stand on the wooded knoll overlooking the riding ring.

On February 22, 1945, the *Petaluma Argus* reported: "Novato Horsemen met Saturday evening in their club house on the Tharp ranch on Atherton Avenue with their president, Charles Wagner. A bulldozer and a driver have been hired to level off the site of the new club house on their recently purchased property. June 3 has been set as the tentative date of the opening of the new club house with a horse show planned to celebrate the event. Legal papers are being drawn for the Incorporation of the club as Novato Horsemen, Inc., which have been signed and sent to Sacramento for recording." They were incorporated on April 24, 1945, as Novato Horsemen, Inc. October of 1945 the club sent out its first monthly newsletter called "The Nosebag."

ECONOMY QUARTERS

Contractor Ralph Briggs at the time was tearing down the Fosters Mansion in



1945 parade in San Rafael. The little buggy is driven by Frank Zappetini, holding the flag is Betty Silva Winslow (age 13) Dwelly Children Ray 8, Vern 7 (standing) and Barbara 3. Dwelly team of donkeys, "Martha" black and "Alfred" grey.

Novato Horsemen Riding Club



Merle Tharp in front of her home on Atherton Lane in 1986

San Rafael off of Forbes Avenue. So, he used his carpenters and the used material from the mansion to construct the clubhouse at a cost of \$750 to the Horsemen.

The Petaluma Argus on December 6, 1944 reported: "A group of Novato Horsemen, Sydney Lowenthal, Bernon Gaston, Charles Wagner, Duane and Carol Tharp and Jim Ruhlman went to San Rafael with trucks Sunday to get lumber from a building now being razed which will be used on the club house the horsemen are going to build on their property in the Black Point district."

On December 13, 1944 Argus reported: "Novato Horsemen held a nail pulling party with a picnic lunch Sunday on their club grounds. While the women pulled out nails, the men trucked in the lumber from the Marin Boys' school building now being torn down on the Foster estate, San Rafael. The all-day party was participated in by over twenty of the horsemen."

The clubhouse was opened on August of 1945. Later, the Tharp's sold their big house and moved into a smaller house in back of the long, one-story stable. They soon found that the small house was too small for them, so they remodeled the barn into their present house. The portion of it where the Horsemen's Club first met became their living room.

EARLY ARENA

Joseph C. Wayne headed a committee that constructed the first arena. They cut down the big eucalyptus trees on the edge of the property to construct it. The first parade and horse show held on June 3, 1945. The Horsemen met on the west end of Novato and rode their horses to their clubhouse and arena on Bugeia Lane for the horse show. The San Anselmo Herald reported on June 7, 1945: "The horse show at Novato last Sunday drew a crowd of something like 3,000, including a large group from Hamilton Field as well as many Marinship employees where the ticket sale was stressed due to the prospects of winning a \$600 saddle horse with complete outfit of saddle, bridle, etc.

Some shipyard workers have written to the show managers regarding the singular coincidence that the saddle horse was won by Sid Lowenthal of San Rafael, who was mentioned as chairman of special events and ringmaster.

Most ornamental outfit in the parade went to CPO Vern Dwelly of the Navy Shore Patrol. The Palomino Club of San Francisco was first for most outstanding group of horsemen. The Contra Costa County Rangers were first with Marin Mounted Sheriff's Posse second in that class. Novato horsemen hope to make this an annual event."

1946 the *Novato Advance* reported: "The Novato Horsemen, Inc. is preparing to entertain a host of visiting horsemen and guests -Sunday afternoon, June 2, when it stages its Second Annual Horse Show at its arena northeast of town. The horsemen are offering \$2,000 in bonds and plate to the winners in their class.

The new 1946 Hudson will be at the grounds, and chairman Sid Loewenthal says that "... if the winner is there, he or she can drive the car home." The second annual horseshow was a big success. Over 200, led by the Novato Horsemen, left Novato at 11 a.m. and rode in parade formation to the club grounds, where they were admitted to the arena in groups to canter round the ring for their judging. The 1947 show was called the "biggest little horse show in the West" and was the first time it was held on father's day with more than 300 entries.

The fourth annual horse show took place June 20, and an added attraction was Alec French and his eight-horse team which appeared in the arena doing unique feats of horsemanship. It was reported that it was the biggest in its history and the largest ever held in Marin County, with over 2,000 guests and three hundred horses and riders took part in the various events, over \$2,000 worth of trophies, cups and cash were awarded to the winners.

Succeeding horse shows made it possible to build on rest rooms and a kitchen, and additional seating capacity in the grandstands. The large meeting room and dance hall was completely furnished and redecorated in 1948.



Sid Lowenthal shown above in the Novato Horsemen's third annual horse show.

Novato Horsemen Riding Club

CLUB IS UNIQUE

Today, the Novato Horsemen Inc. is one of the few riding clubs in the State of California that can boast of their own clubhouse, grounds, arena, and other facilities free of all indebtedness. The first president, Joe Patnode, a prominent horseman and owner of racing stables, did much to organize the group. J.C. Wayne, a prominent businessman of northern Marin, was the club's second president; C.M. Wagner, prominent businessman and chief accountant for the American Steamship Lines, served as president in 1944. In 1945, Mrs. Ethel Murphy, breeder and owner of the some of the west's finest Arabian horses, took over the reins as president. She was succeeded in 1947, by Sid Loewenthal, prominent business man of San Rafael and owner of prize-winning parade horses.

In 1948 the club elected Col. Twitchell, surgeon in the Army in charge of the Hamilton Field Hospital, to be its sixth president. As Col. Twitchell was transferred to Honolulu, Mr. Ralph C. Briggs, a prominent general contractor of Marin County, succeeded to the presidency, and was elected to serve again in the year 1949.

December 7, 1951 was the first meeting of the Novato Junior Horsemen. Zina Craig was elected chairman of the group. Valerie Schwindt was elected vice chairman; Sandra Glass, recorder, and George Hale, budget director. The juniors met the second Friday of each month at 7:30 p.m. in the Horsemen's clubhouse.

1953 they would start having a co-sponsor; the first one was Guide Dogs for the Blind.

1954-56 was Marin General Hospital Service League sponsored the horseshow. 1955 saw the event go to two days and be called Frontier Weekend with a Frontier Dance at the community house on Saturday night.

1956 the Novato Chamber of Commerce sponsored the June 15, 16 and 17 called "Western Weekend." A square dance was added on Friday night. Saturday held an "all you can eat" 25-cent breakfast of hot cakes, sausage, coffee and fruit juice that was served at 8 a.m. Other events were the water-ball fights at 10:30, the 12 noon whisker-growing contest, the Saturday parade and the Frontier dance that night.



Novato Horsemen's clubhouse in the 1950's.

1957 saw the first breakfast called the "Buckaroo Breakfast," which was served for 50 cents on the Anderson Motors lot with the Mariners Club the sponsors. The breakfast went up to 75 cents in 1958.

RODEO GREW

As the club grew, some organizers wanted a rodeo instead of a horse show. So, the rodeo replaced the horse show in 1959. It also grew. At first, it was put on by the local riders. As the show grew, professional cowboys were enticed into coming to the rodeo and professional stock was hired to put on the show.

The event gained recognition as a National Cowboys Association rodeo. Cowboys competing in it get points in their national rating and the purses grew larger so that the better names in cowboy completion came to the show.

1975 saw Western Weekend change to Memorial Day weekend and the Novato Horsemen's rodeo was held on Father's Day. There was no rodeo in 1977. 1978 the Horsemen rodeo was in September under the California Cowboy's Association and that was the last year for the rodeo.

NOV. 15, 1983 -10:58 p.m. - Fire at Novato Horsemen Association's clubhouse at Bugeia and H Lane. Blaze started in a fireplace because of cracks. The fire did \$25,000 damage to the building, which was demolished. It also did \$3,000 damage to the clubhouse's contents. Some 38 firefighters worked for 2 hours to control the fire.

After fighting with the insurance company, the Horsemen's Club received \$67,695 for the clubhouse fire. It would cost almost \$80,000 to rebuild and was almost complete by the end of 1985.

2017 saw the Novato Horsemen celebrate their 75th anniversary.

