

## **Bolinas Revisited**

### **By Alex Horvath**

A geography quiz for locals:

It's a busy Friday morning in a popular Marin community. The streets are jammed with tourists, locals and delivery trucks. Automobiles stop and start about the busy town center looking for a place to park – but they're out of luck – there isn't a single spot left. It's not quite noon.

The next night, at a quaint but upscale restaurant, movie star Robert Redford spends his birthday dinner (with what appears to be a newly ironed face) at a quiet table amongst family and friends. Fans in the restaurant leave him alone. Across the street, a 3-room, loft-like bed and breakfast is being built high above one of the town's prominent businesses – a gas station - each with hardwood floors, a private deck and its own Jacuzzi.

Clear across the same town on a recent Sunday, three tour buses arrive in the early afternoon and drop off 150 guests in front of a house owned by the CEO of a handbag company. Inside the gates, near the pool – a tropical scene has been created, complete with flowered leis, catered lunch, a full-bar and a live reggae band. A few of the revelers dance in the street as the party spills out over the fences.

What city are we in? Tiburon? Larkspur? Sausalito?

Bolinas?

If you picked Bolinas – you win.

But if you are like me – or any number of us who grew up in the tiny West Marin enclave over the past three decades, chances are you would have lost at some point betting against the kind of scene described ever happening in our town. After all, we are the ones who used to throw water balloons at the occasional misguided tour bus or Winnebago!

Obscurity for Bolinas has long-vanished. I think it hit me the first time I spotted a tourist wearing a “Bolinas 2 Miles” t-shirt that he had bought from a local shop. Or it may have been last summer when I crashed a party on the outskirts of town where Hillary and Chelsea Clinton were guests. Hillary turned heads the next morning strolling through town with her secret service entourage and stopping at the coffee stand outside the Coast Café for a latte. Rumors abounded about Chelsea's braces getting caught in the beard of a local peasant who had asked for a kiss.

Somewhere in-between these occurrences I realized that none of us from the old days were in Kansas anymore. And it certainly didn't feel like we were in Bolinas, either.

There is an unsavory feeling that comes over this writer as he begins to chronicle what feels like might turn into an obituary for my hometown. A feeling that longtime friends and family are gasping for air – or reaching for some other kind of assurance. The feeling is not lessened when I encounter a distressed woman on Wharf Road who had just gone through the local Hearsay News for what she says is the hundredth time in search of a rental for she and her family.

“If we can’t find a place soon, we may have to leave,” she says.

Her situation is not uncommon. A sampling of Hearsay’s show no rentals at all listed in the previous three issues. She tells me, “There are plenty of other people looking.” If there was a place available, the woman says she is not sure she would even be able to afford it.

Finding housing hasn’t always been so tough.

At one time, 70 years ago, lots were given away on the Bolinas Mesa with a subscription to the San Rafael Call-Bulletin. In 1970, the average price of buying a home on the Mesa was \$20,000. Rent back then for a 2-bedroom house was about \$85 a month.

Today, the same homes and property now sell upwards of \$500,000. Funky trailers and tiny living quarters, when you can find one, rent for as high as \$1,000 per month, more than half of an average locals monthly income. Try to find an actual “house” and you are usually out of luck or priced out, according to residents.

With the boom economy of the recent years, the rich have moved in and have been snatching up the land.

Many of the modern buyers purchase the homes as getaways – leaving them empty for months on end while also evicting families who have been renters for years. Contributing to the situation is the town’s water moratorium – a ban on new water meters – that has been in effect since 1971. No new hook-ups have meant that there haven’t been any new houses.

“I liken it to having had the same effect as a ‘smart bomb,’” said Howard Dillon, a 25-year resident who works as an actor and part-time driver/delivery person. “The water moratorium was the right thing to do at the time. The fallout effect has left the houses standing but there are no people around.

Dillon said the syndrome is exemplified on the street where he lives.

“One night I was laying in bed – and a car drove by quite late. I got to wondering how many houses on our road are unoccupied. The next day I counted and there are 21 houses past mine all the way to the cliff. Of those houses, 11 are not lived in full-time. I get a lot of work from the rich people in town. What’s happening also is the people here are becoming the servant class.”

Some of the wealthier have tried their hand at patching up the towns housing dilemmas.

Susie and Mark Buell – who count themselves amongst the town’s more prominent, have contributed heavily to the Bolinas Housing Project, an undertaking that is converting the dilapidated old Gibson House Restaurant (and former site of the Bolinas Bay Bakery) into 12 smallish but inexpensive apartments, designed for the working homeless population. Rents for those lucky enough to get a space are expected to be between \$400 and \$600 per month.

The project has been underwritten through county grants and local donations and has received widespread support in the community, including more than \$30,000 from the Buell’s.

Still, in spite of their generosity, the Buell’s are also symptomatic of a greater problem.

In addition to their principle dwelling on Olema-Bolinas Road, the couple owns two other “guest-homes” for the occasional rich and famous visitor, like Hillary and Chelsea, overlooking the community and the lagoon, on Altura Avenue.

The Buell’s are not alone – a local contractor who asked that his name not be used said he has a wealthy client who bought a weekend house – and an additional house each for his two daughters. According to the contractor, these homes remain empty most of the time. “The daughters have no intention of ever living here,” he said.

By contrast to the Buell’s and their multiple homes, longtime Bolinas Public Utility District director Paul Kayfetz, once referred to as being “The Lion of Bolinas,” for his efforts at maintaining the towns cloak of obscurity and the 30-year water moratorium, has cashed in and sold his Ocean Avenue home (for \$2 million in April 2002) and relocated with his family to Strawberry. And even though Kayfetz’ principle residence is now in southern Marin and he currently owns no property in Bolinas (according to property tax records), he still manages to serve as a director on the BPUD, as he has for most of the past 30 years.

Kayfetz’ Bolinas telephone number answers with a voicemail and snail-mail is still delivered to his P.O. Box there. He initially declined an interview, but when questioned about the move and residency qualifications, said, “If you do some research you will find that I still maintain a bedroom in a house in Bolinas. I, and my kids, stay there a couple of nights a week.”

Paul Kayfetz, a weekend resident?

I can’t say I blame Paul for hanging on to the Bolinas identity. I mean, lots of people that used to live there still identify heavily with the town. My own e-mail address even begins with “bolinasdude,” and I live in Santa Rosa. Besides, few, if any, of the locals I spoke with care that Kayfetz has relocated. But there are plenty of people who are going to

have to change their address and voter registration information if lack of housing forces their own move.

The mood of the community was documented in an independent film made last year titled “Safe House.” The film’s producer/writer/director, San Francisco filmmaker Martin Matzinger, lived in Bolinas from 1984-91, and filmed the movie in Bolinas over four days, for under \$6,000.

The film’s farcical dramatic plot – which involves a geneticist who has discovered the gene that will cure greed – stars Dillon and other locals.

But interspersed around the drama are actual interviews with residents talking about being displaced. The film serves as an historical document and opens with scenes of townsfolk stealing the road sign to “Paradise,” a thinly disguised village.

“The film really poses the question, ‘What is greed?’” Matzinger said. “None of the documentary part was scripted. I picked people who I knew had a story I went to them and said I am going to interview you. It’s a movie that is inside of a fictional movie. I told them that anytime you want to say the name of your city to replace Bolinas with “Paradise” and to speak to their own true-life experience.

“There was some incredible footage. They are a community being displaced and struggling with it. Some force, some big wave – the world economy – it’s forcing things to change and so these people are struggling against the wave. The way I think about it is this is happening all over the world. This is the middle class and artist class version of everyone getting displaced. This is the artist’s version of the community breaking up and children and others can’t afford to live into the community any longer. And it’s happening all over and this is just Bolinas’ version of it,” Matzinger said.

A sampling from the documentary includes an interview with Cypress Perrin, who lived in the community for 36-years.

“I just got some new ‘non-neighbors.’ It’s the non-neighbor policy that we have now. You don’t send the welcome wagon because they are not going to be there. They just buy the place and then live somewhere else. They just buy the place and have someone else come over and do their work. That’s what I am going to have across the street,” Perrin said.

Perrin died in November 2001, shortly before the film’s community center premiere.

Perrin’s two-bedroom home sold for \$625,000 in March after being on the market for three months, according to real estate figures. The new owners plan on splitting their time between Bolinas and San Francisco, the broker said.

“When I walk past Cypress’ house part of me is just screaming,” said Lea Earnheart, who was also interviewed in “Safe House.” “Another part of me is happy that there might be a person with a family and will be fixing it up.”

Terry Donahue, an agent at Peter Harris Bolinas Real Estate, said she tries to match homebuyers to the community and hopes for full-time residents.

“For the general health of a community and to keep real estate values stable, it’s better when a greater percentage of the community are fulltime residents,” Donahue said.

She added, “Bolinas has a history of having a second home community. A second home community where homes have stayed in the family for generations. In some ways that kind of second home population is stable and healthy. Also, when the economy is shaky, real estate used for full-time occupancy has a better chance of retaining its value.”

Tom D’Onofrio said he had been coming to Bolinas since 1965 before moving there in 1967 and agrees that weekend residents there are nothing new. “Half of the houses on the Mesa were empty in the mid-1960’s,” D’Onofrio said.

He described the pivotal moment when the current “sense of community” was born.

It was the morning of the big oil spill in January, 1971, D’Onofrio said. As a habit back then, the renowned wood sculptor and Methodist Minister said he would wake up at 5:30 AM and get ready for the day.

“I turned on the radio and heard about the oil tankers colliding under the Golden Gate Bridge and that oil was washing up on Bolinas and Stinson Beach. I jumped on my horse and raced to the end of Poplar. What I saw there looking over the cliff made me cry.”

D’Onofrio said a thick sheen of oil was visible from his cliff top vantage point – and the odor of petroleum could be smelled from the distance.

Realizing that the tide was going out – and would be coming back in at 8:30 AM, D’Onofrio said there was limited time if they could save the lagoon. He got the assistance of a neighbor to begin a phone tree – “Call ten people and have each of them call ten people. And have those ten people call another ten.” He arranged for bales of hay, giant logs and thick cable to be brought down to the end of Wharf Road, which is the inlet for the Bolinas Lagoon. At 6:30 AM, D’Onofrio said he was standing down the street on top of the counter at Scowley’s Restaurant, (the site is now a clothing boutique), gathering up locals to come to the beach and deal with the community emergency.

He recalled: “By 8:00, there were 300-400 people - ‘rag-tag hippies’ - descending on the Wharf Road side of the beach. As we were backing the truck loaded with big timber logs, a large voice boomed from out of the fog. Because of the fog and the sunlight behind them, they could see us but we could not see them. The voice boomed, ‘Do not drop those logs. This is the County of Marin speaking. You will all be under arrest.’”

“It was the quintessential Bolinas moment,” D’Onofrio said. “Someone on our side said that on the count of three, raise your middle finger. It was like 1,2,3 – Fuck you!”

In that moment, D’Onofrio said, things became different. Nobody was arrested – they were instead applauded. And Standard Oil supplied \$1 Million to the community for clean-up and future studies, D’Onofrio said.

In the following months, residents became more conscious of uncontrolled growth in the town. Houses were going up overnight – the end of a big building boom. D’Onofrio said that certain members of the BPUD at the time were property owners who had plans of developing the lagoon and other areas into recreational businesses and condos. The BPUD board members were voted out – and a new regime came in – and with them the water moratorium in 1971.

Thirty-years later, Bolinas business owner and newspaper publisher Don Deane is reflective on the moratorium and the town’s current housing crisis.

“The water moratorium is real. No one fought it harder in the early years than I did,” Deane said. “I thought it was completely unfair and inequitable. At one point, Paul Kayfetz was like my archenemy. It was like I was Luke Skywalker and he was Darth Vader. I’m sure Paul saw it the other way around.”

Over the years, Deane’s viewpoint has changed.

“If you don’t look at the housing issue emotionally – if you look at it pragmatically – it’s about supply and demand. The water shortage does exist – it’s been certified based on state ratios. If there hadn’t been a water moratorium there would have been a sewage or septic moratorium. Maybe there would have been another 200-300 homes – but then it would have been over. It wouldn’t have affected the economy of the housing. The moratorium bought some time – but it couldn’t affect the underbelly. And the underbelly is economics and housing.”

So that’s it. The moratorium came and saw and conquered. Too bad the victorious were the folks who didn’t live there and who could afford a half-million dollar house.

Deane said that a partial solution to the housing dilemma was something like the Gibson House project – which will provide housing for 8-12 people in the community. Realistically though, he points out, half of those people were already living there before the \$300,000 project began. The net gain will be 3 or 4 new people getting to live in a 12x12 room.

As the community prepares for a new Bed and Breakfast high above Bolinas Garage – I am struck by the idea that not much has really changed in my hometown. We used to party with the Jefferson Airplane down at the same house with all the tour buses. We had celebrities dining in local restaurants – like John and Yoko or Bob Dylan at the Gibson

House back in the early 70's. We've had other musicians, artists and writers and filmmakers – and some weekend residents who became pretty good friends once they got to know us.

So long as no one stands out on Highway One wearing a Bolinas 2 Miles T-shirt – I think things will be okay.

Another thing that hasn't changed is the incredible spirit of the community – new and old.

Recently we threw a benefit at the community center to help my younger brother, Tim, pay for his final year in law school. Chipping in a thousand big ones for Tim's fund were none other than the Buell's, who Tim has never even met. Three hundred locals showed up – bringing checks or items to be auctioned.

And there were some strangers.

A lady at one of the tables said she had lived in town for three years. She said that her family moved there because of the kind of community spirit Bolinas has a reputation for having.

That was funny to hear, because in all my years living there, I had thought we had only a reputation for ripping down road signs – and for being slightly reclusive.

One thing this writer is convinced of – the community is not dead – and there is no need for an obituary. If anything, I feel the need to take out a classified ad in the Hearsay News.

The ad will read: If anyone is interested in an incredible tenant or caretaker for their estate, please contact me at [bolinasdude@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bolinasdude@sbcglobal.net). I want to come home.

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