

Edited transcribed from an interview with Jane Ames (by Nick Cabell)
April 2019

Part 1: What in your early life led to your role building Toyon trail?

[1:10] I was born in San Francisco and was a city girl until junior high school. It's odd but I learned to love trails and to love the outdoors there in San Francisco because my mother took me to the local park every day, and she would sit up there and let me play in the sand box. We lived on Filbert Street on Russian Hill facing west and we'd trudge up that steep hill and then about once a week she took me to Golden Gate Park. We didn't have a family car so we went by street car. In Golden Gate park there were beautiful, beautiful trails in the Japanese tea garden, which was probably called the Chinese tea garden for a few more years after the Second World War, and especially in Strybing Arboretum, before it was redesigned, it was full of beautiful little pathways which I adored.

Then I moved to Marin county with my family and in high school my gal friends loved to hike and we would hike up on Mt. Tamalpais which was a beautiful system of trails built by CCC1 during the hard years of the great depression, [3:00] and I loved that, of course. So trails and being outdoors were indelibly imprinted in me early on. But it had seemed to me, especially up on Mt. Tamalpais, there was a trail called Hoo-Koo-E-Koo, an old Indian name², and probably an old Indian trail, and it was a beautiful narrow trail traversing around the mountain toward the sea. And one year I came up there and to my horror they had bulldozed it, for whatever reasons they felt they needed to do that, and some of the other trails were decaying. So in those years I could see no new trails being built. It seemed to me there was a lot of loss and there was a wasteland of future without trails.

Part 2: What was your first experience with the land that was to become Coal Mine Ridge?

[4:30] When we moved to Portola Valley, that was in '64, we moved to Brookside Park and we were right across from the Bovet ranch. They were kind about letting the neighbors hike the hills, and so we walked up and around all the beautiful spots. My children had the benefit of the frog pond (we would collect frogs there), but of course we all knew that eventually would be subdivided, and eventually we wouldn't be able to get in there; there wouldn't be any more public trails. I also was very lucky in a friend I met (our children were in a school together in kindergarten), Jodie Fork, and Jodie had the

¹ [Civilian Conservation Corps](#)

² Possibly named for a band of Coast Miwoks that lived nearby.

patience to organize a hike once a week. She would call up the landowners and get permission, and so with one other friend, (Beth Harper), she started Wednesday walkers, which is a group that grew and grew. You might have heard of them: they're still hiking the Skyline Ridge trails. I had a lot of good opportunity to hike the trails. [6:00] [Were their trails that pre-existed Portola Valley planning?] When there were farms, and horses were your mode of transportation, there were trails and ways that followed every likely path, whether you had to chase your cows [or] you had to haul out your firewood. There were old roads and trails, I think, in every property, wherever you could put one in.

Part 3: What was your involvement with the early trail planning?

[7:45] I got a fantastic opportunity to observe the town council in that first year, in 1964. I was in the League of Women Voters and I volunteered to be the observer for the town council meetings; and they were held in the stone building of the Alpine Hills Tennis and Swim Club. I sat there and I hadn't known the history of the town before it started. I was just amazed (the British would say gobsmacked). I was amazed at what I was seeing because the town had only just incorporated a few months before. And there they sat, the five first council people trying to figure out this puzzle of how to govern and help the town realize its goals. It was absolutely fascinating; it wasn't boring at all. I sat there and we had a wonderful reporter for the country almanac, Marion Softky³, and she was there. We watched Nevin Heister and Sam Halstead, Eleanor Boushey⁴, Bob Brown and Bill Lane; they were the brave five, the first council people, and watched them begin the planning of the town. They were volunteers - I don't think they got paid anything. The staff were Jim Morton, as the lawyer, and George Mader, as the town planner. Throughout those first years they worked on the general plan and how to manage the incoming problems of new subdivisions. [10:00] But beyond the two main staff people, the advisers, it was a citizen run government, and that just pleased me deeply; so in those early years I watched it all happen.

Part 4: How did you get involved with the trails planning?

It was early in the 1970s, I think. My husband, John Ames, had gotten on to the planning commission, he'd been appointed. He served many years, did very good service with that. For some reason there was a meeting in our living room (in our house on Canyon Drive) of [the] council, I think, and they were just dealing with the first work on trails at Portola Valley Ranch, as I learned later, how the maps and plans had been developed. They had sent a bulldozer driver up Old Spanish trail to clear it and the

³ Marion Softky [obituary from the Almanac](#)

⁴ Eleanor Boushey [obituary from the Almanac](#)

result had been fairly disastrous. Everyone, Joe Whelan and Herb Dengler, was sad about that, so they felt they needed to organize a trails committee. [11:30] And I came ready made with opinions, so I got to be chairman of the trails committee, and Joe Quilter, Elmer Wheaton were members of the early committee. Later I remember Bo Gimbal and Helen Quinn.

The trails had been planned; it was very much a bit of hard work in those early years. They had the general plan [that] they were adopting from the County's general plan and they wanted to have a trails and paths element for the general plan. But that had to have a basis: you can't just draw lines. So Herb Dengler and Dwight Crowder set out to walk and find and map all the trails of use that had been historically developed over the years, and they did that. It was a big effort, so when I came . . . [13:30] their basic start was to map existing routes; it's a pretty good start because that's where people naturally felt they needed to go, felt the terrain suited them. So that was the basic thing and then from that [the] planners developed the trails and paths element of the general plan. It was a map of hope, pretty much, it had that basis, it had some foundation, in the history. Where homes had already been built it was not usually possible to add a public trail where there hadn't been one before on their title. But where the road right of ways permitted, the trails could go along the road right of ways. [14:30] And for the future where a subdivision came into planning, the trails were a requirement. That legal requirement was already established, and that network of trails if it happened over the subdivision had some force.

And so my job as chairman of the trails committee was to understand what the requirements were for these subdivisions, especially, and to make it understandable for the developer [15:00] and then to maintain contact throughout the work. That was what I was doing mostly.

Part 5: How did the design and building of Toyon Trail come about?

[16:00] As we worked on the trails Herb would already be working up above us, beyond the area. He would sometimes come walking down and visit with the workers as we were there. And he wore moccasins, he came softly like a person of the woods, very natural in the woods; that was a special moment whenever we began.

But Toyon wasn't the first volunteer effort. Once the trails committee was established (maybe it was Eleanor Boushey) someone told us a little trail had been established along [the edge of] Coal Mine Ridge [i.e. Corte Madera Creek], Eagle Trail, and that it needed repair. It had been built a few years before by an Eagle Scout named Sidney Trapp - of course that's a beautiful place for a trail, that's just marvelous. . . . [It]

occasionally needed work. That was my first experience taking volunteers out. You could only do handwork down there.

I should emphasize as to the sequence of the trails. [20:00] (We could take the trails and paths element as an overlay and require the developer, Joe Whelan, in this case to make trails more or less in those areas.) Toyon trail . . . was not on the original plan. I don't think even think Arroyo was probably, but Joe Whelan was with us to a great extent in planning the trails. He and Herb Dengler had worked on the other trails, like Old Spanish trail, planning it, but Herb had convinced Joe. He said, "Joe, there's this beautiful side hill where I could make a trail that wouldn't have very many switchbacks and would just give a marvelous opportunity to walk above Corte Madera Creek." [21:00] You could hear the creek, be in the shade of the trees, and he wanted to have a trail just for walking, in moccasins if possible. Joe Whelan was agreeable to that, but for that trail Joe Whelan was not required to pay for it, the work, [21:20] whereas for the other trails he was. He had to pay for the trail builder, and eventually he found Gene Sheehan, who did beautiful trail work and later did a lot for the open space district.

Part 6: Tell about the building of the trail.

Toyon trail had to be built with town money and of course we didn't have much, but the trail committee did have a budget for tools and we used (I liked) a light mattock (mattock shovel), long loppers and clippers, and then pretty soon a member of the trails committee, Elmer Wheaton, was primarily a writer, very inventively created the pickle and he built [them] for us in his workshop⁵. He'd buy a good quality shovel with a solid steel tongue and he'd bend it over, and that turned out to be a fine tool, especially for grooming the upper bank of the trail. We learned part way along, where the side hill was steep and you left the upper bank in vertical form, well it didn't look very good; dirt would fall down on the trail but also plants couldn't take hold very well on that vertical face. So we had to grit our teeth and do a little more disturbance initially and bring down a whole lot of that duff and soil from above, until we had a nice slope. It looked awful at first but after a year it began to look very natural and stayed that way, [23:20] so that was one of the improvements in our skills.

⁵ Jane Ames later clarifies: ". . . gradually drifting from my memory is the probability that it was Gene Sheehan, the professional trail builder, who invented the pickle. Then Elmer Wheaton made a few pickles for us in his workshop.



[24:15] The effort was to make it look natural. We were desperate for trail width; we wouldn't have filled anything in at the base. We brought down the soil from above to try to make a natural looking slope above.

[25:20] We really learned our lesson on the 1st day. I put out a call for volunteers through the Country Almanac⁶, on the 1st day of work, and we had more than 30 people . . . many, many people came, and we had our tools and we just dug up a storm. We made a huge long stretch of the lowest part of Toyon trail. But although I moved up and down the trail exhorting people to make it wide, we didn't get it very wide. I was very impressed. About one month later that trail was disappearing and we had to dig it out again and again. Finally we got enough width for it to maintain itself. Thereafter, as the groups grew smaller, we were more able to keep to a good width. What you have to do is give a person a space to walk. Their feet can't step on the very edge of the trail - it's not good footing - and it'll knock the edge off, so you need a width of trail.

⁶ The Country Almanac (1965) was the antecedent to today's [Almanac](#) and served a purpose for Portola Valley and area that PVForum does today.

What happened on that first day, I sure remember. Michele Breiner, as a little girl, came up to work very enthusiastically, but we had built the trail far enough to come to a huge poison oak patch. And Michele got an awful case of poison oak; I heard about that. I would apologize to Mimi⁷; that was really hard. About poison oak: we did spray; we sprayed a lot. They had just invented Roundup, a trans-locating weed killer. We sprayed the leaves before we cut them as much as we could. We had backpack sprayers. We walked up and down - I'm sure, probably Dan Quinn helped with that. We did all we could to spray. Now more recently I've heard more that it is not necessarily a healthy chemical, but what is? Anyway, we tried. I suppose it's come back.

[28:30] Of course in these volunteer days we would have made a mess of the hillsides had Herb Dengler not gone ahead painstakingly planned it to maintain a decent grade. He flagged the baseline, that is, the route it was to take at the level the walking surface should be. So we always had that to refer to; if we hadn't had we would have been wandering about.

I would send out postcards to the people on my list and we worked once a month on Saturday mornings; in the end it was for about three years.

We passed the areas [with] arroyos that were going to need bridges and didn't quite know how to cope with those. [29:40] As we got further up (we were always starting from the bottom carrying our tools) working our way up, there would be small groups, 3 or 5 or 7 people. [Then] there came one day that was sort of the low point. Bob Brown and I were alone up there, and I had forgotten some essential tool and had to walk way back all the way down. And Bob and I sat at the edge of the trail and he renewed the offer he had made before: he'd be willing to hire Gene Sheehan to finish the trail. I was almost tempted, but then Bo Gimbal⁸ came along with his tools, and a couple of other people came along, so on we went and we didn't give up.

Part 7: How did Joe Whelan contribute to Toyon trail's development?

But the arroyos continued to be a puzzle. The town certainly did not have money to build a bridge, and here we had marvelous help and appropriate help from Joe Whelan. He had put in without as much as a by-your-leave these beautiful split redwood trunks, which were marvelous material to use up there and so good to walk on, and I hope they're still in place.

⁷ Mimi Breiner, longtime resident of Portola Valley Ranch

⁸ From MROSD Meeting Agenda Apr 23, 2014: "Mr. Gimbal was a long time volunteer with the District who worked on many trail projects for the District and throughout the area. Mr. Gimbal, who passed away on May 4th, 2013, had volunteered more hours with the District than any other volunteer in District history to date."



[32:00] And another thing Joe Whelan contributed was a complete surprise: I had always thought that the vista point above Corte Madera Creek would have been a great place for a bench. And one day we came up there; he put Herb's bench and I was amazed and delighted he put Jane's bench lower down above an arroyo. It was a spot where I had once been sitting and seen a coyote go by. I was very pleased with that. That was very nice. [33:40] Mine was up above the trail several steps and just before you came to an arroyo. I can't imagine how overgrown it must have gotten. I had thought if I lived here forever that I would just spend my declining years pruning the trail. Instead I'm spending those years in San Ignacio in Baja, California, and still pruning trails.

[34:25] There's a point above Herb's bench - I know that trail's supposed to be closed at night - but I treated myself to a very late twilight walk one night in the rain. I was walking along Toyon Trail, and I came upon a pair of skunks, and they were wet. They were nose down in the leaves on the trail, nosing the leaves aside, probably looking for bugs, and a wet skunk is extremely small - their fur is most of them. So I thought I would like

to pass, but they didn't pay a bit of attention to me, and I had to stand there in the rain and wait and wait, until they naturally worked their way over to the side of the trail. That was one of my animal stories.

Part 8: Other things you'd like to share about Toyon trail?

[35:25] I see on your map, what was for us an upper boundary is now crossed by a trail, which is so nice. But when we were finishing Toyon Trail that was a line we couldn't cross. [35:45] So Herb designed what he always tried to avoid, a switchback up to the meadow on top of the ridge. He designed it and we began to dig it and then Herb was very unhappy with his plan and so he took the trouble to redesign in a better way, I suppose, with less switchbacks, and we finally were able to complete the trail up on top of the meadow. And that's where we had our picnic on the last day - I think it had been 3 years. We carried food up from the bottom, had a wonderful feast up on the meadow in the sunshine. I wish I still had my list of all the people who worked on the trail, but Bob Brown was a stalwart, he was probably as assigned council member, he did the job with enthusiasm; and Dan and Helen Quinn; my husband, John Ames; Mimi Breiner and Michele, probably David; Bo Gimbal and Marilyn Gimbal; Suz Cameron, came those first days; Betsy Crowder, I think; and Marilyn Walter. My thanks now for all the people who worked. We had a good time always.

[37:15] I was in Portola Valley for 23 years. I left in 1987 and went on to other trails and interesting places, but the project of Toyon trail will always remain with me, as something we could begin and complete and do with our own hands, is open to the public, didn't require a gate or a payment. And I liked that, that's my kind of project.