

Monday, April 21, 2008 (SF Chronicle)
“The spirited history of Marin County landmark”
Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer

The big, white landmark called the **Fireside** has stood as a gateway to Mill Valley for 92 years, a symbol of a rough, rollicking era when the Bay Area was awash in rum running. But the celebrants who caroused inside the former speakeasy never knew they were dancing on Indian graves.

Marin County Coroner Kenneth Holmes acknowledged recently that skeletal remains of American Indians were discovered in the ground beneath the brick structure during renovation work over the past 10 months.

The bones may have been the same ones found during a renovation 51 years ago and then quietly reburied underneath the floorboards at a time when folks were less concerned about cultural issues.

"They were Native American," Holmes said of the new discovery. "They were so fragmented that it was difficult to say whether it was one or more people."

Marin officials conceded that the centerpiece of their prized new affordable housing complex is smack dab on top of a sacred Miwok burial ground only after inquiries from The Chronicle. California law exempts developers from having to disclose the unearthing of Indian graves, cemeteries and sacred places out of fear that publicity will draw treasure hunters.

The bones, which were examined by archaeologists and reinterred with the blessing of a tribal representative, are not expected to delay the opening later this year of the newly renovated Fireside, which would have been torn down had the nonprofit Citizens Housing Corp. not agreed to restore it as part of a 50-unit housing development.

The building, next to where Highways 1 and 101 come together, is being returned to its original glory as a 1916 roadhouse, with a few new touches, such as solar panels. It will serve as the community center for low-income and elderly residents of the apartments being built behind it.

"We worked closely with the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria to develop a protocol to follow in case any archaeological artifacts were found during construction," said James Buckley, president of San Francisco-based Citizens Housing. "The protocol requires that a

representative of the tribe and a licensed archaeologist be present during all construction work."

Still, the discovery upset some local residents who were already concerned about traffic and don't understand why the historic findings were not disclosed before the project was approved.

"I think they really should have disclosed what they found," said Shawn McGhie, who lives about a half-mile from the Fireside.

Stories of ghosts:

Finds such as this are not rare in the Bay Area, a fertile hunting ground and a popular location for American Indian villages before Europeans arrived. There are 400 recorded burial sites in Marin County alone, Holmes said.

Some believe the burial ground beneath the Fireside explains the ghosts that, legend has it, roam its corridors. The hauntings got so bad, as the story goes, that the owner of the El Rebozo Restaurant, which occupied the Fireside for many years, once held a seance. Stanley Foote, who worked behind the Fireside bar for 38 years, said she crossed two bottles of tequila like a cross and sprinkled the contents all over the building in an effort to ward off the spirits.

It all started 10,000 to 12,000 years ago when the first Indian villages were established around what was then a mighty river where San Francisco Bay is today.

The tribe we now call the Coast Miwok eventually settled in the north side of the bay, establishing major villages throughout Marin and Sonoma counties. The villages were mostly along a trail skirting the bay that eventually became Highway 101.

The shells and artifacts the Indians discarded built up over thousands of years into huge mounds that, at one time, could be found all around the area, said Nick Tipon, chairman of the Sacred Sites Protection Committee for the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, representing both the Miwok and Southern Pomo.

The Indians often buried their dead in these mounds, or middens, along with sacred ceremonial items, he said.

Such a mound existed at the future site of the Fireside when the Spanish, then Mexicans and finally Americans moved into the area, historians say. In 1889, the North Pacific Coast Railroad established a train stop, called Manzanita, at the site. A wooden structure was built on top of the old

midden, and the place soon became a popular spot for duck hunters to rendezvous. The bacchanalia would soon follow.

Liquor licenses were granted for an establishment called Manzanita Villa in 1906, but county records indicate the current building wasn't constructed until 1916 for use by San Francisco liquor and cigar dealers Thomas, James and George Moore as a "hotel and dance hall."

The speakeasy:

The white brick building was conspicuous, with arching windows and doorways, Mission-style columns and an upstairs balcony reminiscent of a Wild West brothel. By 1923, the place - then called the Manzanita Roadhouse - had earned a reputation as a "blind pig," a colorful Prohibition-era term for speakeasy.

The Bay Area was a hotbed for bootleg liquor after the Volstead Act established Prohibition, and the Manzanita Roadhouse was one of the region's wildest gin joints.

A Chronicle story in 1923 told about monthly raids and how authorities eventually shut down the Manzanita Roadhouse "in which it is said was sold every known drink of pre-Volstead days."

When the owner asked whether he could continue his hotel operation, the judge told him, "You might as well try to placate a pack of hungry wolves by throwing chocolate eclairs as to ask me to permit that place to operate as a hotel."

It isn't clear what sweets were used to change the judge's mind, but the place became known as the Manzanita Hotel after renovations in 1926.

The Moore family operated the place until 1936. In 1941, it was renamed Emil Plasberg's Top Rail, then the Top Rail Tavern.

In 1947, new owners Paul and Ora Smith built a motel behind the building and placed a neon sign on the roof. It announced, "The Fireside."

Rumors of ghosts began in earnest when two skeletons were found beneath the floorboards during a 1957 renovation. An archaeologist was called in to investigate and determined that the burials, on either side of the dining room, were American Indian. He noted that the owner, Paul Smith, was against any scientific excavation of the site.

The remains were presumably left in place, and the ghostly sounds have been heard at night ever since.

When the Fireside reopens, it will be eligible for the state and national registers of historic places both as an archaeological site and a rare example of an early 20th century roadside inn. The building will feature a wall mural dedicated to what, in every aspect, is a spirited history.