

DRUID HEIGHTS, OLD CHICKEN BARN  
Camino del Canyon  
Golden Gate National Recreation Area  
Mill Valley  
Marin County  
California

HABS CA-2920-C  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
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San Francisco, CA 94104

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### DRUID HEIGHTS, OLD CHICKEN BARN

HABS No. CA-2920-C

- Location:** Camino del Canyon, Mill Valley, Marin County, California
- Significance:** Druid Heights, a secluded, woodsy enclave located adjacent to Muir Woods in Marin County, was home to a variety of artists, authors and activists. During its creative peak from 1953 to 1973, the Druid Heights community had a substantial impact on California and American popular culture in the areas of sexuality, feminism, literature, religion, philosophy, arts and crafts, and the drug culture. While many different people and families lived at Druid Heights during its period of significance, the three most significant individuals were Elsa Gidlow, a pioneer lesbian poet; Roger Somers, a creative and influential artisan and builder; and Alan Watts, the English Episcopalian minister who became the twentieth century's foremost interpreter of Eastern philosophies. The Druid Heights community has roots in the West Coast's culture of political radicalism and nonconformity. Against the cultural backdrop of San Francisco's 1950s literary renaissance and the 1960s Haight-Ashbury countercultural activity, the Druid Heights community facilitated the development of alternative thought and ways of life.
- Description:** The Old Chicken Barn is a 30' x 60' rectangular building, with board and batten construction, rough-sawn, 2" x 4" rafters and a split-wood shingle exterior. The long gable roof, covered in asphalt tab shingles, contains skylights. At the southern elevation, there are a series of wooden decks; Stiles constructed one of the decks around an existing tree. A glass door accesses the hot tub. The majority of the house's double paned, picture windows face southward, including a series of 10-light fixed panes at the bedroom addition. The west elevation windows are a pair of 12-light fixed wood frame windows, a decorative round window and a horizontal single pane. The enclosed porch on the east elevation contains a series of 12-light fixed windows and three sets of 8-light windows. The north elevation contains clerestory windows and a rounded window at the northwest elevation.
- The building's interior is mostly an open floor plan, with different spaces apportioned off as the living/dining room, the kitchen, two bedrooms and

studio space. When Somers and Walters converted the one level agricultural building into a house, they constructed an addition on the downhill half of the floor, resulting in the dining and living areas standing four feet below the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom space. The shift in floor levels demarks the different living spaces. When the Stiles moved into the building, they used the eastern end as an artist's studio; first an iron forge and now as a pottery studio. In 1970, Stiles constructed a second story bedroom to accommodate their expanding family. The northwestern corner of the house, originally a bedroom, is now used as an office.

Throughout the house, there are hardwood floors, wood wall paneling, exposed ceiling beams, wood-frame interior doors and ceiling skylights. The building's original exterior wood shake siding is exposed at the north facing interior walls. The bathroom contains tiled flooring and a unique wooden tub and the living/dining room contains a wood-burning stove. Because of its continued occupancy, the Old Chicken Barn is one of the best-maintained structures at Druid Heights and stands in good condition.

History:

Building History

Alphonse Haapa constructed this chicken barn in 1943, situating the building lengthwise on the southward facing ridge of the Druid Heights knoll. After Elsa Gidlow and Roger Somers purchased the property in 1953, Roger Somers and a local sculptor Jerry Walters modified the building into a residence. In 1963, Ed and Marilyn Stiles moved into the house. Stiles, a skilled carpenter and builder, is credited with constructing Marin County's first filtered, self-regulating redwood hot tub. Stiles continued to modify his home as their family grew and the building's exterior and interior features express his carpentry expertise. The Old Chicken Barn, with its decorative exterior shingles and rustic features, is representative of the Northern California Arts & Crafts construction movement.

Muir Woods and Camino del Canyon

The land use history of Camino del Canyon and Druid Heights is directly linked to the establishment and popularity of Muir Woods. In 1822, after Mexico gained independence from Spain, William Antonio Richardson was granted a 20,000-acre ranch named Rancho Sausalito. During Richardson's ownership, Rancho Sausalito (later southern Marin County)

remained largely rural and undeveloped. When Richardson experienced financial trouble, Samuel R. Throckmorton, a successful San Francisco real estate developer, purchased the land and subdivided it into financially successful dairy farming ranches. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, San Franciscans began to enjoy the rural area around Mount Tamalpais for its exceptional beauty and recreational opportunities. The area's increased popularity prompted different groups to purchase the rural lands, often for different purpose. In 1889, the Tamalpais Land & Water Co. purchased Throckmorton's land and with an eye toward great profits, started subdividing the vast land holdings to create small towns, like Mill Valley. At the same time, William Kent, a wealthy businessman passionate about maintaining the Mount Tamalpais lands for the preservation of its natural resources and beauty, purchased great parcels of Mount Tamalpais for conservation purposes. Largely due to Kent's passion and political sway, the federal government designated the Muir Woods National Monument in 1908.

During this time, other local businessmen who owned 50 acres of private land just north east of Muir Woods, created the Monte Vista Realty Company with the intent to sell off lots for seasonal residential and camping uses. In 1908, Mrs. James Ross purchased one of the real estate parcels in the southeast corner, called Camino del Canyon, with the intent to build a vacation home. However, she underestimated the area's characteristic summer fog and never built any structures on the property. When Mrs. Ross died, she willed the land to her gardener Alphonse Haapa. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, Haapa tried to develop the land for agriculture, building both residential and farm buildings on the property. Unsuccessful at farming, Haapa decided to sell the land by the late 1940s.

### Evolution of Druid Heights

The Druid Heights community evolved organically and unintentionally. In the early 1950s, Rogers Somers met Elsa Gidlow through shared interests and cultural activities in Berkeley. Somers approached Gidlow, as his potential business partner in the purchase of Haapa's property for a quiet living and working environment. In 1953, through a combination of Somers energy and Gidlow's money, they purchased the land and farm buildings in Camino del Canyon. Neither Gidlow nor Somers set out to create a formal commune; there was no clear leadership or community

structure and the group often referred to itself as an “unintentional community.” Elsa Gidlow moved into the best-maintained residential cottage, while Somers moved into the simple agricultural buildings and quickly began to remodel them. Ed Stiles, a talented carpenter, was also looking for a place to work and raise his family. After making a financial deal with Somers, Stiles joined the community and his family moved into the newly remodeled Old Chicken Barn. Elsa Gidlow’s functioned as an informal matriarch and mentor, naming the area “Druid Heights” using the word “druid” as knowing or wise.

From the 1950s through to the early 1970s, Druid Heights functioned as a haven for countercultural exploration. Because of both its isolation and proximity to San Francisco, Druid Heights made the ideal setting for an artists’ retreat. Being only 15 miles north of the city’s lively cultural scene, Druid Heights attracted artists, philosophers, and musicians who would not otherwise have come to such a peaceful, secluded setting. Most people who came to Druid Heights maintained close connections to the city, but living so close to nature inspired much of their work.

#### Key individual at Druid Heights

Elsa Gidlow, a writer born in England in 1898, was one of the first women to write openly lesbian poetry and remains an important historical figure to California’s gay and lesbian community. During the four decades that she lived at Druid Heights, Gidlow wrote nine books, published poetry and supported herself as a freelance journalist, writing articles for several Bay Area trade magazines. Gidlow was a champion of women’s rights and a mentor to many younger women, feminists, writers and activists. Together with Margo St. James, the political activist who lived with Roger Somers at Druid Heights in the early 1970s, Gidlow created the advocacy group called COYOTE (“Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics”). Gidlow nurtured a strong connection to her natural surroundings and believed that gardening was a spiritual practice, pursuing organic, chemical-free gardening before it became a more common practice. Elsa Gidlow died at her Druid Heights home in 1986 and her friends and followers buried her in her garden.

Roger Somers, a builder from Chicago, was a charismatic, energetic artisan whose energy drew people to him. Somers remodeled many of the existing agricultural buildings and constructed new structures, all with his signature organic, natural, curvilinear style. He often used recycled and

salvaged building materials and frequently pushed the boundaries of traditional building methods. In addition to his work at Druid Heights, Somers was commissioned to build a private home in Tahoe, a restaurant in Sausalito and Neil Young's 1972 tour bus. Overtime, his unique and expressive design style became easily recognizable and during the 1960s and 1970s, other builders and craftsmen journeyed to Druid Heights to work and occasionally, to live alongside him. Somers was also involved in the San Francisco jazz circles and drew many famous musicians to the community. Because of Somers magnetic personality, Druid Heights became a gathering place for a wide variety of artists, musicians, and craftsmen, looking for new and experimental experiences. Somers died at his Mandala House in 2001.

Philosopher Alan Watts, born in England in 1915, was one of the most influential transmitters of Eastern religious traditions. Watts published twenty-eight books and gave hundreds of lectures on Zen and Taoism, which served as a philosophical bridge between Eastern and Western thought for the burgeoning counterculture. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Alan Watts lived in San Francisco and Marin County, he often visited Druid Heights and made friends with Elsa Gidlow and Roger Somers. In 1971, Gidlow invited Watts to move to Druid Heights; Watts and his wife moved into the Casa Rondo building, which he renamed the Mandala House. While Watts lived at Druid Heights, he wrote six books and performed many ceremonies, rituals, weddings and alternative psychedelic spiritual practices. The title of Watts' book Cloud Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown (1973) is a reference to his hillside home at Druid Heights. In 1973, Alan Watts died at his Druid Heights home of alcohol-related causes. His disciples buried some of his ashes adjacent to the Society for Comparative Philosophy Library.

#### Changes at Druid Heights

In 1969, the National Park Service made public plans to expand the boundary of Muir Woods by purchasing the entire original 50 acres of the Camp Monte Vista subdivision, eliciting some tense arguments and negotiations regarding land ownership among the Druid Heights community. Ultimately, the federal government paid for the land and provided lifetime estates to Elsa Gidlow, Roger and Faye Somers (his then current partner) and Ed and Marilyn Stiles as the only individuals who held equity in the land. The government required all other non-legal

residents to leave. By the mid-1970s, with the federal government now the landlord, the death of Alan Watts and the departure of the many artistically productive as well as nefarious “hangers-on”, the atmosphere at Druid Heights changed permanently. While the remaining Druid Heights community members still lived and worked at the site, their output and activities ceased to be part of a larger cultural significance. Today, only a few families live in at Druid Heights and the majority of the buildings sit unoccupied.

Sources: *Historic Resource Study for Muir Woods National Monument*; Olmsted Center, National Park Service, 2006

*Draft National Register Determination of Eligibility Report for Druid Heights*

Oral histories transcripts of former Druid Heights community members; Park Archives and Record Center, Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Report: The HABS report was prepared by Kristin Baron, architectural historian, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service.

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The HABS records were prepared between July and November 2016. All existing condition HABS photographs were taken in 2014 and 2016.