

DRUID HEIGHTS, RANCH HOUSE
Camino del Canyon
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Mill Valley
Marin County
California

HABS CA-2920-D
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DRUID HEIGHTS, RANCH HOUSE

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- 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 building is post and beam construction, 1" x 8" tongue and groove horizontal siding and the original gabled roof had a 7-12 feet pitch with a 16" overhang and vents at the north and south elevations. In the late 1950s, Somers raised the roof ridge to its current, curved, super-attenuated "dragon" shape. He created an ornamental polichromy by layering the roof with grey and red decorative asphalt shingles. A series of 2" x 6" decorative beams extend perpendicularly from the north and west facades, held to the exterior of the house by a series of braces. There is vertical bamboo siding near the kitchen entrance. The building does not have a concrete foundation.
- Somers added decks, patios and decorative concrete sidewalk pavers around the building. At the southern elevation, there is a small, grade level wooden patio with wood-frame benches and planter boxes running the length of the kitchen addition. At the western elevation, there is a raised 12' x 20' deck with railing, constructed over remnants of earlier concrete

stairs. There is a 10' x 12' deck with railing at the northern elevation. All of these exterior decks are deteriorating, especially the western deck.

The Ranch House contains a wide variety of doors and windows. The door types include wood frame doors with large single glass panels, a sliding glass door at the kitchen and a decorative wood-frame door adjacent to the bathroom. At the southern elevation, there is a small decorative alcove with seating, shelves and fiberglass insert. The house has many large, single pane windows. The north elevation contains a unique, rounded window.

The Ranch House interior contains a living room, a kitchen, one bathroom and two small bedrooms at the rear of the house. Both the living room and the bathroom are very unusual and display Somers' creative experimentation with styles and building materials. The southern half of the living room has plywood-covered wooden walls, exposed wooden ceilings, flooring paved with large irregular blue stone tiles and a wood burning stove. A local artist installed an upright piano into the south wall. Somers remodeled the northern half of the living room as a Japanese-inspired shoji room, which is elevated above the rest of the living room and fully enclosed with rice paper shoji screens. The screened walls contain decorative wooden details and a large round window that looks to the north. The floor at the north end of the room contains a sunken wooden table with built-in, wrap-around bench seats and decorative stonework.

The bathroom is inventive and fanciful. The toilet and sink area contains a butcher-block countertop and individual carved vertical wooden slats along the toilet, designed in an organic, undulating fashion. Organically shaped carved shelves edge the bottom of the mirror. A sunken tub, protected by a two-piece, hinged cover is set into the blue stone flooring. The bathroom's ornate, built-in vanity has a decorative tryptic of mirrors and shelves; the middle panel contains a mirror and the two side panels may have held shelves and/or electrical lighting. The bottom half contains a series of wooden drawers with an open area for sitting, with a small, fabric-covered seat. The dropped ceilings are decorated with carved wooden panels and fiberglass inserts. Two skylights allow sunlight into the bathroom and much of the walls are covered in vertical paneling. The traditional shower area is tiled in small, square ceramic orange tiles.

The bedrooms and kitchen are more traditional than the living room and bedroom. The two modest bedrooms have plywood paneling and blue stone floor tiles. Somers added a kitchen to the south side of the house, sometime during the 1960s or 1970s. The kitchen has 7' ceilings, orange ceramic tile counter tops, open wooden shelving and the same blue stone tile flooring as found throughout the house. Two long, wrap-around, single-paned windows function as the kitchen's exterior walls. The dropped ceilings in the kitchen, bedrooms and bathroom are made of carved wooden panels with fiberglass inserts. Somers used this design feature in many of his Druid Heights buildings.

The Ranch House is in poor condition. The unreliable building methods as well as the lack of a concrete foundation and inconsistent occupancy, has rendered the building very vulnerable to the elements. During winter storms, trees have fallen directly on the building, causing significant damage to the roof, patio and decks. Water damage, mold and rodent infestation is very apparent throughout the structure.

History:

Building History

Alphonse Haapa built this ranch house in 1928 and it was one of the three buildings standing when Elsa Gidlow and Roger Somers purchased the property in 1953. From the 1950s through the 1970s, Roger Somers extensively remodeled the building, which functioned as both a community center and a residence. Because most of Somers modifications to this building were unpermitted (there are no Marin County permits on record), the dates of the renovations are unknown. Among all the Druid Heights buildings, the Ranch House best exemplifies Roger Somers exuberant architectural style and creative carpentry work. The Ranch House contains a Japanese-inspired shoji ceremony room, an elaborate bathroom and a "sunken" dining room table.

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.

Source: *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 of former Druid Heights community members; transcripts, 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.