

DRUID HEIGHTS, ALAN WATTS LIBRARY  
Camino del Canyon  
Golden Gate National Recreation Area  
Mill Valley  
Marin County  
California

HABS CA-2920-E  
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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  
333 Bush Street  
San Francisco, CA 94104

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### DRUID HEIGHTS, ALAN WATTS LIBRARY

HABS No. CA-2920-E

- 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:** Inspired by the form of a water storage tank, the library is a 16-foot diameter, round structure made of 10' high vertical wooden planks, resting on a post and beam foundation. The building is not held together with nails. Instead, two ¾" galvanized rod straps, linked together by clamped tension fasteners, wrap around the building and hold the wooden framing together with tension. There are a series of fixed as well as hinged long, thin, vertical windows that are either glazed or have fiberglass inserts. The 13' tall conical roof, with rectangular tabbed asphalt shingles, has a round skylight in the center. The front door has an organic shaped wooden handle.
- Sometime between 1973 and 1979, Somers converted the building into a residence. By taking advantage of the roof's four-foot overhang, he built a floor extension at the southern elevation and cut through the original exterior wall to add a kitchen and bathroom extension on the downhill

side. Under the kitchen extension, there is a storage shed with an additional toilet.

The interior contains one open, round room with the kitchen and bath addition at the rear (southern) side. The main room contains a small wood stove on a brick platform. The bed loft, one of Somers' favorite unique furniture features, perches above the central room. Seven curved, swanlike wooden baluster vertical pieces, connected together by rope, loosely enclose the bed loft. Large, 6' wide bookshelves, that doubles as stepladders to the loft, flank both sides of the bed loft walls. There are two closets underneath the loft on either side of the opening into the kitchen.

The library has been unoccupied as a residence since 2003 and is in poor condition. The roof is deteriorating as water leaks in around the center skylight. The uninsulated walls and ceiling have also allowed for water damage and carpeted floors are moldy. The building's surrounding decks are in very poor condition.

History:

Building History

British-born philosopher Alan Watts was one of the most influential transmitters of Eastern religious traditions to Western culture. Watts established the Society for Comparative Philosophy and gave hundreds of lectures on Zen and Taoism. He was friends with both Elsa Gidlow and Roger Somers during the 1950s & 1960s and while living in Marin, he often visited Druid Heights.

In 1971, Watts moved into the Mandala House (Casa Rondo) at Druid Heights and commissioned the construction of an open reading room and meeting place for his Society. Originally, a local Mill Valley contractor named Alfred Kylces designed a square and traditional-looking library building. Neither the proposed shape nor its accompanying budget appealed to Watts. Ed Stiles, inspired by water tower structures, proposed a rounded, non-traditional architectural shape, which appealed to Watts because of its non-Western influences. In 1972, a combination of Ed Stiles, Rogers Somers and Alfred Kylces constructed this one room library. After Watts' death in 1973, Somers converted the library into a residence.

Camino del Canyon and Muir Woods

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.