

Search for the Source of the Permanente

Standing on the banks of Permanente Creek on a recent sunny afternoon, it was easy for me to understand why Henry and Bess Kaiser had loved this place so much. Enough afternoon sunlight was finding its way through the thick cover of trees growing along the stream banks to highlight patches of their moss-covered trunks. Overhead, a hawk was hunting. It soared over a meadow on the side of the canyon, riding a breeze coming up from the valley, now known all over the world as "Silicon," only a few miles away. There were no sounds except the pleasantly reassuring burbling of Permanente Creek itself. In the soft, damp ground along the stream were mountain lion tracks. A big cat had recently come down to drink.

The creek runs through the most remote parts of 36,000 acres of limestone-rich hillsides south of San Francisco. The property is so large that it is marked on some Northern California maps as Permanente, California. Here, just before World War II, Henry Kaiser built one of the largest cement plants in the world. It was a turning point in his career. He had been a contractor, a builder of roads and of dams. Now with the cement plant, he was an industrialist, a full-scale builder. However, way up in the hills above the plant, there are no signs of the industrial activity below—and it is here, in the quiet of this Northern California forest, that the name of the Permanente Medical Groups originated.

When Kaiser purchased the property, it came with a stone-and-redwood building perched high in the hills, but today that building lies in shambles; the walls and roof of what once was a comfortable and attractive building have fallen into the old native stone foundation. During the Pro-



Permanente Creek

hibition era, the large house had been a speakeasy. At that time, only one road trailed up the canyon along the creek, and a guard at the turnoff made sure that guests would have plenty of warning in the unlikely event of a raid. Inspecting his new property, Kaiser was charmed by the beautiful location of the old speakeasy. He reno-

vated it into a lodge and built his own road that ran directly over the hills from his offices at the plant. It was here he would go when he wanted to think through a problem. He would sit on the patio overlooking the stream or walk along its shores. He and Bess grew to love this private place of theirs.

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The first Europeans to cross this land were builders, too. From a hill near the Kaiser property, known locally today as De Anza's Knoll, Colonel Juan Bautista de Anza in 1776 became the first European to reach San Francisco Bay by land. Under orders from the King of Spain, de Anza had been leading an expedition of about 250 troops and civilians overland from Mexico City to protect and reinforce Spain's claim to Northern California by establishing a mission and a fort on the shores of San Francisco Bay. After three months of withstanding deserts, mountains, and Indian attacks, the expedition reached the coast. As the soldiers, settlers, and clergy picked their way down from their hilltop campsite toward their destiny—to find what would become the city of San Francisco—they crossed a small, fast-flowing stream. As they did so, they became the European discoverers of what early maps labeled the "Rio Permanente."

The Spanish named the creek Permanente when they discovered that, unlike others in these hills, it was a dependable source of water; they could count on it to flow during dry seasons, even during dry years. Today, to get to the upper reaches of Permanente Creek, a different river must be crossed—the unending river of immense trucks that rumble through the yards of the Kaiser Cement Company kicking up a haze of gray dust as they carry loads of cement destined for use in construction projects throughout the Bay Area. To protect the creek from contamination of loose cement dust in the air and on the ground,



Permanente Creek, near the old cabin



Side stream entering Permanente Creek

all the rainwater falling on the plant is diverted into a large settling pond. Permanente Creek leaves the huge facility with the same sparkle it had high in the hills above the plant.

From the plant, the creek tumbles through private land—mostly hillside pastures—and into a valley headed by a large, neatly groomed cemetery operated by the Archdiocese of San Jose. The cemetery's administration building houses one of the earliest surviving maps of the area: a 19th-century hand-drawn map that shows the house of John Snyder, an early settler on the banks of the upper Permanente. The farm was on what became Kaiser property, and on the banks of Permanente Creek, Mr. Snyder had a dependable water source for his livestock.

Another mile or so down the valley, the Rio Permanente passes through an old Mexican land grant, the Rancho San Antonio. Today, what were cattle pastures and agricultural land is a well-tended regional park spread across the Rio Permanente's rolling valley. Families with baby strollers, bicyclists, dog walkers, joggers, and Frisbee players take time from high-pressure jobs to take advantage of this broad green recreational space on the edge of Silicon Valley. However, the stream is being threatened by new development. Many environmental and historical preservation groups are energetically protesting current proposals to build tract housing further down along the waterway. Rio Permanente is bringing up very strong feelings around here.

From Rancho San Antonio, the creek continues northward toward San Francisco Bay. Unrecognized by the tens of thousands of drivers who cross it daily, Permanente Creek passes underneath Interstate 280 and then flows through a culvert beneath Highway 101 before it mixes with the San Francisco Bay near Mountain View. One

hundred and sixty-six years after de Anza and his expedition first crossed the creek, Bess Kaiser suggested that the name of that attractive and dependable stream would also be a good name for the new medical program at the shipyards. Somehow, she felt, the name "Permanente" went well with health. It still does. ❖



Steve Gilford (right), author, and Danny Lowe, Kaiser Cement Plant Safety Manager, at Henry Kaiser's old cabin.