

# Coastside Chronicles

A Publication of the Half Moon Bay History Association

Spring 2023

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“It was the most peaceful town I ever saw... nobody at any time wore pistols in Halfmoon.”

—Galen Wolf  
1970 interview



## Help keep Coastside history alive!

Coastside Gives is here, and your donation of any amount to the History Association will go toward a **generous match of \$10,000!** Your donation will help us open the new Coastside History Museum.



Your donation will help open the new Coastside History Museum in the barn behind the old jail, at 505 Johnston Street in Half Moon Bay.  
Thank you!

The Half Moon Bay History Association is dedicated to bringing together all members of the Coastside community to preserve, celebrate, and share the history of the San Mateo County Coastside from Montara to Año Nuevo.

Our history is the lives and works of all the cultures that have made the Coastside what it is today from the first Ohlone people, to the Spanish and Mexican periods, through the early American period, to modern times.

## The storied history of the Ken Kesey house in La Honda

—Marc Strohle

Many people know of author Ken Kesey, famous for writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but fewer know that he spent a significant period in his life in La Honda. His house and property, nestled in the redwoods on La Honda Road, have a storied history that started with his infamous parties in the 1960s.



The story continues to the current day with the owners who bought the property in 1997 and faithfully restored it after it had seen years of neglect and a near-catastrophic flood in 1998.

La Honda today is so bucolic and serene, it is hard to imagine that back in the 1960s it was home to mind-bending LSD-laced parties attended by writers including Allen Ginsberg, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter S. Thompson, as well as the Grateful Dead, and a group of Kesey associates who called themselves the Merry Pranksters.

The story of Kesey's house began when, at the invitation of Vic Lovell, a Stanford psychology graduate student, Kesey volunteered to take part in a CIA-sponsored secret military program at the Menlo Park Veterans' Hospital where he worked as a night aide. The project studied the effects of psychedelic drugs, including LSD, on the test subjects.

Kesey said that his role as a drug guinea pig, as well as his experiences working at the hospital, inspired *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

The book's success allowed him to buy the La Honda property in the late 1950s, and he lived there until the early 1970s with wife Faye and their two children.

Kesey held frequent parties and "Acid Tests," where fluorescent paint, black lights, strobe lights, and large amplifiers provided psychedelic effects for attendees. These parties were described in some of Allen Ginsberg's poems as well as Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Writer Hunter S. Thompson wrote an account of one event in his book *Hell's Angels* following a particularly mind-bending party to which he invited 40 of the bikers to Kesey's property where they took LSD.

Wolfe also immortalized a Kesey road trip in a psychedelically painted 1939 Harvester school bus named Furthur. The bus was driven by Kesey's



associate Neal Cassady, the inspiration for Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Further carried the Merry Pranksters, orange juice laced with LSD, and Wolfe, who

documented the trip. He said the trip had a dual purpose, "One was to turn America on to this particular form of enlightenment," the other was to publicize [Kesey's] new book, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, written at his La Honda home. →

## The Ken Kesey house in La Honda...continued

Aside from his fame as an author, Kesey is remembered as a psychedelic counterculture figure who helped usher in the hippie movement and served as a major inspiration to the counterculture movement. He viewed himself as the link between the beat movement and the hippies.

In 1965, Kesey and 13 friends were arrested for growing marijuana on his property, and he was imprisoned for five months. Shortly thereafter he settled in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, where he maintained a secluded, family-oriented lifestyle for the rest of his life. The La Honda home was variously rented or vacant for over 30 years until it was sold in 1997.

At the time of the sale of the house, San Francisco Chronicle reporter Michael McCabe caught up with Kesey, making the mistake of calling the house a cabin. "First of all, it is not a nice little cabin," Kesey growled. "It is a big nice old house in the middle of a redwood forest."



Then he turned the telephone over to his wife Faye, who said that they were "selling the cabin partly to get some money after settling out of court with a San Mateo County sheriff's deputy who sued them." The La Honda cabin sold for \$239,000 Kesey said "because it had become rundown, and vandals had looted several relics of the Merry Prankster era, along with pieces of artwork, collages, and other mementos."

Current owner Terry Adams has many talents, including authoring many poems including a collection called *Adam's Ribs*. He says on his website that "in 1997 Kesey's La Honda house was a Fixer-Upper,

accessed only by forest trail or foot bridge across the San Gregorio creek." No banks were willing to provide financing, so the new owners financed directly with Kesey.

Bringing this story full circle, Kesey's dedication to *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* read "To Vic, who told me there were no dragons, then led me to their lairs."

Adams says "that same Vic Lovell is an old friend of mine and helped negotiate the sale, explaining to Ken that I was not only a poet, but a Masters in literature, a psychedelia aficionado, a General Contractor, and motorcycle racer to boot! A perfect fit!" You'll remember that Lovell also recruited Kesey to the CIA study that started this epic.

Adams believes the original structure from the 1940s may have been a hunting cabin, noting that the house is much larger than it appears from the street. On the sale's closing day Ken referred to the house as his "Viking Lodge."

Adams and wife Eva Knodt's early years at the house were anything but easy, as he notes "the El Niño flood of February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998, almost destroyed the house, but flood insurance and a FEMA Disaster loan allowed us to restore it." He goes on to say that "both Eva & I are woodworkers and builders, and we preserved the antique aesthetic of the house, removing, numbering, and restoring original interior paneling."

Terry continues the story, stating "After we moved back in, in 1999 Ken and the Pranksters, including Ken Babbs, Mountain Girl, George Walker, and Roy Sebern, and newer faces, visited us in Furthur, on their way to England to look for Merlin. After a tearful tour of the re-built house – several pranksters were touched to see the old place given new life." Ken Elton Kesey passed away on November 12, 2001, age 86. →

## The Ken Kesey House in La Honda ...continued

Adams says that “on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1964 Furthur tour, Ken’s son Zane and a gaggle of new Pranksters re-traced the original cross-country route, finishing at our place in 2014,” A fitting end to this story.

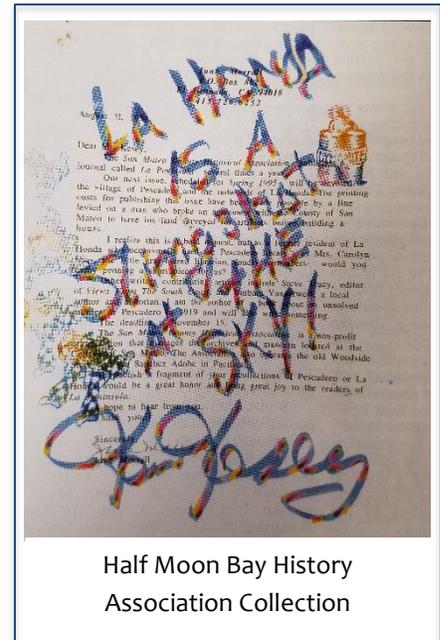
Adam’s website notes that “We show the house occasionally to school classes, researchers, and interested folks from all around the world, but it requires a balance since we have no ambition to be a public site. ♦

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## A bit of Kesey whimsy

In 1994 author June Morrall was preparing an article for the San Mateo County Historical Association’s journal *La Peninsula*. She wrote to Kesey: “Our next issue...will be devoted to the village of Pescadero and the redwoods of La Honda...I realize this is a bold request, but...would you consider penning a short piece for us?”

Kesey replied by penning this short piece, on Ms. Morrall’s original letter:



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## History Mysteries

Do you have a Coastside history mystery you’d like us to investigate? Let us know! Email us at [info@halfmoonbayhistory.org](mailto:info@halfmoonbayhistory.org).

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## Articles and Videos!

Visit the History Association website to read intriguing articles, and to watch videos—[halfmoonbayhistory.org](http://halfmoonbayhistory.org)

## Galen Wolf, Coastside artist

—Ellen Chiri

Galen Wolf was born in San Francisco in 1889 and grew up in the city. His grandparents, Mary and William Griffith, lived in Half Moon Bay and he spent summer vacations with them. “I walked all over the place. I’ve been from end to end of this coast” he said in a 1970 interview with the Spanishtown Historical Society.

To get to Half Moon Bay he took the train from San Francisco to San Mateo and walked over the hill. “I guess I’ve walked the road from San Mateo to Halfmoon at least 100 times,” he said, “and driven it with a team and rode it horseback and rode it in old cars and new cars. I knew that road—every curve, every bush.”

He started painting “...in about 1900...in 1905 I went to Europe for about a year and made many sketches. I came back just in time to get them burned up in the San Francisco fire... I spent the year of 1906 down here [Half Moon Bay]. It was a very happy year. It was the most peaceful town I ever saw... nobody at any time wore pistols in Halfmoon.”

Wolf stopped painting after the San Francisco earthquake and fire. His family needed him, and the young man took on the adult responsibilities of running a business.

He didn’t start painting again until he moved to Half Moon Bay in 1932. He began working full-time on Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects. When those projects ended he continued as a professional artist, focusing on his beloved Coastside.

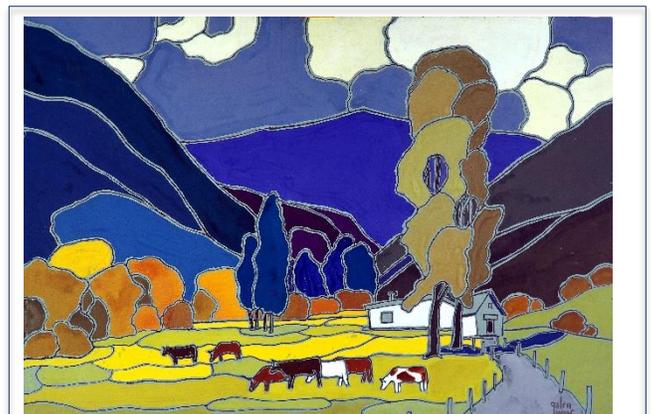
In the 1950s Wolf’s vision began to deteriorate, severely limiting him during the last few years of his life. He continued to paint even as his eyesight worsened, however. The Coastside landscapes were so familiar to him, they were vivid in his mind’s eye.

His works include landscapes and innovative watercolor mosaics that depicted the land he loved.

Wolf considered the Coastside his “...lifelong friend, the small, gentle land between the surf and the hilltops. Its head is pillowed on Pedro Mountain, its limbs stretch south to the point of Año Nuevo.” ♦



“House in the Hollow”  
sketch for a watercolor  
Half Moon Bay History Association Collection



“Coastland”  
watercolor mosaic  
©Shannon Nottestad

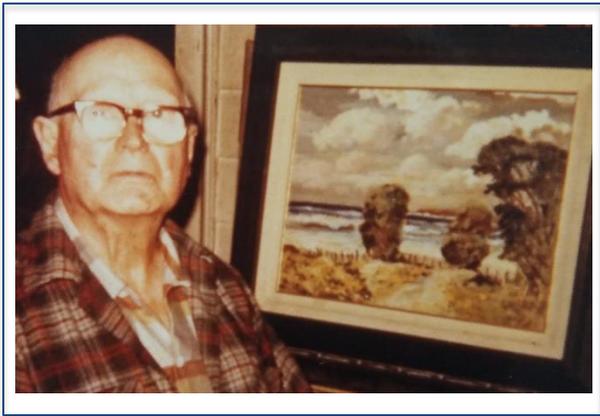
## First person: Remembering artist Galen Wolf

—Pat Keefe

I met Galen Wolf in the early 1970s when he was quite old. He said that he was not teaching but to come see his art. A close friend and I were welcomed to come see him and his artwork here in Half Moon Bay, up at his home in the original Frenchman's Creek Road, which was quite a little ride back up in the mountain. Luckily we had a Jeep and it was fine.

Galen was charming and the old house was right up over a creek that flowed down the canyon. He agreed to give me lessons. So we would get in my Jeep and he would have his paints, and when we found the right spot he would start to sketch and number certain areas of the sketch. Galen had memorized his palette. He taught me by having me copy his paintings, the way the teachers in Europe taught.

Galen gave me this painting, which is in my private collection of his work.



Galen Wolf and untitled Coastside scene, 1972  
Painting courtesy of Pat Keefe



Untitled Coastside scene  
Pat Keefe Collection

Galen loved history, especially the coast legends and stories, and he used them in his art. He talked me into going back to school and getting an Art degree which I am very thankful for.

I am sorry that I met him so late. A true artist. ♦

## Bach! Dancing! —and Dynamite?

--Ellen Chiri

In 1957, bohemian-at-heart Pete Douglas and his wife Patricia moved to Half Moon Bay and bought an old beer joint on Miramar beach. Pete began inviting equally bohemian friends to jazz parties, with jam sessions in what was basically the Douglas living room.

One day in 1963 friends were hanging out on a Sunday afternoon when Pete decided to change the musical mood. "I put on my recording of Bach's Brandenburg Concerti," he's quoted as saying, and dancing began—"...a form of West Coast Swing." Meanwhile, some folks had come by some dynamite and they set about exploding it on the beach. A guest declared that it was—the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society. The Bach was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1964 and began attracting jazz luminaries.

Lining the Bach's walls are Brian McMillen's photographs of such greats as Bill Evans, Carmen McRae, Stan Getz, Bobby Hutcherson, Wayne Shorter, Branford Marsalis... they and hundreds more have played in the Bach's unique atmosphere.



Stan Getz in 1983 epitomized the intimate, laid-back experience of a Sunday afternoon at the Bach.

—Courtesy of Brian McMillen Photography

Pete Douglas passed away in 2014, but the music continues to resonate—if not the dynamite. His daughter Barbara Riching grew up at the Bach with her sisters and helped her parents run it.

Today she continues the Sunday afternoon concerts, presenting jazz greats in the Bach's unique setting where musicians and audience share an intimate experience. ♦



Musical memorial for Pete  
October 2014

## Why is it called Kitty Fernandez Park?

--Ellen Chiri

The little park at the corner of Main and Filbert Streets in Half Moon Bay is a playground for neighborhood kids, a meeting place where friends visit, and a center for music and frivolity during the town's Pumpkin Festival each October.



Kitty Fernandez Park gazebo  
Main & Filbert Streets, Half Moon Bay

The park was built in 1983 with funding from the Half Moon Bay Beautification Committee and named in honor of Elbert "Kitty" Fernandez.

Fernandez was born in 1911 on the old Mills Ranch in Higgins Canyon, and he grew up there. The ranch is now a historical site at Burleigh Murray Ranch State Park.

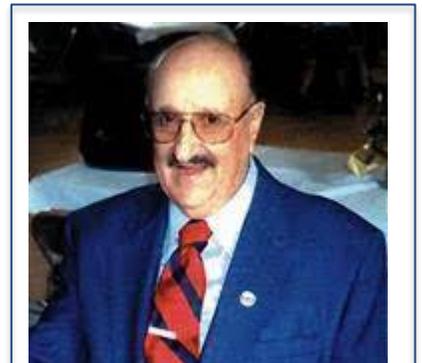
A State Park sign quoted him: "You had to go out and buy your sugar...and your flour. The rest of the stuff you raised. You raised beans and potatoes and beef, and you had the best of bacon; you'd have butter and cream. And there were plum trees... I farmed all those hills... if the horses could stand, we'd farm it."

As a young man Fernandez worked on roads for San Mateo County Public Works, then worked in the brine room of a pea-canning factory off what is now designated as Highway 92. Then he returned to his roots, farming peas and grain and raising cattle.

Kitty Fernandez was also a Half Moon Bay city father. He helped to get the city of Half Moon Bay incorporated in the late 1950s. He was a charter member of the City Council where he served for 14 years, during which he served two terms as mayor.

### But—why "Kitty"?

Elbert Fernandez got his nickname as a youngster. His older brother Joe loved cats and often brought strays home. Joe became known as Kitty, and Elbert became "Little Kitty" Time passed, and Elbert became Kitty to one and all. ♦



Elbert "Kitty" Fernandez  
1911-2005

## Here's what's up at the History Association

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### From the President

—Juliette Applewhite

Coastside Gives is here! We are excited about our generous match of \$10,000, hoping to reach our goal! We are thrilled about the new exhibits for our new Coastside History Museum, and we are looking for volunteers to help us in this very exciting time. Our team is very grateful to the nine members of the Lions Club who donated their materials, time, and talent to paint the accent walls of our new History Museum. We look forward to celebrating the 5th Anniversary of the Jail Museum in June, along with the opening of the Coastside History Museum!

### Oral History—Coastside voices

—Marty Koughan

History writ large is the aggregation of small details about real people and the way they lived. The Oral History project gathers these human stories to help us understand the lives of our ancestors and the forces that shaped the Coastside's social, economic, and cultural development.

We record the personal memories of local residents about the Coastside's rich and varied ethnic roots that define our sense of community. They are the voices that help keep history alive. If you or someone you know have Coastside stories from long ago, let us know! Email us at [info@halfmoonbayhistory.org](mailto:info@halfmoonbayhistory.org).

### Quarterly programs

—Ellen Chiri

Our quarterly programs cover Coastside history from Montara to Año Nuevo. What topic would you like to see presented? Let me know at [hmbhaPrograms@gmail.com](mailto:hmbhaPrograms@gmail.com)!

### The Education Program is back in schools

—Vicky Mitchell

The Education Program has restarted its school-visit program, post-COVID! We have been to three local schools, sharing artifacts and stories with children. We hope to expand upon this in the coming year and perhaps to develop history-related craft activities at the Coastside History Museum over the summer.

### New museum to open—come volunteer!

—Vicky Mitchell

The new museum will open in June, and we are recruiting volunteers to staff it and the current small museum in the old jail. Being a docent is fun and rewarding! If you'd like to find out more, or know someone who might, please contact me at [VolunteerNowHMBHA@gmail.com](mailto:VolunteerNowHMBHA@gmail.com).

### Our artifact collection—small but mighty

—Mary Ruddy

The History Association's collection of artifacts may be small, but it is rich in local history! Every piece tells a story of what life has been like on the Coastside for thousands of years. We look forward to sharing many artifacts in our new, expanded Coastside History Museum in the barn behind the old jail. We hope to receive future donations or loans of artifacts and archival documents that further illustrate the early days of Coastside communities. If you can help, please contact me at [hmbhacollections@gmail.com](mailto:hmbhacollections@gmail.com).

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## Help Preserve Coastside History

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