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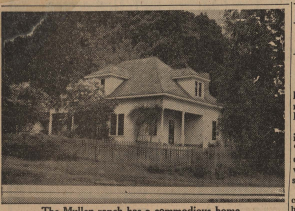
Kneeland--Prairie and Mountains Meet

PICTURE VIEWS, WOODLANDS AND EARLY HISTORY MINGLE

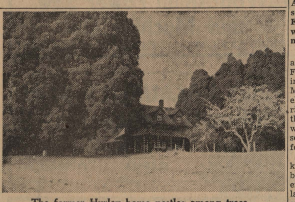
By CHET SCHWARZKOPF

Kneeland Prairie comprises one of Eureka's nearest mountain districts, for it is located hardly more than 15 miles from the county court house. In fact, portions of Kneeland's ridge are closer than that, while the road sign by Kneeland school, on the eastern, or Iaqua Buttes side, gives the mileage to Eureka as 17.

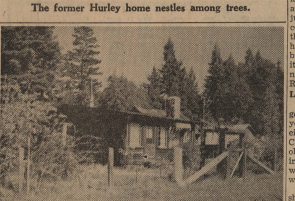
Distance by air is, of course, considerably less, and when there is snow on the prairie, it looks almost within walking distance. Its elevation is given officially as 2,660 feet at the "view rock" on the western edge of the prairie. This was determined by a naval survey during the war, according to Tom Cosgrove, owner of a nearby ranch. Actually, its altitude varies considerably, but it is high enough throughout the entire area for some bit of winter snowfall.



The Mullen ranch has a commodious home.



The former Hurley home nestles among trees.

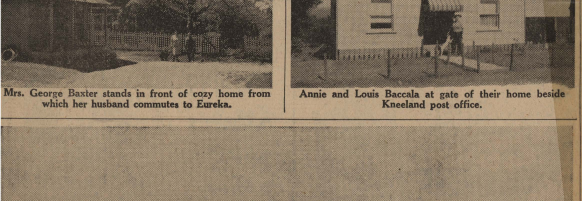


May and Bert Pettengill's neat summer home.

Looking across north flank of Kneeland Prairie toward Mad river.

Mrs. George Baxter stands in front of cozy home from which her husband commutes to Eureka.

Annie and Louis Baccala at gate of their home beside Kneeland post office.



Magnificent panorama of Ocean and Humboldt Bay from atop scenic rock, Kneeland Prairie, 2660 feet elevation.

In fact, Kneeland Prairie, because of its accessibility, long has been popular for winter sports. And in the summer time, when the seacoast often is enveloped in fog, Kneeland will be warm and clear, with a white billowing sea beneath it.

Kneeland can best be described as a place of magnificent views. From its long ridge, water drains into Eel river, Humboldt Bay, and Mad river. And the visitor, traveling the road atop Kneeland's ridge, can get a good view of all three—although he can only see water in Humboldt Bay and the sea, so well are the nearby hills forested.

The prairie itself, for some unknown reason, is almost entirely bare of trees. It comprises several square miles of rolling hill land—which almost became an airport during the war, but was judged too big a job after serious consideration and surveys. For there was just a little too much hill land for even the huskiest of bulldozers to level off—although it could have been done, had the need been more acute . . . or if Red Bunyan had been available!

LET'S GO UP TO KNEELAND

Over the old Arcata road you go, to Freshwater Corner. Here, you have the option of two routes either turn left at the Freshwater Corners' school, and go over the old Kneeland road that was built in 1872—or go through Freshwater and up the newer road that was built in the late 90's.

The newer road is a little shorter, and it climbs through a forest area that is still being logged—although most of the present logging is being done farther back. There is truly a great sweep of timber throughout the entire Kneeland drainage. Redwoods, fir, the famed "Kneeland pine," maple, oak, madrone—to say nothing of a riot of flowers beginning to come into bloom.

The one paved road that climbs to Kneeland has taken a rugged beating in recent years, for it was never planned to handle the big logging trucks that course continually up and down it. A pall of dust hangs over the road all the way, as the giant vehicles roar up and down the grade. Credit is due Humboldt county for maintaining it to the best of their ability, despite adverse conditions.

"We almost need a traffic officer up here at time," one older resident of Kneeland says. "But after all, you must remember that this is the only road serving one of the biggest timber areas in Northern California. There's a lot of logging going on now, and it will continue as long as the market holds up."

BREATHTAKING VIEWS

From atop Kneeland's ridge, you can look down upon Humboldt Bay, with Eureka nestling by its side like a tiny toy village. Way out to sea, a fog bank lies along the curve of the earth, while the breakers foam in white lines along Samoa beach. In the haze to the south, Mendocino's hills loom against the Pacific.

Below you, a vast blue-green expanse of forest sweeps over the hills and blends with the horizon mists. And a mile or so further on, you look across the breadth of Mad river's upper valley to the Trinity mountains beyond—still touched here and there with snow.

You feel almost awed at the tremendous sweep of space across that valley, with its bank of cool, wind-scoured clouds on guard overhead. It's one thing to look at Humboldt on a map. It's quite another to realize its extent from atop Kneeland ridge. And even so, you have only seen one corner of this empire-county of ours. It's a land of the gods . . . an Olympus. No wonder Red Bunyan is its hero!

Close by the road, as you travel on, are mountain glens and dells, set amid green hills. It is difficult to realize you are only minutes from downtown Eureka which is fast becoming a city. It is country like this that makes living in Eureka a joy—for you can get away into the hills and uplands so quickly.

KNEELAND'S SCHOOL

You round a turn in the road and ahead of you, on a wooded knoll, is the Kneeland school. In charge is Mrs. Lillian Bassford, and there are some 24 pupils now in attendance. It is noon hour, and the youngsters are playing softball in a setting no city school can hope to duplicate.

The building is an old one, Mrs. Bassford tells you—built about 1885, while school records in it date back even earlier. But it appears in good condition despite the fact that it is said to be the oldest school building still in use in California. And there are plans a-forming, you're told, for a fine new building ere long.

Mrs. Bassford, who has taught in the Kneeland school for 21 years, tells you that her school serves a wide area. A bus brings pupils from nine miles away, on the old Kneeland road, toward Eureka, and from five miles away on the Iaqua area, where the former Yager school is now closed.

"Our enrollment has increased greatly in the past few years," Mrs. Bassford says. "In 1943, we were down to three children, and had to be classed as an emergency district. In August, 1948, by contrast, we had 38 . A number of families have moved away since then, because of small mills' closing, so now we're down to 24. In the 1930's, we averaged about twelve pupils."

"Some of the children attending Kneeland school are of the third generation—their grandparents learned their three R's in that same building! So the Kneeland school has played its part.

There's a nip in the air as you stand in the school yard, and Kneeland's teacher tells you there was a fairly good frost that very May morning. "I like it here," she adds. "There's no place like it, matter of fact, to live in. Let others have the cities."

EARLY SETTLERS

Kneeland got its name, according to the records of kindly postmistress Annie Baccala, from John J. Kneeland, who first came to the prairie in 1852. Present population of the area served by the postoffice is about 200, Mrs. Baccala estimates. She and her husband, Louis, are looked upon as "newcomers"—they've only been there since 1916!

Many of the early settlers in and round Kneeland were Irish, right from the old sod, who came in from the mines at Virginia City, Nevada. Names like Mullen, Barry, Fitzgerald, Hurley, and Riggs, still are much in evidence. In fact, in the days when the boys were young and gay, the countryside was kiddingly referred to as the "Hibernian battle ground." But it was lots of fun! And the only real battles fought were the Indians who—poor souls—didn't know what they were up against when they tackled the Irish!

Among Kneeland's historic ranches is the Barry place, of some 600 acres, located on the west end of the prairie, overlooking Humboldt Bay and the sea. In a location out of this world for views, Tom Cosgrove runs cattle and sheep, while his 80 years younger brother, the former Mary Barry, keeps house for him. Mrs. Cosgrove's sister, Mrs. Charles Quigg, and her brother, Phil, live in Eureka. All went to the little Kneeland school as children.

First settlers came in by trail from Elk river and Freshwater creek, Mrs. Cosgrove tells you. In later days, the Mike Fitzgerald ranch—another historic place—was an overnight stopover for people on their way into the Trinity and upper Mad river country.

Snows are fairly heavy at times, Tom Cosgrove says, but the county gives excellent snowplow service right to the ranch doors. "Be sure to see Tim Mullen." Tom advises, as you enjoy coffee and pie served by his smiling mother. "Tim knows about this part of the world from A to Z."

MORE KNEELAND HISTORY

Big, kind-spoken Tim Mullen lives with his niece and her husband, Frances and Cornell Paddock, who operate the 1360-acre Mullen ranch. Tim is the last of the three Mullen brothers. John, Bill and himself, sons of Jerry Mullen, who settled there with his own brothers Pat and Dave, in the 60's.

Tim Mullen was born at nearby Lawrence creek, 78 years ago—but there must be an elixir in that Kneeland mountain air, for he is as alert as a man half his age.

He tells you about the old Fair Oaks hotel that used to stand on the Iaqua road, near the school. It was built about 1880 by Dan Campbell, and was the scene of many a merry dance in olden days.

The United States government built a fort at Iaqua Buttes in the Indian war days of the 1850's, and a road was put through to there in the 80's. This had such steep grades that wagons had to be let downhill by ropes snubbed around trees!

Kneeland once had a store run by a man named Chestnut, Tim tells you. In later years, John Mullen ran the post office and a small store, whose building burned down recently.

Bad man of the area, according to Tim, was one Jim Brown, who tried to run everyone out and was said to have scalped people in order to blame it on the Indians. "Brown finally left," Tim stated briefly, and let it go at that. You wonder just how.

Iaqua Butte was an Indian smoke signal place, Tim continues. The word is Indian for "good morning," or a similar greeting, and was pronounced "Ere-oo-kway," but the white man shortened its spelling. Nearby Soldiers' Grove was the scene of an army massacre in the 1850's. One man named Booth escaped by going down a creek to avoid being trailed, but by the time he returned with help, it was too late. That stream is still called Booth's Run.

A noted horse fancier all of his life, Tim Mullen also spent several years in Alaska, returning to his native Kneeland about 1900. "There's a lot of old-time names associated with Kneeland," he says. "Many of them are still prominent in Humboldt. There were Jim Nellist, Tom Bulger, Charlie and Mel Roberts, Judge Sevier, Isaac Gift, John Bell, Cap Stenson, J. T. Frederickson, Tom Douglas, Bill and Ed Edline, Charles Flagg, Tom Keenan, John Nutter, "Madam" Smith, Mike Fitzgerald, John Hurley, Charlie Shephard, Bill Ashfield, Ed and Mary Barry, Ed and Rufe McDowell, Charlie Russman, Bill Ashfield, Lew Hurlbutt, John Johnson, Jake Shaw, A. D. Gordon, John J. Kneeland, "Black Jim" Euret, Dave King, Luther Sibley, the Kleisers—and still others, I guess. You can hardly remember them all."

ALL'S WELL

Tim laughs as he tells of one incident. Two young Kneelanders were courting the same girl. They finally met and shot it out. The loser in the girl's affections pretended to be killed. Whereupon the winner set out for Eureka to give himself up.

As soon as the winner was out

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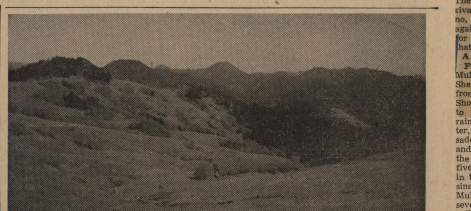

Iaqua Buttes loom against sky from east flank of Kneeland.

Mrs. Lillian Bassford and pupils of Kneeland school oblige.

Lew Hess is building spacious lodge atop viewpoint.

Roy Pritchett beside big fireplace in Hess' lodge.

The Paul Williamson's summer home, Kneeland.

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of sight, the loser got to his feet and hurried to a house where he knew his rival would stop. Sure enough he did—and the loser came out shooting. But all he did was chip off a piece of the other man's saddle.

That ended it. The winner married the girl and they moved away. Years later they returned. The winner looked up his old rival on sudden impulse and—so, they didn't start shooting again—they became fast friends for the rest of their lives! And that was that.

A LADY BRINGS THE MAIL

Frances Paddock, who is Tim Mullen's niece, has a rugged job. She drives a 40-mile mail route from Eureka to Kneeland, Iaqua, Showers Past, Yager, and back to Eureka, thrice weekly, come rain, snow, or blizzard. Last winter, the snows were so deep a saddle horse couldn't get through, and she had to walk over part of the route. Snow was four and five feet on the level, and 15 feet in the hollows. It was the worst since the winter of 1889-90, Tim Mullen says, when the snow stood seven feet on the level.

There is an old cemetery in Iaqua, Mrs. Paddock tells you. Many pioneers are buried there—including the grandmother of Jimmy Doolittle of World War II fame—Mrs. Rose Shephard.

And on the old Indian signal place atop Iaqua Butte, there is now a U. S. Forestry Service lookout tower, you're told.

OTHER KNEELANDERS

John Hurley, son of pioneer John Hurley, was born in Kneeland in 1872, and lived there until 1947, when he sold his 600-acre ranch to Herb Hurt, of Arcata. Now, he and his pleasant wife Victoria live in Eureka. Grandfather Hurley pioneered there in 1868. John tells you, and built the Hurley home in 1885.

First automobile in Kneeland was a Marmon, brought in by Bill Mullen, about 1908, you're told. John brought in one of the first Fords in 1915. "And I didn't like it," Mrs. Hurley adds. "Horses seemed much better."

Mrs. Hurley was born in Arcata, the daughter of Stuart Foster. The first route from Arcata to Kneeland direct, she says, was an old trail that came in by way of Boynton's Prairie—named after a pioneer who was killed by the Indians.

Another third generation Kneelander still on the home holding is Billy Hunter, and still another is J. Irwin Frederickson—both of whom keep some of the region's best livestock and operate up-to-date ranches.

KNEELAND COMMUTER

A number of Eureka people—like Lew Hess, the Paul Williamsons, Pettenbills, and others, own homes in Kneeland area. And one man commutes daily from there to his job in Eureka, the year 'round.

He is George Baxter, who has been with the Eureka Inn almost continuously since it was started in 1922. Cheerful and likeable George, who is well known to most older Humboldters, lives with his equally cheerful and likeable wife Effie, in a neat modern home on the old Kneeland road, where they built two years ago.

"We like Kneeland," the Baxters say. And George adds, "It may be a trifle rough to commute by auto during the winter, but it is worth it. I go back and forth over the old road now days to avoid the big trucks. There isn't a prettier trip in Humboldt."

Mrs. Baxter chuckles over the old Mountain View resort run by Archie McBride down on Mad river, which was started in the 1890's. "We once drove down there by horse and buggy when I was a young girl," she said. "That was a rugged trip, but lots of Eureka people used to make it. Nobody was in a mile-a-minute hurry like they seem to be now. But Kneeland and the hills are as nice as ever."

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