

THE PARADOX OF PARADISE

C MARIN - 1700
NEG 7000

FILE

Anne Ken: California Room,
MARIN COUNTY LIBRARY



"MARIN'S NEGROES HAVE LITTLE EXPERIENCE OF THE GOOD LIFE AS THE REST OF THE COUNTY KNOWS IT"

In this article reprinted from *Horizon* magazine, Tiburon author Kenneth Lamott warns outlanders that although some may see Marin as the best of all possible worlds, this may not be good enough.

By KENNETH LAMOTT

In the course of a conversation with a man who runs an institute for treating alcoholics, I asked where the greatest incidence of alcoholism occurs in the San Francisco area, which is notoriously one of the wettest places in the world. My expert laughed and said he had just looked over a survey that had shown that the hardest-drinking people around San Francisco were the American Indians in the Oakland slums and the residents of the Tiburon peninsula in Marin County. I didn't laugh quite as heartily as he did, because, although his point was both just and striking, I happen to live on the Tiburon peninsula myself and have for the past seventeen years.

The peninsula, which encompasses the communities of Tiburon and Belvedere, whose combined population is 8,000, is one of the most affluent sections of one of the richest suburban counties in the United States. Marin County as a whole runs neck and neck with such other enclaves of upper-middle-class prosperity as San Mateo County, to the south of San Francisco; Montgomery County, in Maryland; Westchester County, New York; and Los Alamos County, New Mexico. The current "effective buying income" (after taxes) for an average Marin family is between eleven and twelve thousand dollars.

The 200,000 people who live in Marin's 520 square miles have available to them an abundance of the tools of leisure — besides the bottle — that is surely rivaled only by the best situated of retirement communities, which the towns of this county decidedly are not. The residents are on the whole working people — lawyers, architects, doctors, advertising men, vice presidents of something, stockbrokers, sales managers, and so on. Most of them travel daily to San Francisco to earn the means to enjoy what is just possibly the closest any Americans have yet come to the dream of the Good Life.

The evidence is impressive. To take one example, the fortunate people who live on Belvedere lagoon, where houses on narrow lots can be bought for seventy-five thousand dollars and up, can board their Lidos and El

Toros from docks in their backyards and sail until a neighbor hails them to come ashore for a drink. For sailors to whom the lagoon is cribbed and confining there are two yacht clubs from which they can sail out into the thirty-knot winds of San Francisco Bay or through the Golden Gate into the great Pacific itself. There are two tennis clubs on the peninsula, with swimming pools and a total of fifteen courts, most of which seem to be in use most of the time except when a winter storm is actually lashing their surfaces. A little farther away are eight golf courses. Ocean beaches are within an hour's drive. Only twenty minutes away is the foot of Mount Tamalpais, with lakes stocked with trout and a network of hikers' trails through the redwoods and madrone. Twenty-five per cent of the county is occupied by park and recreation areas, with the great redwoods of Muir Woods and the rolling moors and white cliffs of Point Reyes offering the most dramatic prospects.

While entertaining friends from Washington, D.C., we drove them one afternoon from our house on the bay through the forests of Mount Tam to our weekend shack on the mesa at Bolinas, which looks out over the Pacific. The trip took barely an hour. Our friends protested smilingly that it was hardly decent to live among such a concentration of good things. I thought I detected a note of puritanism in their envy, a suggestion that, as in the soap operas, true happiness cannot be bought, even in California.

Dramatic! Beautiful! Historic!
— Marin County Chamber of Commerce

A local historian once startled a gathering of his patriotic compeers by reading a paper that began with the observation that Marin is where the sick Indians used to be sent. As a matter of fact, tubercular Indians from around the bay were cared for in the warm and sunny climate of San Rafael, the county seat, where the penultimate of the Franciscan missions was established in

1817. Later another Indian gave his name to the county. The story goes that, after having been defeated by the whites, the last chief of the Licatuits became a ferryman on the bay, earning the name of El Marinero, the Sailor, which became shorted to Marin. (Just yesterday I drove through a community called San Marin, the old ferryman having been canonized through the grace of a real-estate developer.)

Perhaps those sick Indians can perform a useful symbolic function for us. Although much has happened in Marin during the years since then, the county has managed to avoid being drawn into the main currents of California's growth, and even now, in spite of its remarkable rate of population increase, it survives as a sort of refuge, a sheltered place. After the Americans came and, by means both fair and foul, divested the original rancheros of their lands, Marin became dairy country, which in its remoter parts it still is. Bypassed by the gold rush, it prospered bucolically. In the latter years of the nineteenth century the theme of the Good Life began to assert itself as well-to-do San Franciscans built summer cottages on its hills. Belvedere acquired a mildly racy reputation for the frolics that went on in the houseboats anchored in its coves. Tiburon became a railroad for the Northwestern Pacific and qualified for its own reputation of raciness by virtue of the inordinate number of saloons that lined its main street. Elsewhere, other towns took on the outlines of personalities they still enjoy: Sausalito, charming and schizophrenic, divided between the solid citizens on the hills and the free spirits on the waterfront; Mill Valley, green and a touch artsy-craftsy; Ross, with its great estates, rich; San Anselmo and San Rafael, rather stuffy.

Why do I play so much tennis? Because I love it!
— A Marin Lady

Over the years the number of commuters has multiplied to the point that driving across the Golden Gate Bridge during the evening rush is an experience that,

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

(CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE)

remembered, can bring on the night sweats. Still, even the bridge has not entirely overcome Marin's isolation. As the other four counties that ring the bay have drawn unto themselves such industries as electronics and aerospace, Marin has remained almost virgin, the purest of bedroom suburbs. Improved industrial property accounts for only 1.5 per cent of the tax assessor's rolls, a statistic of which we homeowners are made painfully aware when our truly horrendous bills arrive each fall. (There is a persistent story that to keep the money rolling in, a deputy county assessor periodically takes to a helicopter to check on newly built swimming pools.) It is clear that one pays for the Good Life.

Marin supports more than nine hundred organizations. A recent count came up with 98 parents' groups, 39 women's clubs, 105 church groups, and 30 musical organizations. There are also 216 sports clubs and teams. I don't happen to be an active participant in any of the latter organizations, although, for reasons I don't entirely understand, the two females in my family find it necessary to belong to two different tennis clubs.

On a weekday not long ago I happened to start out for one of these clubs and, having made a false start, ended up stopping at both. At the first club twenty women in pretty white dresses were whaling away at tennis balls. Mostly in their thirties and forties, they were well-tended, tanned, muscular of arm and leg, and intensely involved in their games. While some of them inclined to a pat-ball style of play, there were others who swung their rackets with a fervor that reminded me of one husband's comment that tennis was, at least, cheaper than psychiatry. Changing courts, a couple of the fervent types called hello to me and then went on with their game. Thwack! Thwam! Smash! In my mind's ear I heard womanly voices chorusing Take that, and that, and that, and, being the only male in the vicinity except for the club pro, who was stringing a racket in his shop, I retreated.

At the other club some thirty ladies of similar aspect were engaged in the morning's round robin. The club's round robin, which goes on five days a week, is based on an organization of regulars and substitutes that is treated with the seriousness of the order of battle for a major military engagement. Players give up their places on the roster only for the gravest reasons — family bankruptcy, a mortally sick child, or pregnancy. The prudent husband does not treat lightly dinnertable accounts of round-robin politics. Tennis is a serious business. As I approached one court, I was greeted by a lady of mature judgment and quick intelligence who will willingly play tennis seven days a week, mornings and afternoons. Feeling like a spy from a foreign county, I completed my errand and fled.

Later that morning, needing paper clips or rubber bands, I walked to the dime store in the shopping center. The round robins were over, and the tennis players were now in the shops. Marin is not the sort of place where women go shopping in bathing suits. Even shorts are not looked upon with favor. Tennis dresses, however, enjoy a general dispensation. Perhaps it is their virtuous whiteness; perhaps their association with vigorous and laudable sport. Yet it has struck me forcefully, both on the courts and in the shopping center, that ladies' tennis, at least as we know it on the Tiburon peninsula, is a phenomenon whose psychic depths have never been adequately plumbed.

Fortunately it is not often that a citizen of the United States has the opportunity to witness one group of Americans bent on the deliberate destruction of other Americans through the open and illegal use of firearms. . . Such an incident took place in Marin City, Marin County, California, on the nights of July 27 and 29, 1967. — Marin County Grand Jury

Before attempting a theory of leisure and the Good Life, we are obliged to consider two of Marin's minorities, the most isolated of whom are the Negroes. There is really no place for Negroes in Marin, and their one sociological function often seems to be, as in the grand jury's naively shocked report, to remind us of the realities of life in the world outside. (On the nights referred to, fires were set, and firemen and deputy sheriffs were shot at by snipers. Three people, including a little girl, were wounded.)

There are now between four and five thousand Negroes in Marin, or about 2 per cent of the population. Half of them live in Marin City, which started its life as a wartime housing development for shipyard workers and which has now turned into a model of well-designed apartment buildings and houses on a site for which the local real-estate developers would willingly give their collective eyeteeth. Nevertheless, Marin City remains a ghetto, with all the familiar problems of rootless and angry young men and families supported by hard-working women who do the domestic work for their white sisters.

Half the remaining Negroes are prisoners in San Quentin, which for more than a hundred years has occupied a sort of limbo in the county in spite of its formidable yellow walls, and is easily forgotten except when our jurors are called to pass on knifings in the Big Yard or assaults on guards.

Most of the rest of the Negroes in Marin are serving as airmen at Hamilton Air Force Base.

With the exception of an exceedingly small number of professionals, Marin's Negroes have little experience of the Good Life as the rest of the county knows it. Their problems are not the problems of the white people on the lagoons, the bay shores, and the hills. If there is substance to the rumors I have heard occasionally that some of the young men of Marin City have been thinking of making forays, armed with Molotov cocktails and firearms, upon the nearby white towns, then our problems will merge forcibly with theirs in a way whose outcome is hard to predict and dismaying to think about.

In other counties, a lot of drug use is rather "laudable" — gaining insight, discovering hang-ups, and so on. It's a little less "laudable" in Marin. Here, it's more a pleasure thing. There's nothing else to do. — Sanford J. Feinglass

The other, and greater, minority is the kids.

Having three children myself, I have given a good deal of thought to the lives they lead and have arrived at the considered judgment that Marin is a lousy place for kids to grow up in. Like the Negroes, they stand outside the Good Life, which is largely a white adult notion. For the

'The Good Life is largely a white adult notion...'

kids, it's great to be able to camp out on the slopes of Mount Tam or dig in Indian burial mounds or play tennis after school seven days out of ten the year round or sail an El Toro out of the back yard, but the real thing that's on their minds is What's it all about, man?, and the style of life we've evolved here doesn't give them a very convincing answer.

And so our kids get stoned and drop out of school and make love without prudence and contract gonorrhea and get abortions and sometimes boost cars. Some of them do, at any rate. Others do other things, like becoming eagle scouts and getting into college and going to work or getting killed in Vietnam or getting married and raising families. But it's the other side of the coin that interests me. Somehow, compared with other communities, the kids in Marin seem to accomplish less than they should, and their problems seem proportionately larger.

Their more serious troubles often come pretty close to home. One of my oldest boy's friends — a gentleman, unaggressive type — is, as I write, in a psychiatric clinic in San Francisco recovering from a prolonged love affair with an amphetamine called speed. In an attempt to go beyond my own household observations, however, I looked up a couple of experts on the lives the kids really lead.

Sanford Feinglass is an unlikely type to find working as an educator in drug abuses for a school board. A dark, round-faced young man, he turned out to be both articulate and irreverent. We started with the assumption that pot, speed, and acid are available to every school in the county, from junior high up, in spite of the efforts of a sheriff's squad of narcotics agents.

"I came in with fairly clear ideas," Feinglass told me, "but they're getting more and more clouded as I deal with the kids. They've been lied to all their lives. Every time we tell them that marijuana poisons the body, we create thirty disbelievers.

"And so the kid looks at his mother and says, 'Okay, mommy, you use your drug and I'll use mine.' Well, alcohol and marijuana fulfill the same social purposes. Until we can level with them, the kids are going to continue to use."

He went on for a while about the significance of glue-sniffing as an initiatory ritual and then came back to the kids in Marin who use drugs so freely. "There's nothing else to do," he said. "There's nowhere else to turn. Maybe the problem's greater because there's a greater literacy here and more awareness of the failures of society. The kids' great need is the need to get involved and to do something meaningful. The city streets are in some ways a lot better," he added.

In another conversation John Parker, the youthful education officer for the Department of Public Health, added some comments on other areas in which Marin's performance doesn't exactly square with its self-image. The incidence of venereal disease is going up, as it seems to be doing all over. (In 1967, the gonorrhea rate suddenly doubled, from 175.0 cases per 100,000 population to 341.5 cases.) In spite of the pill, the number of illegitimate births is going up, with the greatest concentration among Caucasian girls between seventeen and nineteen years old. Though still comparatively low, the suicide rate doubled between 1962 and 1967.

But statistics tell only part of the story. "We don't really know what the problem is," Parker said, "because our abortion laws are geared to the sort of people we have in Marin County. Poor people have to go to a butcher, but our girls can have relatively safe abortions elsewhere — Tijuana, for instance. Some of the increase in VD may be due to the growing hippie communities in Larkspur and Fairfax, but it really runs through all socioeconomic levels."



"...MARIN IS A LOUSY PLACE FOR KIDS TO GROW UP IN"