

The Russian River

Chris Witzel & Val Ridgeway
with assistance from Uncle Mo
Summer 2006

Introduction

When our parents said "The River," they meant "the Russian River." (The Napa River, another family favorite, was "the Delta.") "The River" was synonymous with swimming, sunbathing, canoeing, and summer jobs and romance in places called Hilton, Summer Home Park, Highcroft, Russian River Terrance, Cosmo's Farm and Guerneville.

In August 2006 Val & Chris looked for the places where our fathers (Claude and Fred respectively) spent their summers. We each have our own memories of being taken to the River in the 1950s by nostalgic parents, but we will focus here on the times when the river was a hugely important part of our families' lives.



For people not familiar with the area, a bit of history. Middle class San Francisco families used to summer in the Russian River area rather than live there all year round as many do today. Before 1936 when the Golden Gate Bridge was built, families took the ferry across to Marin and then the train to Hilton or other town along the river early in the summer to open up their cabin or take possession of a rental. Fathers worked in SF during the week and came up by train for the weekends.

In the old Witzel family albums, the earliest photo we've found is one of Emma standing in the Cazadero Creek in 1905 and wearing pants and chewing on a corncob pipe! Chris' parents saved photos of Hilton from 1927-1931 (while dating in college), while Emma (mother of Fred, Claude and Ev) pasted a lot from the 1920's into her scrapbook. Chris's mother's family album contains photos of the Short family from 1910 through the 1940's. Clearly the river played a role for our families similar to that of Cape Cod or the Jersey Shore for New Englanders during the first third of the 20th century.

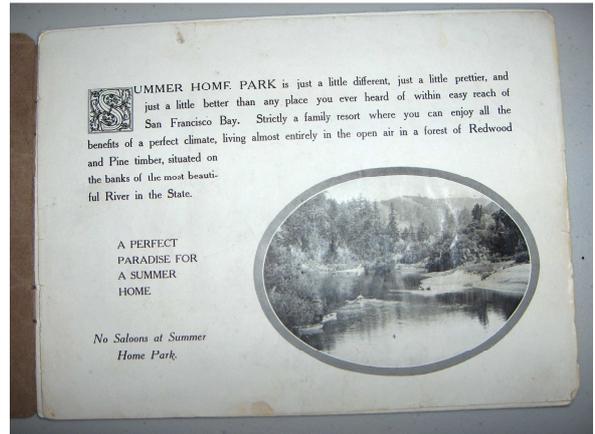
Summer Home Park

Summer Home Park, a home-owner's association founded in 1908, was the scene of many dances and social activities for our parents. Claude, Val's father, worked at this ice house one summer. Walking around, we were struck by how steep the hillsides are. Today many houses have electric lifts to supplement the stairs, but years ago no one needed a Stair Master machine if they walked to the river from their house.

Everett (Uncle Mo) remembers that Claude needed a summer job his senior year in college. Their aunt Mimi arranged with her grocer that if Claude had a car, he could make deliveries. Carl Ernst, Mimi's husband, gave Claude a well-used 1922, 4 door Phaeton with a Liberty engine to haul the ice in. He would deliver groceries and take ice orders in the morning, then deliver the 25 lb. blocks of ice in the afternoon. Mo helped him one summer and told us one day Claude was staggering up a steep hill when he slipped and slid down a couple of steps. "All these damn steps!" said Claude, or perhaps something earthier. Anyway, Claude bruised his shin and kept Mo awake all night moaning on Mimi's porch where they slept. Mimi and Carl had a home in Russian River Heights, just above Summer Home Park, where she made wonderful meals.



Val & Chris in front of ice house where Claude worked.



From 1908 Brochure



Typical Russian River house – perched on stilts on a steep hillside



Val in front of Summer Home Park (SHP) Lodge in 2006



SHP Beach in 2006 – with foot bridge



SHP Beach in 1908 – with foot bridge

Hilton

Today the only remnant of Hilton visible from River Road (the main road following the river out to the sea) is the Hilton Family Campground. Years ago Hilton had a train station, Post Office, Brown's store, Brown's Beach, etc. Chris's parents, Fred and Virgilia, first met there when he was a lifeguard at Brown's Beach. Her parents had a home ("Rio Verde"), still standing, in Highcroft, next door to Summer Home Park. From the picture of Highcroft today - standards have risen a lot! One thing that definitely has risen is the height of the houses, many of which have been raised up onto higher stilts after the last big flood.



Hilton signage today – a campground



Highcroft Recreation Area today



Side view of Rio Verde house in 2006



Short family house ("Rio Verde") in Highcroft
Hilton in August 1929

For Chris's parents, Hilton was the center of the Russian River resort area. Mother (Virgilia) loved to swim, sunbathe, and canoe. She told me that one day in 1927 she and Dad canoed from Hilton to Healdsburg and back – "It was the talk of the river that year." That's a lot of hard work – she must have been really smitten! They met at the Hilton beach where Dad was a lifeguard. Apparently her mother was not pleased that her daughter was dating a possible beach bum. When they got engaged, according to Mother, her mother said "What!?! Engaged to that German?" while Dad's parents said they didn't believe the marriage would last. Mother sounded amused when she told me this story as they had already been married about 35 years (and on track for a 57 year marriage).

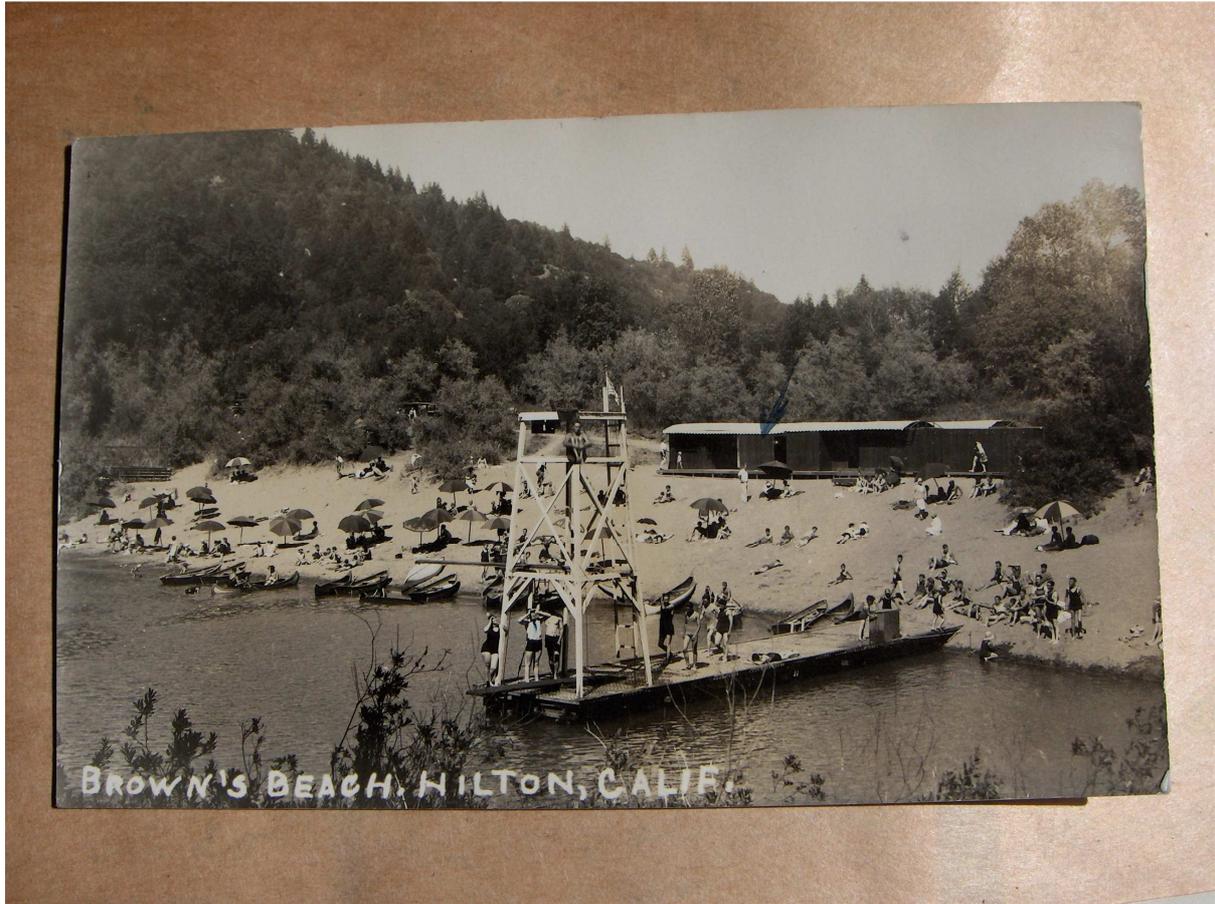
According to Uncle Mo, Highcroft used to have a resort with a large barn-like building with single room cabins divided by a center aisle. It's likely that this empty recreation area is the site of the resort – there aren't a lot of alternative spots. The resort was closed by 1930 when Mo started staying with the Shorts after Fred and Virgilia were engaged. Al and Edith Short owned a green cabin called "Rio Verde" and would summer there with their two daughters, Virgilia and Edith. The Shorts continued to summer at the river through the 1930s and possibly into the 1940s.

Joanie remembers Brown's Store as the "center of town" and the place to go for supplies. The accommodations were Spartan by today's standards. Electricity was rudimentary and ice was delivered in blocks for coolers. Ice deliveries were exciting – cold drinks again!

The picture of Claude standing was taken when he was working for the boat builder, Easedale. They made boats and canoes for use on the river; at the time it was too expensive to ship merchandise as heavy as these, so a local builder could have a good business. Again, Aunt Mimi helped Claude obtain this job.

Guy Clark, on the far left side of the group picture, was an Alpha Sigma Phi¹ fraternity brother of Claude's at Berkeley. Next to him is sitting Fluella Clinton who later married her boyfriend Pete, the man at the far right. Uncle Mo is sitting next to Claude in the center.

¹ This fraternity was across the street from where Virgilia was in the same sorority as Claire Paulsen, who married Claude in 1934. Claire's sister Beverly was best friends with Jane Miller who married Mo in 1941. Claude and Claire, like Fred and Virgilia, first met at the river, but unlike them, did not start dating until later.



Browns' Beach, Hilton, Calif. ca. 1928



Fred, lifeguard, July 1928



Virgilia Short July 1929



Claude at Guerneville Park 1930



Claude (in center) and Everett (Mo) to his left
around 1934 at Summer Home or Hilton beach

Cosmo's Farm

Emma and her family used to stay at Cosmo's Farm, a family resort with its own beach a short walk to the river. According to Uncle Mo, they stayed in tent cabins (like in the Army, on platforms roughly 20' x 15' containing 2 or 3 cots). Meals were taken in a communal dining area that held about 75 guests. A daily milk train ran from Healdsburg to Duncan Mills or Jenner on the NWP tracks.

Val and Chris couldn't find any trace of the Farm resort, so if anyone knows the location or has information, please tell us!

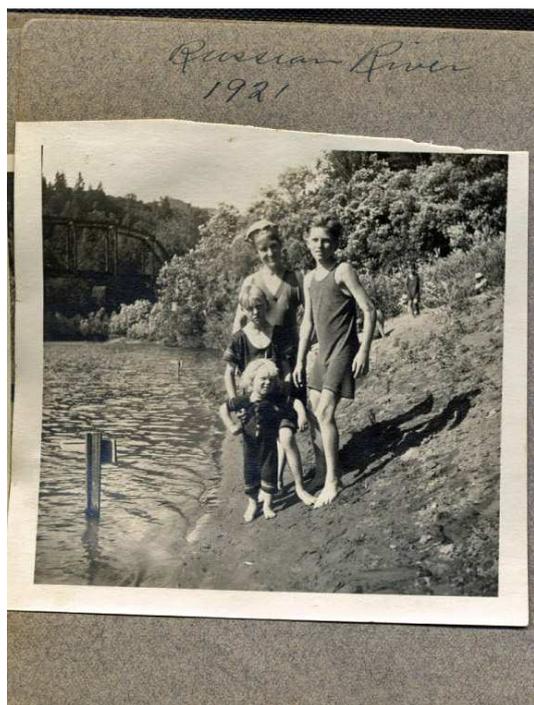


The letterhead above is from a letter Fred wrote to his mother on June 22, 1924 reporting his safe arrival for work at the farm. In subsequent letters he told "Ma" that the chickens wake him up at 5:30 am, he saw Claude waving to him from his scout train as he passed through the Hilton station, and "about quarter to seven I get up and eat breakfast then go and dig half-a-sack of potatoes." After doing the breakfast dishes, resting, and washing the lunch dishes, he could go swimming. "Oh boy! They have a raft and a springboard. At 5:00 I come in and eat and then Modesto, maybe you remember him, does the dishes and I wipe them. Modesto, who is 17...is really smart, as was proved when prohibition agents came upon his place². He stalled them off....He is great fun." Later that summer he writes, "To date I have got 75 cents in tips! 'Ray! Tonight or tomorrow I think I'll go to Summer Home with the girl that makes the tents. I'll spend all my tips there." Emma must have replied with concern because in a later letter he explains how all the girls are really 'swell' and she shouldn't worry.

Uncle Mo (Everett) explained that Emma and her family used to stay at Cosmo's Farm each summer until Pa bought the Thelma³ in 1926 and they turned their focus onto sailing. However, they would sometimes go to see Mimi and one time, Mo remembers, they rented a place in Guerneville Park for a couple of weeks.

² Was this a 14 year old boy trying to startle his parents, or simply a commonplace event during Prohibition?

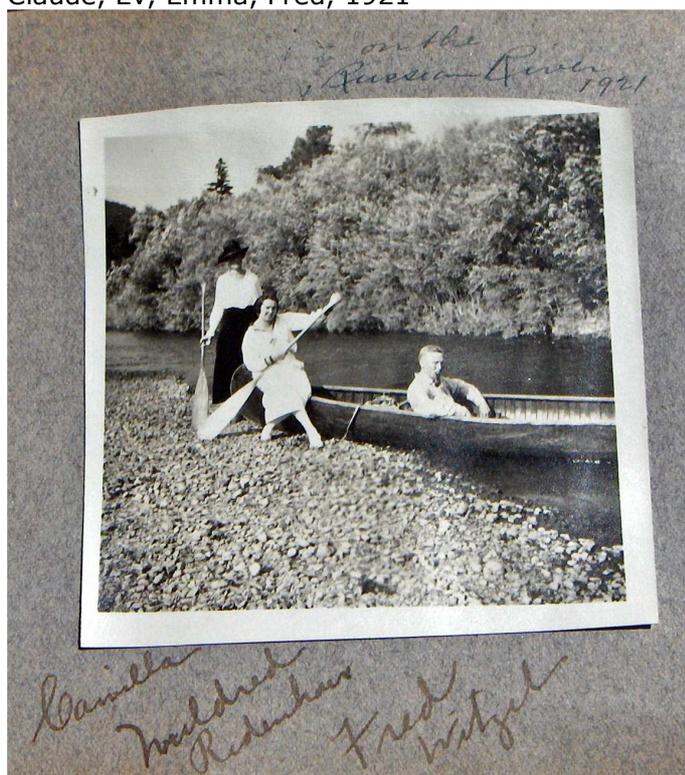
³ The Thelma was kept at the Corinthian Yacht Club and the family would sail on the weekends. Emma cooked on the boat, using a pea-coal fired cast iron stove. The Thelma or other boats figure prominently in all the family albums.



Claude, Ev, Emma, Fred, 1921



Camilla at Cosmo's Farm, 1921



Mimi, Mildred Ridenhour, CFE Witzel 1921



Only the Ridenhour name remains

The Ridenhour B&B today is near the location of the old Cosmo Resort. The Witzels were good friends of the Ridenhous and their children. The Ridenhous eventually left the area and sold their house, now a B&B.

Today

The family resorts went out of fashion by the 1960s and hippies started moving in. The late 1970s through the early 1990's saw an influx of gays who renovated resorts, bars, Bed & Breakfasts and summer homes, especially in Guerneville. An article in the New York Times in 2006 described how Forestville (currently the home of Amy & Andy) has become a chic place for people weary of the pace of high tech work.

For visitors, visiting the wineries and canoeing down the river is still a blast (Burke's canoe rentals lets you canoe down river and return by their bus.) And don't forget to get in touch with Val and Chuck who live in nearby Windsor. A good place to start planning your trip is: [Russian River Chamber of Commerce](#).



Do you have stories to share?

We would be happy to add your stories and photos in a later revision of this essay. Perhaps you would like to share something of your own, maybe of more recent visits to the river? Whichever, we hope you enjoyed reading this, and would very much like to hear from you.