

Traveling to Ross Valley

Frederick De Boom Witzel
ca. 1985

In our earliest years, about 1912-1920 the big events for Claude and me included occasional visits to Ross. They were a magical experience. We started out in the tow of Maman and her satchels, dressed in straw hats and Buster Brown suits with the large white collars. We boarded the Haight Street No. 17 car for the rare and exciting run downtown. It ended at the enormous loop in front of the Ferry Building. In those days Market Street held four tracks. The United Railroads, running green cars with red trim, was assigned the two outside rails and the Muni, sporting a battleship gray with maroon trim, took the pair of inside rails. On Market Street we hung to our varnished wooden seats while racing the Muni car alongside, urging silently our motorman to cut short his all too frequent stops. A conclave of almost all of the many cable and electric varieties of cars usually were gathered in front of and on the loop. Some real oldies dating back to the early cable era, such as the Pacific Ave. tractor dummy, were still in service. Backing and filling between them were the horse drawn flat bed drays riding a foot or less off cobblestones and loaded with bales of hay or sacks of wheat or coffee. The air was filled with aromas of roasting coffee, horse manure, and the bay.



Ca. 1915

Then it was off No.17, clutching satchels, hands in tandem at Maman's heels through the ticket taker and on to the ferry. In those days we rode the North Western Pacific "Eureka," the "Alcatraz," the "Tamalpais" or the "Sausalito", sturdy double-ended boats that made the run to Marin. They were propelled by big steam engines, fitted with walking beams and paddle wheels. Large glass windows framed the engine rooms where the small passengers could watch on tip-toe the impressive action of these giants.

Once the dock gates were down and the late comers were sheepishly made to wait behind the barrier for the next boat we savored the aromatic mixture of tar and oakum, decaying fish and seaweed, and bunker fuel. The boat's hull made awesome grinding noises as she was held against the piles at Low Speed Ahead.

Finally loud blasts on the whistle signaled taking the locking pin out of the former bow rudder and converting the bow to the stern. The skipper, white-mustached, walked to the other pilot house to take up his new position at the big wheel. Great heaving and thumping noises came out of the engine room. The walking beam slowly at first began to move and in a

cloud of steam, with great difficulty, the paddle wheels began the comfortably rhythmic melody I later found all triple expansion and compound engine aficionados learned to love.

We were guided by a vigilant escort of gulls that rode our forward air turbulence. We rumbled past Alcatraz island close enough to throw a potato, past hay barges, lumber schooners, other local shipping through the cool morning spray across the tide into the Golden Gate. About halfway we passed our sister vessel on the opposite course with appropriate deep whistles and hand waving. Finally, thirty minutes from the start, we came to a crunching landing against the piles of the Sausalito piers.



Photos of Alcatraz and electric car by Mimi (Camille De Boom Ernst) around 1905.¹

¹ From an album Dad has labeled "Camilla's Album 1898-1010."



Here again Maman and the satchels took the lead and again hooked us hand in hand to dash off the ferry. On shore we faced a bewildering array of electric trains. End of the line runs went to Mill Valley, San Rafael, or Fairfax. A steam train to Santa Rosa and Eureka usually was present. We climbed aboard the "To San Rafael" coaches. They were tongue and groove wooden sided, and highly varnished a deep olive green. Like the city cable cars, they sat on four wheel trucks and were graced with gold North Western Pacific insignia and numbers. Vestibules were completely open—an area in which one was not permitted to loiter or ride.

The first step up was a high one—a design that ignored the needs of the then fashionable hobble skirts or of passengers in short pants. An ominous looking set of third rails carrying the electric current lay under the edge of the train platform. Inside the cars the seats were covered with flammable wicker, shining with varnish and the seat-backs swung fore and aft so that the cars could change direction at each end of the line.

As the front end motor car slowly pulled us out of Sausalito we slunk low in our seats as we passed by the alcohol distilling plant so as to avoid the sickeningly sweet-sour smell. Faces pressed to the windows, we swung around the inlet at Strawberry Point, rumbled over the switch to Mill Valley, and prepared for the tunnel. The brakeman for our car, in blue uniform, brass stripes and NWP insignia, walked through the car lowering each overhead lamp and lighting the gas mantles. At the tunnel's end this procedure was reversed. He called out the stations for Corte Madera, Larkspur, and Kentfield as the train slowed down and stopped. Finally he called out "Ross" and in vibrant anticipation we scurried around for our satchels and hand held toys, and climbed down off the train.

The station area at Ross must have been laid out by an environmentalist before his time. It was then, I thought, as lovely, open, warm, and inviting a space as I would ever hope to see. Big trees shaded the ground and gave it the aura of old California—Spanish restful simplicity. There were few buildings and close by was the garden of St. John's Episcopal Church. A few yards away and around the corner began the double banked long avenue of elms called Shady Lane that formed a tunnel of shade completely covering the roadway. It extended well beyond the secondary lane where Uncle Charlie and Tante Fanny lived.

We were met at the station by Tom, a white haired ancient, who drove us off in an open black four-place buggy, pulled by a horse whose name is lost in antiquity. On our arrival, and after greetings to Tante Fanny, Uncle Charlie, Frances, Charlesy, and Carol, there was an immediate shift from the Buster Brown regalia to play clothes. To our disgust, however, we were also turned out in tabliers² to keep clean our play clothing. Unfortunately for Claude and me, the pervasive influence of French-Belgian tradition was as deep at Tante Fanny's house as in the De Boom household on Page Street. Conversations with Maman and Fanny always were in French at that time. At one birthday I recall that she was greeted individually and in serial order with the usual "Je te souhaite une bonne fete"— a birthday salutation that was drilled into us annually for recitation to my grandfather's old friend, M. De Connique.



The family celebrating Frances Hazeltine's christening on June 17, 1907. Back row left-to-right is her father Charles Hazeltine, Camilla ("Tante Mimi" De Boom), RC De Boom, Willy De Boom?, Emma De Boom and her fiancé, CFE Witzel. Front row from left, an unidentified woman, baby Frances, Fanny De Boom Hazeltine ("Tante Fanny") and Caroline Marsily De Boom ("Bonnemaman"). Emma and Fred were married 5 days later.

² Pinafores

Life at Ross for a five year old was a blissful adventure. We played in the stable, the buggy, and the adjacent creek where brown yellow-bellied salamanders lived. Frances and Charlesy organized blind man's buff and hide n' seek. It never seemed to rain at Ross and, like Camelot, the air was redolent of madrone, manzanita, pepper and hazel trees. Tall oaks shaded the sun and the light was gentle and temperate. There seemed to be many parties and, when we stuffed ourselves to excess, Tom was available to care for our transient stomach-aches. He was long ago a medical student drop-out from Columbia University in some far away place called New York. Uncle Charlie had Tom install a croquet court of gray colored crushed red rock and I learned some of the subtleties of that tricky game. We made shopping trips in the buggy for strawberries. On one red-letter day we drove to San Anselmo for the regular visit to the blacksmith. There, all five of us watched in a circle of awe as the bellows heated the gorge and the red-hot shoes were shaped to fit our horse's feet. The blacksmith clipped off of one shoe a beautiful square of white hot steel that fell to the first flower. Its colors were changing so attractively to an orange red that I stopped down and picked it up between my thumb and index finger. A sad lesson.

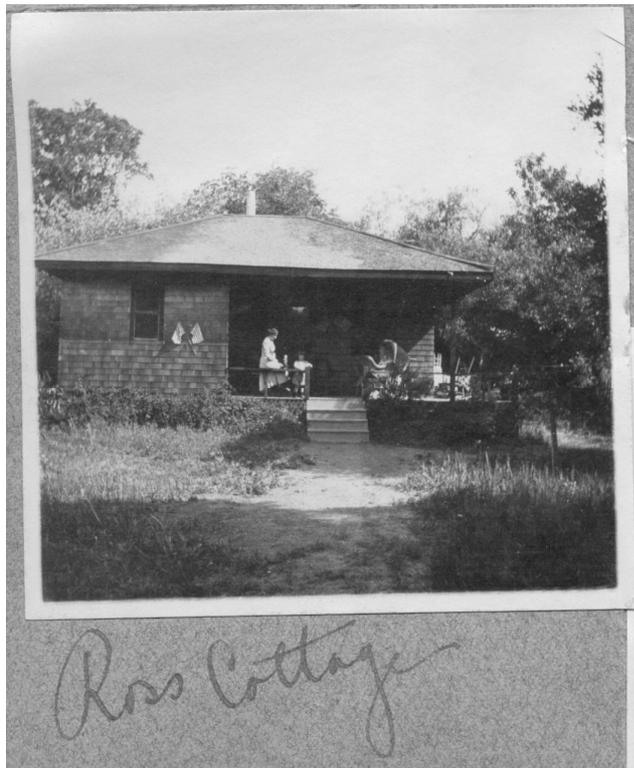
Charles,
Frances and
Carol Hazeltine
with their
cousins Claude
and Frederick in
1914.



On another and later visit we were greeted by Tom at the station in a new large open touring auto – an immense black monster with real leather upholstery and a top that appeared to be permanently folded down. Long leather straps to the front lamps held the windshield upright against the wind. When we traveled *en famille* the five seats were filled generally by the adults. One of two of the children were assigned a place, if one was available, and then only by seniority. Claude and I usually were required to stand behind the front seat grasping any hand hold within reach on sharp turns and not to touch the ladies veils or hats. We toured the dirt roads of the vicinity in some style to make our afternoon calls on Fanny’s friends.

The auto was kept by Tom in immaculate polish and in the highest mechanical condition. After its initial delivery Tom was reputed to have taken the engine and driving mechanisms all apart and to have put it back together without having any parts left over. This procedure seemed to be common among the mechanically inclined automobile owners of the time. It was my opinion, held secretly I must admit, that its brakes were unreliable after Tom crashed into at least two fences. Also, its tires must have been inferior since they often succumbed to puncture en route. We carried two spares.

An indispensable piece of owner-added equipment was a white enameled child’s potty that fit partially under the right front seat where it encumbered the limited area for standing room. Questioning Maman about this familiar accessory revealed that, while boys were encouraged to use the privacy of wayside shrubbery for nature’s needs, it was different for little girls – “*Ce nest pas comme il faut pour les jeunes filles.*” My initial inkling of *la difference!* In retrospect, Maman’s phrase seemed to be a standard constraint for most of our first ten and even later years.



Tom had spent much of his life at sea and was an extremely fertile source of knowledge and of home-made toys for small growing boys. He deserves an individual section in these tales³. Many of my ideas were shaped in my formative years by Tom.

Ross Cottage in 1912, with the author as a toddler on the porch.

³ Dad included “Tom Sinclair” in his to-do list of stories. See ‘The Samsonite Briefcase’ story.



"Twin cousins" refers to Claude (son of Emma) and Carol (daughter of Fanny). Emma loved to reply to 'Are they twins?' with 'Well, they were born five days apart.' (ed.)

Visits to Ross were no longer possible after about 1919. An unrelenting, deep, and life-long estrangement developed between Maman and Tante Fanny. It became, I felt, a family tragedy that had a chilling impact on their friends. It was more than twenty-five years later, not long after World War II, that Virgilia and I were invited to a beautiful party by Carol and Jim Barnes who then lived at the house in Ross. The old folks had gone to their rewards. The croquet court and the stables seemed to have vanished; but the large garden, the flowers, the trees and the soft ambience were the same – a nostalgic recollection for children that had grown up.