

RESPONSE TO COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ, HISTORIC RESOURCES COMMISSION, AGENDA
ITEM #7A, REVIEW OF HISTORIC INTERPRETATIVE INSTALLATION FOR 1500 CAPITOLA
ROAD (MERRIMAN HOUSE)

FROM: JOE MICHALAK AND JUDITH STEEN
OCTOBER 12, 2020

PROPOSED ART WORK

We think that photographs would make for a more powerful and meaningful presentation with a de-emphasis on Hemingway and more focus on Merriman. In our opinion the proposed art doesn't accurately convey visual information about him or the site. Is there visual documentation to support the artist's interpretation of the depictions in any of the historical themes? Any representations should be historically accurate and would be best conveyed through photographs.

At 6' 4" Merriman had a commanding presence and a charismatic personality. John Kenneth Galbraith, fellow graduate student at UC Berkeley, and later adviser to President Kennedy, commented that Merriman was, "... the first hero of World War II."⁶ He went on to call Merriman, "the most popular of my generation of graduate students at Berkeley Later he was to show himself the bravest." Numerous photos of Merriman and fellow combatants exist at archives at UC Berkeley and other institutions.



See:

https://www.google.com/search?q=%22robert+hale+merriman%22&sxsrf=ALeKk038w1kqenQg3fSHuTFXMdFTBFF5qw:1602518445292&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj_zrW1tq_sAhXEv4KHTeJAIQQ_AUoAnoECCYQBA&biw=1357&bih=983#imgrc=Ag0WzOhBPYTABM

EARLY "RANCH HOME" SUBDIVISIONS

In terms of Live Oak and the "ranchettes," a picture from the Wilson Bros. advertisements would convey a better idea of Live Oak at the time of its peak development. There could be

more development of the poultry industry and its significance. In the 1920s Santa Cruz was second only to Petaluma in terms of egg production and shipments. In 1925 at 111 Madrone Street, the Poultry Producers of Central California built a packing and shipping depot for small poultry ranches in Santa Cruz County, adjacent to the Southern Pacific tracks. The Madrone property on the City of Santa Cruz's Historic Building Survey has been adaptively reused as an industrial/commercial facility. It now serves as Dominican Hospital's Outpatient Rehabilitation Center.

Shorter version 2 of the "Early Ranch-Home Subdivisions" more adequately conveys the essence of Live Oak and its occupants.

MERRIMAN TEXT

In general we don't think the text or proposed murals and convey adequately the essence of Robert Hale Merriman. Merriman became a heroic symbol through his leadership in fighting fascism and his perceived selflessness in championing a "cause greater than oneself."

We think there should be more emphasis on Merriman's life in Santa Cruz and the need to focus on the attributes and personal qualities exhibited by Merriman that might explain why he is considered an American hero. Though he had no allegiance to Spain, he volunteered to defend their democratic institutions during a civil war. He wanted to be a professor of agricultural economics. He was an idealist and saw first hand the effects of widespread destruction, starvation, and the bombing of civilians in a conflict that was the precursor to World War II.

During the 1930s President Roosevelt instituted a policy of neutrality so that the United States wouldn't be drawn into war in Europe. Despite numerous requests to support the forces fighting to preserve the democratically elected government of Spain, the U.S. refused to provide arms or materiel. However, there were those who believed that if one didn't fight Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini in the battlegrounds of Europe that the conflict would eventually come to America. Many Americans were horrified and believed that they had an obligation to act—hence the establishment of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and its 3,000 volunteers. It was a cause, "greater than oneself."

California historian Kevin Starr wrote, "Like his fictional counterpart [Robert Jordan], Robert Hale Merriman lost his life to fascism on the field of battle. Because he was so talented, and because he died so young, and because Hemingway immortalized him, Merriman must be given the first position in any roll call of Californians in battle against the ultra-Right."

Though Merriman lived for only a short time in Santa Cruz from 1923–1928, he maintained his relationship with his family, friends, and community and corresponded with them, even when he was a combatant in the Spanish Civil War in 1937–1938.

When Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* debuted in 1940 as a book, and later in 1943 as a movie starring Ingrid Bergman and Gary Cooper, citizens of Santa Cruz were not aware that the character Robert Jordan was based on Merriman. It wasn't until the 1980s, fifty years later with the publication of his widow's memoir, that the community learned of the

contributions of Robert Merriman (See *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reporter Mary Beth Varcados interview with his widow, April 5, 1987).

Merriman's courage, compassion, and persistence, as personified in Robert Jordan, the hero in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, still resonates today as a role model for selfless public service. Throughout his life, the late U.S. Senator John McCain referred to Robert Jordan as his lodestone. At the age of twelve, during his formative years, McCain became mesmerized by the heroic character of Robert Jordan. He found the Hemingway novel in his father's library. "For a long time, Robert Jordan was the man I admired above almost all others in life and fiction. He was brave, dedicated, capable, selfless, possessed in abundance that essence of courage that Hemingway described as grace under pressure, a man who would risk his life but never his honor." At the end of his life, McCain remarked that, "Jordan was his hero when he was young and his hero today. Nothing is better than the story of someone who sacrifices for causes greater than themselves and Robert Jordan was that." "[President Barack] Obama told *Rolling Stone* that Hemingway's novel, published in 1940, is one of the three books that most inspired him.

We recommend that the date of the demolition of the house be noted.

Source notes are available upon request.

Hi Annie,

Thanks for sending the agenda for the upcoming HRC meeting. Attached are our comments on the proposed interpretative panels.

We would also like to inform you that we contacted the Berkeley Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the apartment house at 2517 Virginia St., the Robert and Marion residence from June 1932 to December 1934. We asked the Commission to consider adding the structure to its inventory of historic properties. Because of Covid-19, the Commission didn't meet until March. In the meantime, a student-driven initiative raised \$1,000 to pay for a permanent plaque which was installed on the building in February with the help of volunteers from the private Berkeley Historical Plaque Project. Like the Blue Plaques in Santa Cruz County, the structures themselves have no legal protection.

We sent the Berkeley Commission the ARG consultant's report on the Merriman property in Live Oak. The report stated that the "extant apartment building at 2517 Virginia Street in Berkeley, California, best illustrates his formative years. ARG concurs with the assignment of the NR Rating Code... NR-6." Based on that conclusion the Merriman Live Oak property could not be listed.

At the March meeting of the Berkeley Historical Landmark Commission our request that they consider the Virginia Street property for listing. They discussed the proposal but took no action. **This means that neither the Berkeley property nor the Live Oak property will have any legal protection and there will be no structure associated with Merriman that will be preserved. Perhaps consultants in the future should be asked to investigate the status of structures "competing" for listing on the local, state, or national registers.**

Sincerely,

Judith Steen
Joe Michalak

Dear Historic Resources Commission,

I note that Item #7 on the October 14, 2020 agenda includes review and comment on the Draft Interpretive Historic Panels for the historic Merriman House at 1500 Capitola Road.

While the artwork is nice, I do not see any plan to include a photograph of the actual Merriman House, or what the farm looked like when it was thriving. I request that the photos be included in the interpretive display to relay a real sense of what the area looked like at the time Robert Merriman lived there.

There is also no mention in the Live Oak narratives that because of the successful ranchettes in Live Oak and Morrissey areas, Santa Cruz County ranked second in the State in the early 1900's (after Petaluma) for poultry and egg farms. It would be nice to have actual photos of some of those farms. These are available in the Henry Washburn Collection at the library in the Ag History Project at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.

Here is information about the importance of the poultry industry in the County, in general, and the famous Egg Laying Contest that took place in the Live Oak area in 1922-1923, but within the County between 1919-1930.

<https://santacruzmah.imgix.net/uploads/HJ6-Egg-Laying.pdf>

"The 1922-1923 contest marked its beginning with an offer from Leslie A. Thornehill of the Alberta Ranch in Santa Cruz. He would give \$100 to any entry from Alberta Ranch stock that placed first, second, or third or was a 300-egg hen. The ten-acre Alberta Ranch was on the site of the old Rodriguez rancho on Seventh Avenue just off Capitola Road; it was a University of California Extension farm with all the recommended amenities, including two university-type poultry houses where they were "busy making records." Two world records were broken during this contest. The first record was by Thornehill's pen of ten birds, which laid 2,816 eggs in the course of the year."

In the Long Draft for Robert Merriman, page 1, there is a grammatical error:

"Merriman was motivated to volunteer for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain after an excursion to Vienna offered *he and Marion* a firsthand view of Nazism."
should be "*him and Marion*".

On page 2:

"Eighty years later, on April 7, 2018, **the University of Barcelona placed a commemorative plaque in the old village** of Corbera d'Ebre where Merriman was likely killed:

Per la vostra llibertat i la nostra [For your freedom and ours] En memòria de Robert H. Merriman."

I request that there be a duplicate of this plaque somewhere in this interpretive work in Live Oak, with his photo, if it is available. Where are his two journals that he gave Marion? Can duplicates of significant passages be included in the interpretive display?

Finally, I still regret that the County of Santa Cruz could not find this historic Robert Merriman house of value and preserve it, rather than demolishing it.

Sincerely,
Becky Steinbruner