

FRIENDS OF THE PETALUMA RIVER
STORIES FROM THE RIVER HERITAGE CENTER

1. Introduction: Thom Butler & Petaluma Mayor Pamela Torliatt

Once it was called a creek, now it's a river. Technically the Petaluma River is a title slew, for a thirteen mile sinuous arm of San Pablo Bay. All who ply these water must attune to the rise and fall of the tides. Like the tides, human history ebbs and flows, as the life of the river merges with the lives of its people. Petaluma Mayor, Pamela Torliatt, "McNear Peninsula has a long history in the City of Petaluma, the City of Petaluma purchased ten acres of the McNear Peninsula in conjunction with the Open Space District a few years ago, and we have master planned this area in order to have people be able to access the river, David Yearsley with the Friends of the Petaluma River, has been working very hard with many volunteers to create space where people could potentially have overnight stay and be able to paddle up the Petaluma River as part of the Bay River Trail to experience this unique asset.

Executive Director of Friends of the Petaluma River, David Yearsley, "The beauty of our setting on McNear's Peninsula, is it is actually in the heart of the City. It's in the little, what I call a necklace of jewels around the downtown turning basin, between the Visitor's Center, the arts center, McNear's Peninsula. The Bay Trail, runs right by it. The Bay Trail is actually part of the McNear Peninsula and it runs through downtown Petaluma. So we're a five minute walk from downtown Petaluma. The Friends of the Petaluma River has taken the lead in creating the River Heritage Center and the livery Stable and around the grounds of McNear's Peninsula to both tell the story of how this river helped create Petaluma and the industrial and now recreational and educational components that have come through the river. So we see the Heritage Center as a place to tell stories.

So now, sit back, relax and listen as David Yearsley tells some of the stories of the Petaluma River.

2. Natives & Settlers – in the beginning

It all started of course with a blank canvas. But the canvas wasn't blank. We had the largest estuary in the northbay that was navigable up into the hills of Sonoma and the Native American tribes lived here in plenty and in peace for hundreds and thousands of years. We want to tell the story of the Native American. The Pomos and the Coast Miwoks were the tribes that settled this area. They had so much provender in their own little tribes that they had up to seven or eight villages in the area that spoke different dialects they couldn't even understand each other. They didn't have to go five miles to meet all their needs between the fish and the river and the

waterfowl and the elk and deer and bear on the land and the grain crops and the acorns. They had all their needs met within a very small radius. And what they did was built little villages in different parts of their terrain to take advantage of the foodsource that was in season; protect themselves from the elements. So they would go camp under the oaks during acorn season, they would camp by the river during salmon and fish season. They might camp along the creeks or in the hills during deer season. And so their villages were not like big cities like some of the bigger tribes in western plains. They were little campgrounds. When Petaluma was in its native conditions, most of Petaluma was tidal wetlands. Everything that was flat between the hills was some sort of wetlands. Whether it was tidal or seasonal wetlands it was a floodplain in the winter and in the summer it was grasslands. And it made a wonderful palate for western civilization. And as you know General Vallejo came up and got a land grant that covered everything from Sonoma Creek to Petaluma River, and developed essentially the first Western footprint here. And he changed the Indians life forever. The western migration that started with the Spanish, they, some people say enslaved the Indians. They certainly dominated the Indians, and put the ones that they could train, or subdue to use, and the other ones they couldn't, they killed. Vallejo was known as an Indian killer. He was a military man. And he was sent up here to dominate the landscape and he had a very powerful military bearing and he fought the Indians and he killed the ones that resisted and he dominated and enslaved the ones who didn't. This was what is sometimes painted in our history books as the mission period. The first settlers were actually the missionaries. And it wasn't long after Vallejo had settled, and become prosperous that gold was discovered in California and the gold miners flocked to the state from all over the world. Life in California changed dramatically. The first white western settlers in Petaluma were rumored to be, reported to be, guys from the gold ships, who abandoned ship and came up the creek in whale boats to find food and produce to take back to San Francisco and sell to the miners and sell to the newly arrived people who were settling up. I'm told that right about where our office is here on North Water Street was the camp of the first western settlers who came up by whale boat and put a little game camp here. And it wasn't long before the bounty here was so great that there were elk and deer and bear in the hills and Vallejo had basically used it as grazing ground. They got so much provender they needed to build warehouses and so they started building warehouses along the creek and those early pioneers became the first western settlers and the Petaluma City's fathers.

3. Maritime Heritage – scow schooner days

The Creek, Petaluma River, which they called the creek at the time, was the main source of transport and communication. That's how goods and services and where news came from the city. All of the creeks around the bay were the network of communication wires in that day. They didn't have bridges they didn't have good roads, but the water was flat, it was tidal, you could carry a big load in with the tide, you could go out with the tide and use the available wind when it was in your favor and travel all over the bay. That created the scow schooner era, this is

the second story I want to tell. The scow schooners and the subsequent paddle wheelers, transported goods and carried Sonoma's agricultural goods, to the main cities and brought manufactured goods and people to the north coast. Before the Golden Gate Bridge, Petaluma was the commuter rail. It was how people came and went. There were actually competitions between the paddle wheel companies to gain riders. Who had the faster paddle wheelers, who ran the most trips, speed was always an issue, speed and cost. But the scow schooners still plied the slews, they were the big rigs of the time. They could carry a huge cargo, they could pile hay on the decks, up to six, seven, eight bales high. They had special rigs where they could raise the steering wheel so the pilot could see over the load. They could raise the boom on the sail so it would clear the load. And they could carry big loads right on deck. They were essentially big barges with sails on them. That story is really germane to Petaluma. The scow schooner Alma is still the last model of a working scow schooner in the world. The western scow schooner. That model was developed on the San Francisco Bay. The Alma had a special connection to Petaluma in that she worked all over the bay but she mainly worked Petaluma. There's a lot of pictures of her in Petaluma's library and the maritime museum in San Francisco. And of course the Alma comes up every year to Petaluma to tell that story. The timeframe was mid 1800's, not long after Petaluma was incorporated, 1858, even before it was incorporated, but California became a state in 1848, when the westerners overthrew Vallejo. And it wasn't long after that before the scow schooner started to develop. They started small boats. But because of the thin water and the nature of the tidal wetlands, they needed flat-bottomed boats, and they could carry a load. And so that model was started in the mid 1800's. And the Alma was one of the last working scow schooners. The Alma was revived after it was left to rot on the Alviso slew in the south bay. A Petaluma native son, Karl Kortum, whose brother, Bill Kortum, is still very active in Sonoma County. Carl founded the San Francisco maritime museum. He and a few others saw the heritage of these boats that were left lying around the bay, rotting, and saw if they couldn't be saved soon, they were going to disappear. With the help of many, he was the visionary and the leader who helped save the Alma the Balclutha, the CA Thayer, the Eppleton Hall, which is a side wheel, paddlewheel tug from England, and the Eureka. The boats at the Maritime Heritage Museum in San Francisco, Aquatic Park and Hyde Street Pier, were for the most part there because of Karl Kortum's work. We're sitting here with a little book that Carl wrote about the sailing days on the Redwood Coast. He wasn't a prolific writer, but he was a visionary historian and preservationist and we want to tell his story as part of the Alma story. Because he is a native son of Petaluma, and his sister Maxine Durney, his brother Bill Kortum, and Bill's wife Lucy Kortum, are historic fixtures and community leaders in Petaluma. And Karl grew up in Petaluma, played on the river. We have stories from his sister and brother of their heritage, getting their feet in the mud and playing around in small boats and this is how he came for that passion. His family legacy lives on. And very few people even know this. That our maritime history in San Francisco is directly connected to Petaluma. If you go to the Maritime Museum in San Francisco, they hold Karl Kortum in very high esteem. They have a Karl Kortum award for

boat preservation, they have grants, they have a connection with Petaluma that a lot of our People don't even understand and we want to tell the story.

4. River Commerce – the aquatic highway

The other amazing connection we want to tell in this tulley sailor story is the age of wooden boats, which fascinates me, I love old wooden boats and the character of the and the way people relate to them. There's not only a sense of work, but adventure, and craft. They're not manufactured goods, they're hand build and operated by men who know how to use them and take care of them and navigate with them. This was before they had power but even after they had power navigating the river in hand build boats is still something I like to see done today. The age of the gasoline engine allowed the scow schooner to be converted into gasoline powered barges and the paddle wheelers often ran on steam but the scow schooners would be, not appropriate for steam because they were too small but a gas engine is much smaller than a steam boiler and once they developed that engine capacity they cut the mast off and used them as motorized barges and they were used for dredging up sand and shells which the sand was used in construction trades and the shells were used in the chicken trades. Petaluma being the big poultry center on the west coast needed a lot of shell because the calcium in oyster shells made strong eggs. The Alma itself was actually used as one of the first shell dredgers and continually served Petaluma with loads of shells until it transferred ownership into the early 1900s, 1930's 1940's. She was carrying shell up to Petaluma and our shell company in Petaluma, Jerico dredging had a direct relation to it they were one of the last owners of the Alma before it was decommissioned and left on a mud bank to rot, that scow schooner was still serving Petaluma as a transport ship. Jerico dredging has the tug and barge business that runs up and down Petaluma and brings raw materials in not only for their company but for shamrock. They bring in gravel they bring in other materials by barge. Jerico operates around the bay but they're headquartered in Petaluma and they have that thread of connection to maritime industrial trade that goes back to the time of the scow schooners when this river, and all the rivers were the means of travel and communication. So I want to tell that story. Jerico are our neighbors on McNear Peninsula they have their headquarters and their shell processing plant on McNear Peninsula and that's part of the industrial and the agricultural heritage of this river. I has lunch with Mitch and Barbara Lynn who own Jerico dredging and have passed, or passing that along to their second and third generation but they have a fascinating story of how they not only acquired and operated that dredging and shell business but how they acquired the land on McNear Peninsula. And actually saved it from development. I want to tell part of that story in our heritage center, and they are interested in cooperating. We want to be proud of this story because I want people to care about the maritime heritage of Petaluma and we also want to create ways for people to connect with this heritage by building traditional small craft. Using them on the water, row boats, small sailboats, even maybe, some small scow schooners where we can put hay on boat and give river hay rides up and down the Petaluma and talk about the cultural heritage and the industrial

heritage. I'm really heartened by the progress the City has made for years they turned their back on the Petaluma River, it looked kinda funny, it was dirty colored and it smelled bad at low tide and people thought it was just a ditch that they dumped their trash in. Many people in town didn't even know where it went. They had no idea that the Petaluma River connected to the bay which connected to the rest of the world. It's an international port. You can sail anywhere in the world, and boats from anywhere in the world can sail to Petaluma

5. Natural Resources – the wetlands empire

The other story I'm trying to tell as an environmental leader is the natural resources of the Petaluma watershed. The tidal wetlands in Petaluma are incredibly important to the bay. People didn't realize this in the 50's and 60's when they were filling and diking tidal wetlands, but they actually act as floodplains, they control floods and more importantly they help to cleanse water by spreading it out and letting the sun get to it, the plants absorb the toxins. The most important function the tidal wetlands perform, very few people know, is they provide the nutrients that are the basis for the aquatic food chain. The decaying plants and detritus feed little bugs and mollusks that live in the marsh who feed on them and break them down and create nutrients that flow into the water when the high tide carries those nutrients from the marsh into the slews and the slews drain down the bay. The fish and birdlife on the slews eat those little bugs and plankton that are in the water and those in turn are eaten by larger fish and as it goes out to the bay and the ocean, this food chain is what sustains aquatic life. And its fed by tidal marshes. I don't think many people realize that that discolored water is not just dirt, those are nutrients that are feeding the life of the sea. We are blessed with the largest remaining historic contiguous ancient tidal marsh on the west coast. The Petaluma Marsh has been preserved mostly because it is surrounded by water. Petaluma River and San Antonio Creek are two of its borders, and because it was hard to get heavy machinery to it, it never got diked or drained. We would have lost that too in the 50's if it had been on the shores of Petaluma. But as you can see from our maps, the blue was all tidal wetlands and today most of those are hay fields. Well there's nothing wrong with the hay fields except they've displaced tidal wetlands. I learned from Bill Kortum that that's actually called salt hay and it had a very high value in the hay market because the salt was good for the animals. As you know farmers often put out salt licks for their cattle. Well the horses and livestock needed salt, needed that sodium to aid their digestion and maintain their health. Hay was the gasoline, was the oil of the 18th and 19th century because horses and cattle were the power that drove industry and they ran on hay. And so that was why the scow schooners were like the oil tankers of the 1800's. In the early 1900's before the gasoline engine and roads became prevalent and displaced that. That hay was incredibly valuable and people found that the marshes, especially the seasonal marsh around the Petaluma River would grow good salt hay. So they diked off those marshes and drained them and started growing hay on them. And the salt hay from the Petaluma and Sonoma watersheds was highly sought after because it grew in what was saline ground and the salt was captured in the plants. This still

happens in the plants that grow in tidal wetlands. The pickleweed has a special way of processing salt. Petaluma's most tidal estuary are brackish water. A mixture of fresh and salt water. The higher up you go the fresher it gets but the salt is in the water and the only plants you can grow in that region have to learn a way to deal with it. Most of them evaporate it in their cells and leave little salt crystals in the edge of the leaves. Pickleweed which is called Salicornia is the most prevalent plant in our salt marshes. They're so called Salicornia marshes and the pickleweed actually holds the salt in the cells of the plant like little pickles. But moves it out to the tips. In the fall those tips turn red and fall off and then new plants spring from the roots and new cycle starts again. But to watch our pickleweed marsh turn from green to rusty, to deep red is just like watching the trees turn in the hardwood forest. It's a beautiful sight and it's an ever-changing visual. I like to educate and tell people about our Petaluma Marsh, and tour the sloughs out there. Very few people have ever been out there. They don't even know it exists or know the value it provides to the watershed. And we want to tell that story, the natural history of the Petaluma River.

6. Outdoor Recreation – connections to nature

Another story we want to tell at our heritage center is how the abundant fish and wildlife not only provided food for the pioneers but they provided food for our forefathers and recreational connection. Actually a spiritual connection. Where hunters and fishermen still carry that gene, that need to connect with nature and harvest that bounty. And that includes someone who knows waterman skills, navigating boats in tidal backwaters. This was well described in the book called Chesapeake, and that's how I came to my work and my understanding as both a hunter and fisherman. We often lump them together and call them outdoorsman. So we want to have an outdoor heritage component. I think sharing those skills is very important to pass them on not so much for sustenance but I think a part of our nature as mammals is connected to hunting and gathering. I know it's in our genes to observe nature and there's no closer way to observe it and understand it than as a participant in the food chain. As a predator, who catches fish, hunts waterfowl, or tracks wildlife, the tracking in the Petaluma Marsh is some of the best in the world because the footprints in the mud tell stories that often disappear on our harder landscapes. We want to take people out in the marsh or even to our River Heritage Center and learn to read the tracks we want tracking to be a part of our educational component. Very often outdoorsmen start as people who catch and eat their prey, but they often develop into people who just love the connection to the prey, and often don't engage in killing it, but just tracking it, studying it, photographing it, telling their children about it or...it creates a very meaningful connection to our roots and this has been the story that I want to expand on because we are losing it. A lot of our children are not getting out in nature. There's a lot of fear around dangers both from traffic and civilization's threats and from human threats. The beauty of our River Heritage Center is it's totally devoid of motorized traffic. To get there you have to walk out a quarter mile trail, or take a bicycle or come by boat. But motorized traffic won't be an issue, even human interaction will be very easy to monitor because the Peninsula is flat and because the people who come and

go, go through one little point right by the Livery Stable and you can sign in people, or check people in as they come and go and control the threat of the human element. I see it is a place where children can run free natural adventures and not be threatened by some of society's ills. It's a wonderful feeling to think we can play in the river again, and our kids can play in the river and be safe. The water is fairly shallow, it is tidal as you know, but even people who fall in, they don't disappear they usually drag themselves to shore. It's a very safe, benign environment. The current is not threatening. People might get dirty, cold, muddy, you know, but they'll learn some valuable lessons and learn to tell their children.

7. A Living System – the river body

When you look at the river and the tidal slews that go off of it, the little streams that feed those slews, you'll see something that's very similar to a cardiovascular system in the human body. You'll see the arteries, the veins and the capillaries that take nutrients around and feed different parts of the body. That's exactly what our river does to the Petaluma Valley. And we need to know that in order to honor it and to maintain it, try to keep it healthy. We've already done a lot of damage to it. Now we're putting stints in certain sections, basically doing bypasses the same as doctors do in the cardiovascular system. But the Petaluma Marsh and our Wetlands are a lot like the lungs and the kidneys of a body. They not only cleanse the water but they convert sunlight and oxygen into energy which goes back into the food chain. We're all very similar in some ways. You know, our bodies, our blood, has about the same saline content as the tidal estuary. It's true. We're 90% water. And the rest are just you know, skin, bones, and organs are like our features of the landscape. I think people can understand that, that simple kind of description of the value of tidal wetlands. Just compare it to the human needs. We want to create programs that engage people in living in connection with the river.

8. River Heritage Center Vision – Mary Dooley

Friend of the Petaluma River, architect Mary Dooley, who recently helped design Petaluma's beautiful new arts center, offers her thoughts on the River Heritage Center. "I have two eight year olds and a twelve year old, and I have always dreamed of being out on that Peninsula with my family and at the time that I envisioned that I only had one son, now I have three sons and my vision was having picnics out there and walking out there and just being on this Peninsula with water on both sides and enjoying just the natural setting, and the natural environment. And when I came to find out about the River Heritage Center and the idea of having watercraft classes and things that would really engage younger people as well as older people, I just thought I want this to happen while they're young. And just can be childlike out there. The idea of this happening before they get older is really... wants me to just work on this and help to make it happen. The old Livery Stable being located now on the peninsula, this historic structure, it's a really classic form that you see in all Sonoma Landscape, so it's really appropriately sited. This sort of rustic interior and it's very unassuming. It's really the way a farmer would build a building. It's part of this "see it all" it's exposed, nothing's covered up, you walk into that space

and you could see a boat in construction you could see exhibits around on the walls and kind of get an idea of the history of the River and of Petaluma so there'd be some really nice interpretive exhibits. And there'd be a big open space that would have a multi-purpose, undefined use, over time. I imagine it could be even unstaffed at times. It could actually be sort of a fixed exhibit that could have its doors open and people come in and experience things, maybe during the week when there's not classes or events going on. Then on the weekends I could imagine people coming up with their boats and pulling up to a dock and getting off and having a picnic or sort of a spontaneous amphitheater performance. I think its got all the potential for an amazing heritage center, bringing in agriculture, watercraft, native American histories, histories of the River. And it's all connected to how Petaluma came to be.

9. Conclusion – an exciting dream

We don't have a lot of space out here, but I want to create permanent or rotating displays that will tell us these stories both with visual displays, with programs, with presentations, and personal events. We want to create sustainable practices, harvesting, sun, rain, composting our waste and reusing that in the land. I'd love to see a couple draft horses out when the rest of McNear's Peninsula is acquired, to pull our hay wagons and till the fields, it's beautiful stuff. And feed the hay to the horses and use the manure to grow the hay out there and make our own hay bales and load our own hay barges and give our own hay rides on the river. Perhaps even use the shell, the oyster shell in raising chickens; it's all connected. What's old is new again. What we're learning about sustainability, we're actually looking to the Native Americans to teach us. How do you live in harmony with nature for hundreds of years? We might have to give up some of our luxuries, some of our comforts, but we also will preserve what we have, the resources we have for future generations. This is my dream for the River Heritage Center. Interactive programs, to engage not only children but the community in water born river heritage of our town. It's exciting stuff.