

# Spring Down Open Space

## Portola Valley, CA

### A Pictorial Story of Restoration



Spring Down Open Space Meadow April, 2010

## I. Introduction and Recent History

The arduous journey to convert a six-acre horse facility into the gem of Portola Valley's open spaces through the perseverance of the Town and volunteer committees is worthy of documenting as given in this *Pictorial Story of Restoration*. Technically, the project is more of a creation than a restoration as a century or so ago the property was likely native grasses dotted with oak trees. The story is long, so for a quick read refer to the Timeline on page 5 and the captioned photos throughout the story.

Way back in 1948, the land that is now the Town's *Spring Down Open Space* was in partial agricultural use. A small orchard occupied the southeast corner of the six-acre parcel, but most of it was grassland. One wonders where lies the evidence of water that fills today's pond and carves a creek bed along the western edge of the parcel.



1. Spring Down Open Space Parcel in 1948. South is at top. The solid line at the far left delineates the approximate current Portola Road alignment.

Twenty years later in 1968, Myrl and Ruth Stearns built a 62-horse boarding stable on the entire 11.7 acre parcel that included an additional 5.7 acres immediately to the west of the open space. The Stearns' goal was not so much to train and breed horses as it was to provide a place for locals, both young and old, to enjoy their horses.

The Stearns named the stable *Spring Down Farm* after a horse belonging to their daughter. The name was derived from the horse's sire, *Spring Count*, and its mother, *Downey*, a naming custom for thoroughbreds. Thus came *Spring Down*, the name of the horse, the stable, and now the open space.

The property changed hands in 1976 and again in 1984 when Stan and Carol Goodstein purchased the property and renamed it *Spring Down Equestrian Center*. Over the years, the Goodsteins made several improvements to the equestrian center and conducted many horse shows and schooling shows. Carol continues to run the Center today. In 2000, the Goodsteins and the Town entered into a contract whereby the Town purchased the front six acres as open space and leased the property to the Equestrian Center to continue to use the horse facility on the property. In 2008, the Spring Down Equestrian Center removed their horse facilities and the Town began to turn the parcel into today's *Spring Down Open Space*. Many town folks

remember the spectacular wildflower display in the spring of 2010 following the clean up, grading, and wildflower seeding the previous fall.

## II. The Vision

In 2009, the Town's *Open Space Acquisition Advisory Committee* (more simply, the *Open Space Committee*) submitted their *Spring Down Master Plan Proposal* to the Town Council. An excerpt below from that proposal stated their vision, later endorsed by the Town's 23 member *Ad-Hoc Spring Down Master Plan Committee* in 2011 and again by the Conservation Committee's *Comprehensive Plan for Town Owned Open Spaces* in 2018.

"The property is characterized by a large, open, gently sloped meadow surrounded by Coast Live Oak trees and a few Redwood trees. A thick growth of Willows dominates the southwest corner of the property.... Hidden by the willows is a pond excavated by the property owners to control flooding. With selective trimming of the willows, it can be better accessed to provide a unique biotic feature that would attract wildlife and provide a place for natural history study by residents and their children. This quiet space would provide a restful retreat from the hustle and bustle of the Town Center campus. Most of the open space is open grassland, and from several points, one is impressed with the expanse of the meadow and the role of the trees around the property's edges that help insulate the space from Portola Road traffic and nearby structures. The open meadow and oaks provide a view from the past of how the valley floor likely appeared prior to development."

Today, Spring Down Open Space fulfills its promise of this vision as a tranquil natural area, both prominently sited in town and accessible to Town Center activities, parking, and trails.



2. The "vision" is reflected in this quiet moment under somber winter skies

### III The Meadow

A grassy meadow occupies most of the Open Space land. We see it as bright green in winter and spring, later punctuated by wildflowers for a moment in late spring, and then a warm golden-brown throughout the summer and most of the fall. A thick growth of willows and dogwood form an almost impenetrable habitat for wildlife near and around the pond. There is no evidence of the four horse rings that once occupied this space. In 2008 and 2009,



the Town removed the ring materials, carefully graded the area, and began a mowing schedule including the removal of non-native plants. The Town seeded the meadow with California wildflowers. The cover photo reminds us of that special time. Today, restoration has removed all evidence of the former use, but non-native grasses remain and pose a challenge for removal.

3. Horse Rings in late 2007. The pond is visible among the willows at top right.



4. 2009 After removal of rings and grading.

## IV. The Pond, Yesterday and Today

When the Goodsteins built the horse rings on the western half of their property, they soon realized an accumulation of water during the winter seasons. In the mid 1980's they excavated a roughly 30 feet square 10 feet deep "pit" to trap the winter water. For safety concerns, the "pit" was fenced and a pump house built to water the rings during the summer. As years went by, the "pit" softened to a deep pond. Willows and dogwood soon lined its edge. By the time the Town took full ownership in 2008, willows had overwhelmed the pond and left its waters anoxic, littered with refuse, and its periphery surrounded by the imposing chain link fence.

The restoration of the pond is a story of its own. In 2012, the Town embarked on a lengthy journey to obtain permits from the U.S. Corps of Engineers, which claimed jurisdiction over the pond area as a wetland, and to obtain approval of other agencies dealing with environmental quality. Five years later, the Town obtained all needed reviews and permits in a story perhaps best told as a **Timeline**.



5. Pond condition in 2010, inaccessible and anoxic. Pump house at left.

### Restoration Timeline for Spring Down Pond

2000 - Town purchases the six-acre parcel from the Spring Down Equestrian Center owners, Stan and Carol Goodstein.

2008 - 2009 Spring Down Equestrian Center removed their horse facilities from the parcel. The Town removed ring materials, graded the parcel, and applied native grass and wildflower seed.

2009 – The Open Space Acquisition Advisory Committee submitted to the Town Council a proposed Master Plan for the parcel which included pond restoration, trail layout, fencing restoration, limits on uses, and a vision for the parcel.

2009 - The Town Council authorized the formation of an Ad-Hoc Spring Down Master Plan Committee. The Committee was composed of members of specific Town Committees, Town Council member, staff, and interested members of the community.

2010 – The Ad Hoc Committee met four times. The report to the Town Council was that the consensus of the Committee and neighbors was that the parcel should *remain in open space and in an undeveloped state*, but would include pond and fencing restoration, a trail, and elimination of non-native vegetation. The Committee report refers to the pond as *Spring Down Pond*.

2011 – Spring Down Pond Enhancement Plan was submitted to the Town by *Balance Hydrologics, Inc.*

2011 – Spring Down Pond *Special-status Species Assessment Study* was submitted by *TRA Environmental Sciences, Inc.*

2012 – U.S. Corps of Engineers declares jurisdiction over the 0.86 acres of wetlands of the pond, pond drainage, and surrounding area pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

2012 – Town makes application to the U.S. Corps of Engineers for pond restoration.

2014 – Plant Species Inventory of Pond and Adjacent Upland was submitted by members of the Open Space Committee, Conservation Committee, and members of the *Jasper Ridge Herbarium*.

2016 – After 4 years of frustration with slow and dismissive responses from the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the Town contracted with MIG/TRA Environmental Sciences to pursue restoration permits. The Town re-submitted the application increasing pond depth from 2 feet to 5 feet.

2016 – U.S. Department of Interior grants Certification of Compliance for mitigation as affects the Red-legged Frog and San Francisco Garter Snake. Restoration permits were granted to the Town.

2017 – Because of special status protection, a dozen Dusky-footed Wood Rat nests surrounding the pond were carefully moved to a nearby location.

2017 - Restoration of Spring Down Pond was completed in the six-week period from mid-September to late October. Because of compaction of the pond bottom, the contractor drilled three artesian wells to allow ground water to fill the pond.

2018 – Conservation Committee submitted a *Comprehensive Plan for Town Owned Open Spaces* to the Town Council to specify yearly maintenance of Spring Down Open Space with a goal of controlling invasive species.

By mid 2017, the permits were in hand. The Town scheduled pond restoration for the six-week period between September 15 and October 31. Before restoration could begin, the Dusky-footed Wood Rat nests, observed in the *Special-status Species Assessment Study*, were required to be carefully relocated from the construction area. A wildlife biologist relocated about a dozen of these nests found to be inhabited. The relocation included placement of temporary two-room wooden “apartments” at the new locations



6. Moving the Wood Rat nests.



7. Wood Rat temporary "apartments."

8.



8. Pumping the old pond.



9. Clearing the old fence and other debris.

In early October, with the old pond empty, equipment and crew descended to excavate and grade the new pond from a steep sided 10 feet deep "pit" to a gradually sloped 5 feet deep pond according to the approved design.



10. Excavation equipment –two graders and two shovels.



11. Crew and Equipment.

The construction crew of *O. Nelson & Son, Woodside, CA* completed the final grade of the pond on October 9. The heavy equipment compacted the soil at the bottom of the pond so that the expected inflow of ground water seemed to be impacted. Three one-foot diameter artesian wells were drilled to a depth of about ten feet. The holes were encased by perforated pipe and filled with drain rock. The seepage of ground water into the pond was immediate.





12. Final Pond Grading



13. Location of three Artesian Wells

The question of existence of so much water in the area of the pond remains. Water in the old pond persisted through the seasons since it was dug in the mid 1980's. Carol Goodstein's recollection was that the Spring Down Equestrian Center dug the pond to contain "standing water" near the southern end of the major horse ring during the rainy season. Only in the final year of the five-year drought in 2016 did the pond water level drop to a puddle. Traces of the San Andreas Fault run east of the pond with another projection running almost through it. A report associated with the *Stanford Exploration Website* states that:

*“Strike slip faults are good places for lakes; the fault both creates a low spot to collect the water, and grinds up the rock underneath making an impermeable layer to hold the water in.”*



Even with high ground water levels, because the new pond bottom is at least five feet higher and the pond five feet shallower than the old pond, low water levels can be expected in the dry season.

14. Public Works Director Howard Young supervising restoration.

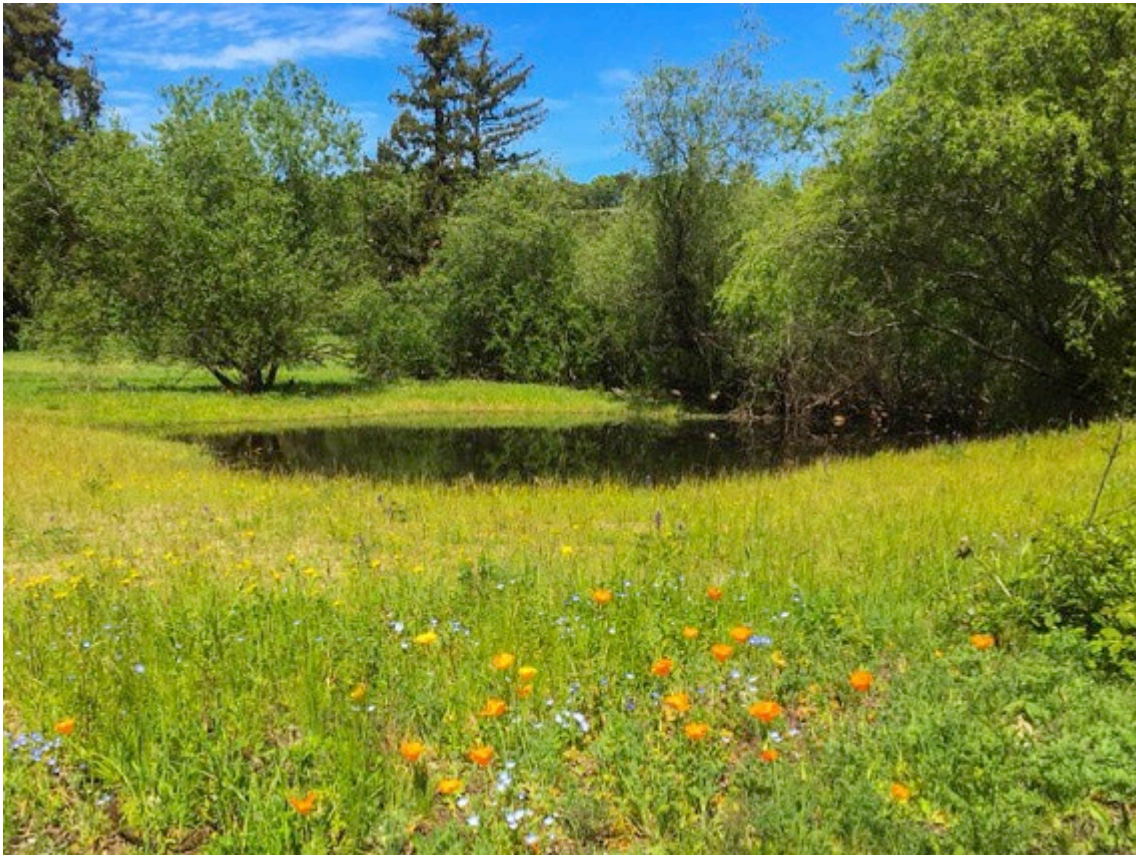


15. Pond overflowing by March 1, 2018 even with below normal rainfall.

## V. Tomorrow and Beyond

After nine years of work on the open space; site clean up and grading of the horse ring area, the long ordeal of obtaining Federal and State permits, biological assessments, non-native plant removal, and pond restoration, we can now say that restoration of Spring Down Open Space is nearing completion. A trail connection or two to existing trails needs to be established and repair of the old fence needs attention. A few non-native trees along Portola Road will be removed to enhance the view of the open space and of the hills beyond and the challenge to control non-native grasses and other invasive species continues. For the future, our Conservation Committee will assume responsibility for oversight of the yearly maintenance of the open space.

The remaining goal in the years ahead is someday to have all residents of our town walk the trails of our Spring Down Open Space.



15. Spring Down Pond today – Spring 2018

## VI. Acknowledgments

Assembling this pictorial story was the collaboration of a number of individuals. Town Historian, Nancy Lund, and Town Public Works Director, Howard Young, both suggested documenting the restoration. Nancy provided historical information for *Spring Down Farm* for this story. As Public Works Director, Howard was responsible for communicating with government agencies to obtain permits, contracting with consultants for environmental assessments, and overseeing all restoration activities through the years on the open space including the major work on the pond.

Town committees, in particular, members of the Open Space Committee and more recently, members of the Conservation Committee contributed many hours of work characterized by diligence and persistence to making this open space a success.

Many Town residents were generous donors for the purchase of Spring Down Open Space led by the lead gift of Mary and the late Rodney Smith for the *Millennium Challenge* fund raising project of 2000. All of us, as residents of our town, are also donors through the open space revenues raised by the Utility Users Tax.

Photos by Howard Young and Gary Nielsen  
Text by Gary Nielsen

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