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Into the Wilder-ness

By Victor Ryerson



The Wilder development in the Orinda hills
Photo Victor Ryerson

1,600 acres of land, with homes boasting 2,500 to 6,000 square feet of living space, Wilder is its own oasis. It took almost three decades for Wilder to get to the point where homes started rising on the newly graded hills, and the path is nearly as littered with defunct developers as the Chilkoot Trail is with the artifacts of Alaska gold seekers. With 16 of the 19 finished homes actually occupied, their occupants, at least for now, are very much pioneers in Orinda's outback.

They are coming from places close by like Lafayette and Berkeley, and from faraway places like Atlanta and New York. They are predominantly families of young professionals with children ranging from newborn to college age. Their reasons for coming are familiar to all Orindans: Orinda's proximity to the metropolitan centers of San Francisco and Oakland; its celebrated schools; and the quality of life in a remarkably peaceful semi-rural town buffered from the urban world just over the hills by seemingly endless open space.

Mark and Shannon Vicencio, the third residents to move into Wilder, came from Lafayette with their two teenage sons. They have lived there for over two years, enabling them to get a feel for the rhythm of life in the new community. "I love it," Shannon says of her life in Wilder. One feature of the development that she finds particularly appealing is what she calls the "stadium effect" of the construction, with houses built either uphill or downhill from one another, which means that neighbors will not be looking across the street into each other's living rooms.

For Madelyn Mallory, 60, and her husband, Dr. Mark Bresnik, 64, Wilder's location was an important factor in their decision to move from just over the hill in Berkeley's Hiller Highlands neighborhood. Mallory, a financial planner who works in San Francisco, had previously lived for many years in Orinda and was eager to return. Bresnik, who works in San Mateo, supported her aspirations, but made it clear that Wilder was as far as he was willing to commute from the Contra Costa side of the tunnel. It was a good compromise: She takes BART from Orinda, arriving early enough to find parking at the station, while he battles the traffic to get to his job in Foster City.

Not surprisingly, real estate in Wilder does not come cheap. Lots have been selling in the range of

It may be a bit of an exaggeration to say that the residents of Wilder are pioneers, but being the first homeowners in a whole new community is a phenomenon Orinda has not witnessed since the middle of the last century. Surrounded by open space and accessible only from Highway 24, Wilder is isolated like no other Orinda neighborhood, yet it is a stone's throw from downtown, and just a little farther from the bright lights of the East Bay. Wilder residents can easily choose between the two for their shopping and entertainment needs, yet they are cloistered in a valley so rural at this point that they have to take precautions to ensure their pets do not become dinner for the coyotes that roam the hills around them.

Once part of a ranch owned by airline mogul Ed Daly, tucked in the Gateway Valley between the Orinda crossroads and the Oakland Hills and set on

\$700,000 to \$1.5 million, and homes from about \$1.8 million to just under \$3 million. The demographics of its inhabitants reflect these prices. Brooks Street's Perry says that about 20 percent of Wilder's current residents are empty nesters. Bresnik and Mallory fit this profile. Essentially empty nesters - Mallory's 27-year-old daughter has boomeranged home while she gets her career established - they claim to be Wilder's oldest residents. As the sixth to move there, next door to the very first occupants, they are certainly among the earliest. The younger residents tend to work for large tech companies like Sales Force, Paypal, and Survey Monkey, or in biotech. Many of the children attend nearby private schools, but some attend Orinda public schools and high schools in the Acalanes Union High School District. Buses are available for students of both public and private schools.

Both families extol Wilder's proximity to open space, and they make full use of it. Mallory says she and her daughter particularly enjoy hiking the winding trail between the development and neighboring Sibley Regional Park to get away from it all. The Vicencios make regular use of Wilder's local system of trails and paths to walk their two golden retrievers. The valley is home to a great many songbirds and raptors that are generally in view, and Mallory especially likes to watch the local flock of redwinged blackbirds doing aerobatics "at that magic time" before dusk.

To most of us who zip past Wilder on Highway 24, the most salient feature of the project is the growing group of five sports fields that cascade down from the top of the saddle separating the valley from the rest of the world. The fields, included in Wilder as a condition for building the development, are already busy, especially after school and on weekends. Michelle Lacy, Orinda's Director of Parks and Recreation, reports that they are used for youth and adult soccer, lacrosse, youth and adult rugby, adult softball, youth baseball, and field hockey. She cites 2015 use by no less than 19 different sports organizations from both sides of the tunnel, including some from Berkeley and Martinez-Pleasant Hill. Three fields are completed and in use, and were reserved for a total of 6,166 hours in 2015; two more fields are scheduled to come online shortly. As might be expected, all of the new life and activity in Wilder have brought with them what Mallory calls "growing pains." The empty new streets were quickly discovered by skateboarders, who could not resist the temptation to try them out for an exciting ride. There have been a few incidents of mailbox break-ins and minor vandalism at construction sites because there are not yet a lot of eyes in the valley, she says, and some problems with construction trash and violation of construction hours in the valley. There have also been a few instances of vehicles abandoned on the property that may be related to the easy access afforded by proximity to Highway 24. Residents are working closely with the developer, the Orinda Planning Department and the Orinda Police to address these concerns, and heightened enforcement of permit conditions and stepped-up security measures, such as installation of surveillance cameras, are expected to resolve most of these issues. Others will simply disappear as the construction ends and the valley fills up with new residents.

The Wilder community is settling at a slower pace, with only 16 of the proposed 245 custom homes in the development occupied, and 23 more under construction. How quickly Wilder will build out is anyone's guess. "The market will dictate the velocity of sales," says Perry, but "every sale adds new word of mouth." Vicencio believes it will not take long, perhaps until the end of 2017, because "progress is amazing." Mallory thinks it will take a longer time, maybe five to 10 years. In the meantime, Wilder's pioneering residents are busy building a community by doing the kinds of things pioneers have always done: hosting potluck dinners and throwing progressive Christmas parties to get acquainted, and banding together to address their community issues. In addition, they have done something their historic counterparts did not traditionally do. They hired a concierge to handle all of the duties that title implies in the hospitality world, plus a few others such as coordinating community events.

"We're very pleased to be here, and very fortunate," says Mallory. And while she and her neighbors have Wilder all to themselves, their pioneering lifestyle is unique to Orinda.



Photo Andy Scheck

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