



# Nicasio Historical Society

## Summer Update 2018

### Upcoming Event in 2018

*Glimpse of West Marin: secret places, private lands*

#### **A Fine Art Exhibition and Sale to Benefit the Nicasio Historical Society**

The “Glimpse of West Marin” Fine Art Show will showcase the results of twenty-five accomplished artists, who are presently creating art on location, with exclusive access to private lands all over West Marin and in Nicasio during the summer of 2018. This exhibition will include watercolor and oil paintings, photography and metal sculpture.

The festive Opening Reception on Friday evening September 28 from 5pm to 8pm will include local wines, cheeses, and more.

The show continues on Saturday and Sunday September 29-30 from 11am to 5pm. It is free, open to the public, and promises to be a feast for the eyes. **Don't miss it; last year's show was a smash success!**



*Farley Barn*

©Laura Culver

### Upcoming Exhibit in 2018



#### *Ranching in Nicasio*

A new exhibit, planned to open in mid October 2018, will focus on Ranching in Nicasio. It will feature several pieces of fascinating historic ranching objects, like an old washing machine, a plow, a vintage tractor, and more along with photos and informative signage.

You can always find the latest information on events, exhibits, and opening receptions on our website:

[www.nicasio.net/nhs](http://www.nicasio.net/nhs)

*Photo: Albertoni and Ottolini Ranch  
Courtesy Mary Albertoni*

## Two Past Events in 2018

### ***Recollections: A Conversation with Dewey Livingston and Tom Forster***



It is with a heavy heart that I begin this article with the sad news of Tom Forster's untimely passing in May. We were so very fortunate to have held the fifth, in our series of *Recollections* interviews, with Tom on Friday evening March 16, 2018. Tom worked for Skywalker Ranch for 34 years as Ranch Manager and Fire Chief (1984-2006) and later as Director of Community Relations.

It was a lively and engaging conversation between Dewey and Tom accompanied by Tom's slideshow presentation with questions and comments from the audience. He and Dewey Livingston talked about the history of Lucas Valley ranches, the development of Skywalker Ranch, and the firefighting history of the area, which was of particular interest to Tom, who served as chair of the Marin Fire History Project.

*(Interview transcript on page 3  
Tom Forster obituary on p. 8)*

### ***Reception for the Nicasio Children Through the Years Museum Exhibit***



Thirty guests attended our exhibit Reception in the museum on July 14, 2018. Elaine Doss gave a talk about the history of Nicasio School and its students, interweaving historical facts with amusing student anecdotes. Phyllis Sharrow, who appears in two photos in this exhibit, was present and added colorful details regarding her time at Nicasio School, as did Terri Carlson. After the talk and the questions and comments of guests, we enjoyed refreshments.

## Thank You

- We would like to express sincere thanks to artist Dorallen Davis for graciously donating to NHS her lovely painting of our museum.
- We extend our gratitude to Loren and Rachel Carpenter for their generous donation of computer, scanner, cassette digitizer, and digital recorder.
- We convey our appreciation to Janet Fulton, descendent of William J Anderfuren, for donating the original Nicasio School hand bell, now part of our *Nicasio Children Through the Years* exhibit.



*©Dorallen Davis*

**Interview with Tom Forster**  
**By Dewey Livingston**  
**on March 16, 2018**  
**Before a live audience in the**  
**Nicasio School Multi Purpose Room**

**Amy Morse:** Welcome to the Nicasio Historical Society. This is our fifth *Recollections*, an interview with an important historical figure in Nicasio conducted before an audience. We will record and transcribe the interview and keep it in our archives. Elaine Doss usually does these introductions but she had some hip surgery yesterday so she's sorry that she can't be here. She is here in spirit.

Dewey Livingston and Tom Forster are going to speak tonight about the history of Bulltail Ranch, which was the previous name of Skywalker Ranch and some of the surrounding ranches, as well as some of the history of Volunteer Fire Departments in Marin County, of particular interest to Tom.

**DL:** Thanks everybody for coming. It's a nice turnout. It's been really great to get to know more about Tom and what he's doing. I think you're going to enjoy tonight and some of the things we can learn.

One thing I found out about Tom a few years ago is that he is a native of Marin County and we even went to the same high school. You were one of those puny freshmen I think when I was a senior. So starting with that Tom—welcome Tom Forster [applause].

**TF:** Thank you.

**DL:** I understand your family was here for a while before you came along. Can you tell us a little about your family's pioneering history in Marin County or how they got here?

**TF:** First, on my mother and father's side there are roots in San Francisco and Oakland. They both go back into the 1800s. My family ran one of the first bakeries in Oakland, long ago. And then we have plumbing and painting roots in San Francisco. The Forster family, my great-great-grandfather, patented a toilet flange back when toilets were new. So you can actually Google Forster patent toilet flange and it will come up Library of Congress, the original patent. But of course they didn't make big money or anything.

**DL:** But it's a good legacy.

**TF:** It is. My grandfather was born in Larkspur and Alswood, my Grandpa Nelson, became the

longtime Police and Fire Chief in Corte Madera. My Grandpa Forster was raised in Fairfax and lived there. He used to commute on the train from Fairfax to the ferry in Sausalito to go to work in the plumbing business in San Francisco before the Golden Gate Bridge.

Then my mom and dad were both born at Cottage Hospital in San Rafael, which is the hospital prior to Marin General. Then, I was born at Marin General long ago and raised in Corte Madera and went to school at Larkspur-Corte Madera School where my grandfather and my mother had gone and then Henry C. Hall. That school was named after my grandfather's teacher at LCM, Henry "Pop" Hall. Then I went to Redwood and College of Marin where I got a couple Associate Degrees. I went to Chico after trying Berkeley and had decided that Berkeley was too big for me. I took some time off, worked a couple jobs, saved some money and went up to Chico where I got my Bachelors.

I have lots of Marin Country family still and roots going way back.

**DL:** Corte Madera, when you were growing up, was a little different than it is today. What are some of your fond memories of Marin in the quieter days?

**TF:** I remember my father passed away about five years ago and I spoke at his memorial. There's three sounds that are quite different today than they were when I was a kid. One was the train, the freight train still came right by our house in Corte Madera so you would hear that pretty much every day. And you'd hear the fire horn in both Larkspur and Corte Madera. The horn would go off at 8:00 in the morning three times, noon three times and 5:00 o'clock three times. Those were originally used before two-way radio and pager days to alert the volunteer firefighters that you had an emergency.

Some towns like I believe Nicasio used a siren rather than a horn and it would be kind of like an air raid siren but in the case of Larkspur and Corte Madera they started with box alarms around town and that was how you would report a fire in the days before the telephone; it's use was widespread. You'd go pull a box and the number of horn blasts would tell you where the emergency was if you didn't see the smoke.

The third sound that's really different is I can remember as a kid it was really quiet at night and the freeway noise that you have today, the ambient noise that's just a dull hum, you could hear dead-silence and if the weather conditions were right we

could hear the loudspeakers at San Quentin prison, which would come across the marsh and come up into the valley we were in. You could hear in the middle of the night if you were up, the one single truck coming down the freeway and then it would be dead quiet. So, I do notice that when I visit my mom who still lives in the family home in Corte Madera.

**DL:** Things have changed. Traffic jams—I remember you could ride your bike down Magnolia or whatever and there would not be much traffic.

**TF:** You could walk down the railroad tracks to school and get milk deliveries at home.

**DL:** Nice times.

**TF:** Yeah.

**DL:** And it wasn't that long ago. Now, was your father also with the Fire Department?

**TF:** He was, with the Corte Madera Volunteer Fire Department, as were several uncles and my grandfather. So a lot of history there in Corte Madera.

**DL:** It sort of runs in the blood.

**TF:** Yes. I actually joined Larkspur. The Corte Madera Volunteer Fire Department had a falling out with the town council in the mid-1970s and that was a decade when Marin was becoming anti-development and there was a big battle over the development of what was called the Hahn Shopping Center. Three council members got recalled and two of them were volunteer firefighters, so you can imagine there was some bad blood there between the two groups. When I turned eighteen, the year they dissolved, I decided to go to Larkspur. I'd always wanted to be in the Fire Department and wound up becoming a volunteer there. I'm a life member at Larkspur and worked with Paul Smith, who is the retired Kentfield Fire Chief, so close partners with Kentfield and Corte Madera. Today Corte Madera and Larkspur are about to merge.

**DL:** When you were a kid with all this Fire Department in your family did you get particular perks? Did you get to ride on the truck?

**TF:** Once in a while you could get a ride. The big perk I remember as a kid, were the fireworks. They were illegal but everybody was using them, so the Corte Madera Town Park if anybody remembers the fireworks there on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the Volunteer Fire Department actually set those off to keep the costs really low and the cops who were working for my

grandfather who was the Police Chief and the Fire Chief would go into the park where there were hundreds if not thousands of people, collect fireworks, bring them back and then tell us to destroy them. *[laughter]* So, in the safety of the Firehouse backyard we got to do the fireworks under coffee cans and such so we wouldn't get hurt.

**DL:** When I was eighteen Mount Tam was our backyard and there was a fire up there. I loved Mount Tam, so my brother and I ran up and we got to ride on one of the trucks and we helped fight the fire. After that, I was eighteen years old then, I went to the Kentfield Fire Department and said I wanted to volunteer. They said well you can if you cut your hair. That's one haircut that I really regret not getting because that would have really changed my life in a good way.

**DL:** So, you went to school as you said and you came out and you ended up here at Skywalker Ranch. How did that come about?

**TF:** When I graduated from Chico the semester prior I took a class at the career development center about how to find a job, and back then before the internet you of course would look in the want ads and that's where my mind was when I graduated, I'm going to go look in the want ads and magazines and so on. This little seminar they did, said no, no, no, you need to go out and find places where you want to work and approach them because most of the jobs are not advertised. I read about Skywalker Ranch being developed in its very early days and it said they have a private Fire Department. I wanted to work in the private sector and thought well, I'll ask around and see if I know anybody that works there. Sure enough, a brother-in-law's connection worked there and it turned out they were looking for someone to develop—they didn't have a Fire Department--they were looking for somebody to develop one and security and safety programs.

I got hired to do that I think, looking back on it, in part because I was very cheap. I was a young kid coming out of college and they didn't have to pay me much. They probably figured well if he doesn't work out we'll just get somebody else. But I was promoted to Director of Safety and Security for the company. At the time we had property in L.A. and San Rafael in addition to West Marin. In 1989, I was promoted to be Ranch Manager and moved to the ranch and my wife and I lived there for seventeen years. The formal title was Director of Operations and Facilities, the informal was Ranch Manager, which I really went by.

In 2006 I asked to step down into a part-time position. My wife had had some illness. I still to this day work half-time and come down a couple times a month from our home and do work on a variety of projects and a little bit of that is history work with photography and so on. It's been 34 years, so a long time.

**DL:** So when you arrived in 1984 what did you find there? What was going on at Skywalker at that time?

**TF:** I brought a few photos we'll click through later. The ranch had not opened. George purchased the property in 1978 after the success of *Star Wars* and had envisioned building what he thought of as a creative retreat. He had been inspired in the 1960s as a student at USC and it was the era of *Easy Rider* and all sorts of improvements in transportation. So you started thinking you don't need these big Hollywood sound stages to make movies, you can go out on location and shoot. What you really need is a nice, quiet, peaceful, beautiful place to plan the project and then you go off on location somewhere, which could be far away or close. And when you come back, you need a nice place for post-production, which is sound, music, and editing.



*Skywalker Ranch*

So Skywalker was master planned as that. When I came, it was about three years into the development so the infrastructure was still going in. The main house was framed but not finished and some of the buildings that are there today would come much later. It kind of was built over a thirty-year period and it still isn't finished. Technically we could still do a few buildings. I don't think he will at this point but there's another allowable 60,000 square feet for some functions we really don't need at this point.

The roads were not paved and all the utilities, which are now underground, were all being installed and it

was really a big construction site that looked somewhat ugly. Dewey mentioned flying over Big Rock when it was under development and when you're in that grading phase, dirt everywhere and mud. But it ended up being just a spectacular, beautiful place.

**DL:** What do you know of the history of the Bulltail Ranch? Before it became Skywalker it was the Bulltail Ranch. What have you learned over the years about that?

**TF:** I understand that the name came from the 1800s and it had something to do with a technique that cowboys would use to flip cattle and it involved twisting their tail, riding up behind them and twisting their tail. So it got the name Bulltail and about fifty years prior to George's ownership of the property Frank Soares Sr. who was President of the San Francisco Dairy Company bought the ranch and raised his family there and ran the ranch. It was used for hunting—deer hunting was very popular back then—and they had a shooting range and a dairy business. Then his son Frank Jr. after Frank Sr. passed away ran the ranch. Frank Jr. was a World War II aviator, a Navy Lieutenant who flew a Bearcat airplane. That's a fighter. He was credited with shooting down two Japanese planes, sinking two destroyers and two other small ships. Then he participated in ground support with the airplanes of the Iwo Jima landing and several other big battles in the Pacific theater. He ran the shooting range apparently when he came back.

Then in the late 1970s as many of you know the dairy business is a tough business to be in. The family was looking to sell and George had sent several people out to look around Marin for possible private, peaceful places to build that would be away from the urban noises.

I know Dewey you've written about the Soares family a little bit in your Nicasio history book. I've met some of the Soares family over the years, they would come out for visits and tours and such. Frank Soares Sr. originally came from the Azores, he was a Portuguese dairy rancher.

**DL:** And it was Soares I think who divided off all those lots west of the entrance to the ranch where there are houses all the way down into Lucas Valley there.

**TF:** Yes, he started the process of subdividing and broke off initially several ten-acre parcels I think. All the way out to the freeway on Lucas Valley Road houses were marching westward and each ranch

that George still owned from the Grady Ranch to Big Rock to the former Bulltail (now Skywalker) had housing developments proposed and some had gone into the Planning Department and were moving forward with that process. They weren't approved, but George's purchase effectively stopped that westward march of homes. Even Loma Alta some of you probably remember there was a big lawsuit over a Chicago Developer proposing to put some high-end homes up on the top of Loma Alta and it went to the Supreme Court in a fight over the County's General Plan and Marin's ban on ridge top construction in the unincorporated areas was successfully upheld. Then George bought it from the Chicago guy, a guy named Bronsick who wanted to get out of his real estate deal once he couldn't make it happen.

**DL:** He had been fighting the A60 zoning I think claiming that it wasn't any good for agriculture and so it wasn't really fair to him I guess to not be able to develop. I don't know how many of you have been into Skywalker there but it's this big valley back there and you can imagine a suburban road going up into there and hundreds if not a thousand houses in there would have been possible.

**TF:** Very different and in Marin if you think back to the 1950s it was just booming because all the veterans had come home from the war and the biggest development in Marin's history at a single time was Terra Linda and then that spill northward into what today is referred to as Lucas Valley but as Dewey will tell you that name is kind of inaccurate but it's a lost cause to battle over that. Lucas Valley really is technically west of Big Rock, but most people, because they named the development Lucas Valley down the hill, picked that up. Oh no, no, Lucas Valley is down there and even I think of this as the Nicasio Valley but it's not an official designation.

**DL:** No, that's Lucas Valley right there in the redwoods and then it's Gallinas Valley on the other side but it is a losing battle. I've been battling the IJ. I'm about to go the Supervisors. No, I won't even bother, it's too late.

Another bit about Bulltail Ranch history was over these years I keep running into just a little snippet of a family I think before the Soares it was a tenant ranch. It was about 2000 acres.

**TF:** Well, all the properties together, which are six different historical ranches, are about 5000 acres and we gave away about 800 acres of Grady to the Open Space District. So it's a big property but there

had been multiple dairy ranches and the area had historically been logged. There was a dirt road and they would haul the logs out to San Pablo Bay. They were used all over the place, San Francisco, etc., for building.

**DL:** We run into people now and then who say this or that like my grandmother was born there. Many families lived on the old dairy ranches and most of them from the Azores from what I understand.

Were any of the dairy barns or houses or anything else still there by the time you got there?

**TF:** There were and in fact the only piece of the original dairy structures is the foundation of the firehouse. It was from the old milking barn and we left it there because it turned out to be so well built and strong enough. We had an engineer test it and we thought heck, we'll keep the foundation so it's working out great. And then there's two old milk cans, the big milk cans out on the porch. It's a nice memory. We have a few pictures and a few old photos in our collection, but the Soares family didn't document it heavily. It's neat to come across that stuff from time to time. Natalie Lewis used to ride her horse as a child through that valley and all sorts of people hunted there. The Arrigonis have a long history in hunting in that region and lots of connections because Marin, going back into the 1930s and 1940s, was not a big population, very small towns. It wasn't until after the war that it really boomed.

**DL:** What did they find in the old ranch dumps?

**TF:** As an old dairy ranch you probably know that in the old days your dump was you'd just dig a hole and that's where your waste would go, your old bottles, soup cans, just garbage. So part of that site work that we did over the years both at Skywalker and Big Rock was cleaning out dumps. We took eight old rusty cars out of creeks that were wrecked and left there over the years and rebuilt the eroded creeks because of course dairy ranches often have over-grazing. We have a few progressive dairy ranchers like John Wick sitting here who grazed a little bit different to prevent that. But most of it sadly ends up pretty eroded. And there was also a small quarry there and this is back in the days before quarries were heavily regulated.

**DL:** So there's been extensive landscaping there and improvements really in the range and in the native plants and things like that. What can you tell us about that?



*Roller from an old still  
pulled from the creek at Big Rock*

**TF:** George loves trees. We've planted over 6000 trees over the years and most recently at Big Rock we actually planted native acorns for the oaks. Typically the trees we planted over the years are six to eight feet tall but in this case we agreed to use extremely native seed and those are growing a little more slowly than the instant tree effect. But it's amazing and I have a few pictures later of just the front gate, looking at the front gate over the years, you can see the tree growth and for anybody in our world who may have worked there long ago or visited that's the first thing they remark on when they visit is wow, the trees are really doing well and the landscaping has matured to the point where you think the place has been there from the late 1800s which was his design intent.

**Male Speaker:** Are those oaks that are right up at Big Rock along the road the ones from acorns?

**TF:** Some of those are. Some were about that big when they went in. I remember Supervisor Kinsey when he was in office when we first opened Big Rock. He called me one day and everything had just been planted and he said can't you make it look like the Skywalker front gate? I said, Steve, the Skywalker front gate has been there thirty years, it doesn't grow that quick. So looking at a picture of the Skywalker front gate in the early 1980s you could look at it and I bet I could fool some people, well that's the gate to Big Rock. No, it's just when the trees were really young. But eventually those at Big Rock will, we hope, do well. We have lost hundreds of oak trees to sudden oak death and the young, mostly coast live oaks that we're planting are not being affected so far by that pathogen, but it's a fear. So we hope they do well.

**DL:** I'm really impressed how you go in there and you don't see buildings. It feels like you're in a park and yet there's extensive development in there, a lot of square footage, but you don't really know it when you go in. Was that carefully planned that way?

**TF:** Everything at the property comes from George. He says his main hobby is architecture and describes himself as a student of architecture, so originally when he laid out the design on a yellow legal tablet in pencil, as he loves to do, he wanted it to feel like each group of buildings blended in with the environment and what really stood out was the environment. He succeeded with that to the point today where you can be at different places on the ranch and it feels like nobody else is there. The parking is often underground and hidden intentionally because he dislikes large paved areas. The look and feel is one of stepping out of a building and you're really in big-time nature with creeks and trees and frogs croaking and birds. It's just beautiful and that was his original vision that did take quite a few years to come to fruition with the tree growth but we're really proud of that.

**DL:** Have you seen the wildlife come back during that time?

**TF:** Tremendous resurgence of birds. George's longtime secretary Anne Merrifield was a very active Audubon Society member. She has since retired and moved to Montana. But she would go out every morning five days a week and track birds for Audubon. She counted over a 140 species of which about 40 were nesting. This was about ten years ago. We haven't updated the study but it's a huge variety and then of course everything from coyotes to bobcats, foxes, skunks, tons of deer, tons of wild turkey if anybody wants wild turkey we're happy to give you some. They poop all over the place. It's a very active and robust ecosystem.

**DL:** I think the foxes poop all over the place too because on my little walk up it was almost like being in a dog park.

**TF:** That's actually the turkey poop.

**DL:** I could have sworn that was fox.

**TF:** They go up in that big redwood tree at night to get away from the predators like coyote and then they poop all over the road where you walk to lunch.

**DL:** Have some turkey dinners come Thanksgiving. I might start a controversy there.

## **Obit reprinted from Marin Independent Journal, May 13, 2018**

Thomas Nelson Forster March 27, 1958 May 6, 2018 Thomas (Tom) Forster of Blairsden, California passed away suddenly in Reno, Nevada on May 6, 2018 after a brief illness. A fourth generation native of Marin County, Tom was born at Marin General Hospital in Greenbrae to Jack and Diane Forster. He is survived by his loving wife of 28 years Maureen Forster; his mother Diane Forster; older sister Lynn Sogoian of Red Bluff; younger brother Dan Forster (Ania) of Sydney, Australia; younger sister Pam Rosa (Kevin) of Petaluma; and step-daughters Michelle (Jim) Kossivas of Novarro and Christine (Richard) DeRienzo of Spain. He was pre-deceased by his father Jack Forster. Tom was raised in Corte Madera and attended the Larkspur Corte Madera School District. Graduating from Redwood High School in 1976, he was an avid member of Redwood Crew, the precursor to today's Marin Rowing Association. He completed ROTC training during this time and received accreditations at Hamilton Field. Tom was a graduate of College of Marin, California State University, Chico and the University of San Francisco where he earned a Master's degree in Human Resources and Organizational Development. Tom was instrumental in the development of Skywalker Ranch. He was a long-time Director of Operations and Facilities, responsible for the design and construction of the emergency response system, fire protection, security, guest lodging, food services and daily operations of the property. He developed and served for over 20 years as the Fire Chief of the Skywalker Ranch Fire Brigade. Tom was in the fourth of five generations of extended family in fire service. He grew up with a strong admiration of both his father Jack Forster, and grandfather Frank Nelson whose commitment to their community as volunteer fire fighters was unwavering. Amongst many other positions including [Police Chief](#), Frank Nelson served Corte Madera as Fire Chief for 43 years. Tom was determined to follow in their footsteps and was a volunteer with Larkspur Fire. Most recently, he was the Fire Chief for Plumas Eureka Fire Department, a volunteer position, just as his role models had served. His family's service has totaled over 270 years and counting. Tom was a long-time instructor at the California Fire Academy at Monterey Bay, was certified Master Instructor for California State Fire Training and taught for the Santa Rosa Junior College Fire Technology program. He was an active member of the fire community having served as Chair of the California State Fire Association Committee for Volunteers, Marin Sonoma Fire Training Officers Association and the Larkspur Firefighters Association. Tom served on the board of the North Bay Leadership Council, the Marin County Disaster Council, the Marin Conservation Corps, and the Marin Center Renaissance Partnership. Tom's passion as an avid fire service historian is exemplified in the work he did on the Marin Fire History project for the Marin County Fire Chiefs Association, which can be found at [www.marinfirehistory.org](http://www.marinfirehistory.org). A tribute to his dedication to public service and leadership is witnessed in The Tom Forster Leadership Award established in 2015. Tom loved mentoring others and enjoyed walks with his loving wife Maureen and their many dogs over the years...

### **Words of Amy Morse upon learning of Tom Forster's passing:**

Tom was the embodiment of a kind, smart, caring member of every community he was involved in.

In any meeting he headed up, he was a consensus builder and considerate of others' input. He was very giving of his time with the NVFD and helped the department become the professional group that it is today. My daughter, MacKenzie has had the pleasure of working with and being mentored by Tom at her job at Skywalker. She told me again and again how much her connection with him has meant to her.

I am heartsick that we have lost such a wonderful person and dear friend to Nicasio.