

The Martin Farm House*

The Ellis-Martin House was built by John D. Ellis and his wife Margaret in 1908. The land was sold to Mr. Ellis by William Hill, a Petaluma businessman who also owned the Agricultural Park and race track (later Kenilworth Park) across the street. John Ellis was from Nova Scotia. Upon moving to California by way of Australia, he bought a 245-acre ranch east of Petaluma, which he worked until his retirement in 1907.

Ellis and his wife hired Petaluma's top architect, Brainerd Jones, to design their house. Architect Jones was known for his many civic and commercial buildings in town, as well as some of Petaluma's finest homes. They also hired Frank Sullivan of Santa Rosa to build the house. Mr. Sullivan was considered one of the best builders in northern California. It was unusual for Jones or Sullivan, who built many commercial blocks in Santa Rosa, to design or build a semi-rural property.

John Ellis sold the house and most of his 18-acre parcel to John and Bertha Mount in 1919, after which he rented a small house on Spring Street. In 1920 Mrs. Ellis was living with her daughter and son-in-law in Oakland. Mr. Mount, who owned the Blackburn funeral parlors in Petaluma, held it for only a year before selling it to Leopold Martin.

Leopold Martin was the son of Charles Martin, a prominent Marin County rancher from Ticino, Switzerland, an Italian-speaking region. The elder Martin's name was originally Carlo Martinoia. Although he was a mason by training, he became a dairy rancher in Chileno Valley upon settling in California.

Charles Martin was one of the most successful ranchers in Marin, owning 5,000 acres by 1911. His four dairies were managed by his four sons. He also held ranches in the San Diego area and had a real estate business in San Francisco. The original Italianate farm house built by the elder Mr. Martin is now owned by descendent Sally Gale. She and her husband Michael raise organic beef on the old home ranch in Chileno Valley. The Dolcini family of Marin are also descendants. They own 8,100 acres over nine ranches in the Nicasio, Hicks and Chileno Valleys today and are the largest private landowners in Marin County.

Leopold managed one of the family's dairies until his retirement in 1920, at the age of 47, at which time his four children ranged in age from 13 to 21. He lived in the house until his death in 1940. Daughters Estelle and Emeline continued to live at the house. Martin's daughter Emeline never married and taught school in San Francisco's Chinatown for 45 years. Estelle married Albert Shaffer, a jeweler. Martin's son Elfo continued in the family ranching business, running one of the Chileno Valley properties. And daughter Marie married Dr. Harry S. Gossage, a prominent Petaluma physician.

The family began to sell and develop the surrounding property in the 1950s, and still owns the Kenilworth Apartment complex northwest of the house. The family sold the house and surrounding properties to Anton Selkowitz in 2005, who developed the land to the rear of the house. Architects Rick Brereton and Church Hildreth of ADR bought the house in 2007.

*The Martin Farm House is called The Ellis-Martin House on the National Register of Historic Places, in honor of both the person who built the house and the family, the Martins, that lived in it the longest.