

Veterans' Home of California, Yountville, California

A Brief History: In the Beginning

Between 1869 and 1870 the Society of Mexican War Veterans first proposed a veterans home for California. The Legislature then passed a bill providing a plot of land in San Francisco for a home. The Mexican War Veterans were a not strong enough organization to spearhead construction of a home, and nothing was done until 1877 when the Lincoln Post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in San Francisco inaugurated measures to secure the land in the city and build a veterans' home.

In 1880, Col. J.J. Lyon stood before the post encampment and proposed that the GAR build a veterans' home (Lyon is often called the father of the veterans' home for his role in bringing plans into reality). A committee was appointed and took title to the San Francisco site donated by the Legislature in 1877, but then decided it would be a poor location. They wanted the home to be in the country where the members could have work as well as enjoy the beauty of the countryside.

They decided that the public, which had supported their wartime efforts, would also back a veterans' home association, and the group and planned a major fund raising in San Francisco on Thanksgiving weekend 1881.

Despite some major problems, the Thanksgiving fund raiser was a success. A total of \$40,000 was raised and another \$20,000 came in over the next two years. A search committee was organized and 27 sites were investigated before the Yountville site was selected.

On Oct. 24, 1882, the Veterans' Home at Yountville was founded when the association paid \$17,500 for 910 acres of land known as the A.G. Clark Place. The home is located on land that was part of Salvador Vallejo's Napa Rancho.

Contrary to popular belief, George Yount (namesake of the town of Yountville) never owned an acre of the home land and, in fact, had been dead for 17 years when the home was founded. Also, no one gave land for the home. All land was purchased with funds from public subscription. The land was a working farm when purchased and the association continued to farm while the first structure for the home, the 1883 administration building, was completed.

Mrs. Mary E.S. Bucknall of San Francisco said her grandfather,

"George C. Yount was born in Burke County, North Carolina, May 4, 1794. He came to California in 1830, settled in the Napa Valley. In 1833, acquired a grant of land there, and died at his Caymus Rancho, October 5, 1865. Yountville was part of his land, which he gave as a townsite.

"In March, 1836, the first tract of land ever granted to anyone in what is now known as Napa County, was granted to my grandfather by the Mexican Government. This grant comprised two square leagues and

contained 11, 814.52 acres. It was known as the Caymus Ranch, because of tribe of Indians of that name was living there at the time near the present site of Yountville. In October, 1843, Manuel Micheltoreno deeded to my grandfather one square league of land in Napa Valley. It was known as the Ranch de la Jote. This contained 4,053.84 acres."

"In 1853, George C. Yount built a mill a little north of the site of Yountville. It was a large and substantial building run by water power with a wide overshot wheel. The flour from this mill received many premiums. The mill was known as the 'Star of the Pacific Premium Mill'."

Opening Day

The first building at the new Veterans's Home was completed in 1883, but the wait for funding for equipment for the facility delayed the opening until April 1, 1884. The home was to have been opened on April 16 (to correspond with the signing of the peace at Appomattox that ended the Civil War), but the date was moved up to April 1 to accommodate the first 13 members who showed up early.

A non-profit corporation (chartered by the State of California) owned and operated the home. The official name was The Veterans' Home and it was funded and operated by The Veterans' Home Association in San Francisco. Original funding had come from eight western states (GAR posts), and it was officially the state home for both California and Nevada.

The State Takes Over

From the beginning, the home received funding from both the state and federal government. In 1896, the federal government decided that it would no longer pay allowances to privately-operated soldiers' homes. To avoid losing badly needed federal funds, the Veterans' Home Association in San Francisco sold the home to the State of California for one 20-dollar gold piece.

At the time of the sale, the home consisted of 910 acres of land and 55 buildings, as well as successful farms, dairy herd, hog farm and chicken ranch. When the state assumed control of the home, the name was changed to "The Veterans' Home of California."

There were 800 members in 1900 when the state took control. The home was still operated by the Veterans' Home Association in San Francisco after the sale. Nearly all of the original organizational documents of the home were lost in 1906 when the San Francisco office of the Veterans' Home Association were destroyed in the earthquake and fire that devastated the city.

Between 1900 and 1919, the home continued much as before the sale to the state, but the vitality seemed to have disappeared. The buildings grew old and new structures were not built. The home became very crowded.

World War I hero, Col. Nelson M. Holderman, was appointed commandant of the home in 1919. Changes were badly needed and he began to make them. Civil War veterans still controlled the home, and resented his demand for new buildings, new programs and major changes. "If those buildings were good enough for Civil War veterans, they are good enough for any veteran," was a common comment at board meetings.

Col. Holderman did not want a confrontation with the Civil War veterans and resigned as commandant in 1921, but he said that he would be back. After the home steadily

declined for five more years, and after the death of a few members of the board, he was reappointed commandant in 1926 and remained so until his death in 1953.

The Holderman years (1926-1953)

During his term as commandant, Col. Holderman completely rebuilt the physical plant, and he finally got the 500 bed hospital the home needed for years. The success of his programs owed much to his personal prestige. As either the first- or second-most decorated soldier of World War I, he was a popular national hero. Newspapers, magazines and radio always found him a good story, and he would use that fame and popularity to get what he wanted for the home.

He never used his military prestige for personal gain, but never refused to put on his uniform and medals "one more time" for the home (although he was personally very tired of both the uniform and the medals). Once, while in Seattle, he was asked why he hadn't worn the medals and replied, "Sometimes I get tired of looking like a Christmas tree." In any case, his dedication and constant work paid off for the home.

Another Turning Point

In the 1970s, the home faced another financial crisis. Decreased funding was having a degrading effect on facilities and staffing, to the point that the future of the home was in question. The California Department of Health Services and federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare were both threatening to withdraw certification from the home. The California legislature took action, approving a \$100 million renovation master plan, reinforcing California's 10-plus-year commitment to its veterans.

The Home at the Turn of the Century

In 1999, the Veterans' Home of California at Yountville was home to some 1,200 veterans, including almost 150 women veterans and nearly 30 couples. The home offers five certified levels of quality health care, and a variety of social and therapeutic activities. It is a true community of veterans.

The home's administrator is retired Navy Commander Marcella McCormack . Veterans share their input and recommendations through the Veterans' Home Allied Council, an official advisory body to the administrator. The home's annual operating budget is \$47 million, half of which is provided by the California general fund; the remainder by other sources, including federal reimbursements and member fees.

The Veterans' Home of California at Yountville continues to enjoy tremendous support from citizens, service clubs and veterans organizations throughout the state. Their help makes many of the services provided by the home possible in a time of increasing fiscal problems at the state level.

This is especially true for those things that make the atmosphere truly homelike, such as television sets for hospital rooms, improvements to picnic ground facilities, holiday celebrations, and so forth. The home is a focal point for service organizations, including AMVETS, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans and The American Legion, to name a few of the most active, who represent thousands of veterans throughout the state and make their presence felt at the home.

The Home, nestled in the verdant Wine Country of northern California, also houses the alternate Seat of Government for the Governor's office, and shares that duty with another State facility at Fresno.

Based upon a news release by Steve Janosco
California Department of Veterans Affairs, Sacramento.

[Return to top of page](#)