

The Schmiedell Family: A Legacy in Nature

By Fran Cappelletti

Several families in Ross had an impact on the Bay Area and beyond. While many of their stories centered on the worlds of business and culture, there are others that show a lasting impact on our natural environment. One such story involves the Schmiedell family. Edward Schmiedell and Alice McCutchen grew up in San Francisco and knew each other from summer stays in Marin County, he with his parents at the Hotel Rafael and she with her parents in Ross. It was a popular locale for vacation and recreation. Married in 1895, they celebrated with an around the world tour.

While partner in the firm of Maillard and Schmiedell and manager of the Schmiedell estate, Edward had many interests. An avid photographer, he captured wonderful images of his family and local landscapes. He took many photos of damage from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. He was also an active hunter and outdoorsman.

They had three children, Doris, Edward, Jr., and Elizabeth. Doris would live for many years in Ross after working at Yosemite National Park. Edward would work for the family business, living in Ross and later moving north to Sonoma County.

Elizabeth married James Moffitt in 1922. Son of Dr. Herbert Moffitt, early Dean of UC Medical School and namesake of UCSF's Moffitt Hospital, James was noted for his interest in ornithology, working as research assistant with the California Division of Fish and Game and later as Curator of Birds and Mammals in the California Academy of Sciences. Beyond professional work, James and his young family would travel together while he researched the birds he loved. Yet tragedy struck. While serving as a naval officer in the Aleutians during World War II, he died in a plane crash.¹

The Schmiedells loved the outdoors and were avid horseback riders. In her oral history, daughter Doris bemoaned the loss of riding privileges on Water District lands during World War II and remained an activist for riders throughout her life.²



EJ McCutchen with Edward and Alice Schmiedell, Schmiedell Collection, Ross Historical Society/Moya Library

¹ Hilda Grinnell, "THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF JAMES MOFFITT", *The Condor*, Volume 46, Number 2 (1944), 60-66.

² Oral History of Doris Schmiedell, Anne T. Kent California Room, Marin County Free Library.

Mrs. Schmiedell was active in her community. In addition to founding the Lagunitas Club, she was involved in the Ross Valley Improvement Club. She was directly involved in the movement to eliminate roadside signs, perhaps an inspiration for later ordinances against Highway billboards in Marin County.

Edward and Alice were active with the Save the Redwoods League, an organization still dedicated today to the protection of these majestic trees.

The Schmiedells were also champions of making Mount Tamalpais into a Park, helping to host an event at the Lagunitas Club on September 12, 1903. Speakers included William Kent, David Starr Jordan, Gifford Pinchot, chief of the United States Bureau of Forestry, and Mayor Schmitz.³ While the meeting did not produce immediate results, it set the stage for future efforts leading to today's State Park.⁴



³ Favor Park on Mount Tamalpais, Forestry Movement is Launched at Enthusiastic Meeting, Marin Journal, September 17, 1903, 1. California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside, <<http://cdnc.ucr.edu>>

⁴ Tamalpais Park Is Hope Of Marin County Society, San Francisco Call, September 13, 1903, 35. California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside, <<http://cdnc.ucr.edu>>

Although the Schmiedells visited Tahoe in the early 1900s, they did not buy property there until 1907, when they purchased 610 feet of lakefront a short distance north of Ward Creek. From then on, their time was divided between San Francisco, Ross, and Tahoe.



Schmiedell Vacation site, Lake Tahoe, early 20th Century, Ross Historical Society/Moya Library

Their consuming interest was to preserve the beauty of the lake and of the surrounding High Sierra lakes and mountains. Mr. Schmiedell personally led two pack trips with mules loaded with 5-gallon milk cans containing fingerling trout to stock a lake west of the Rubicon River, a difficult undertaking because the water had to be changed frequently while under way. To honor him, the Division of Fish and Game named the lake after him, though the official name was misspelled, a correction still needed to this day.⁵



Photos courtesy of Kevin Dufficy, Marin Resident and intrepid Sierra Hiker

⁵ From biography of E.G. Schmiedell, *written by Betty Fennelly, in Arnold, Anthony, and Secret Harbor: A Heritage*. California: The Printing Factory, Inc., 1989.

Daughter Elizabeth Fennelly recalls her father's work on preserving Lake Tahoe in a 1987 interview:

... And so the Lake was very, very low, and there was what they call the "rim", there at the dam, which was the natural outlet of the Lake. And those people wanted - those villians, as they were portrayed through all of this - to cut that to lower the level of the Lake. Well, if you once lowered the natural level of the Lake, it would be like Eagle Lake, over there back of Alturas - Susanville. Susanville, not Alturas. Whare there's nothing but rocks around. You NEVER can bring it back.

So my father started a group of the property owners there. Not the commercial - they had their own group. But this was to be people who just loved the Lake. And they raised money and hired a lawyer to fight this. And it went on for a long time. And he was told if he came to Reno he would be shot. And he went over there and then the old saying was instead of saying "son of a bitch" in Reno, they said "schmiedell". And they fought it and they won the suit that the Lake could only be so low and so high. And I have suspected in the last few years that they have been keeping the Lake higher than it should be. I've forgotten the limits, but it's all in the lawsuit. Now whether that has been renegotiated or not, I do not know.

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The Schmiedells were not the only Ross Valley family with a connection to the Lake, as the Kents, Greenes and Coffins were also frequent visitors to the Lake and advocates for its protection. Each deserves appreciation for their legacies in establishing and protecting natural places in Marin, Tahoe and beyond and for their inspiration to present and future generations.

⁶ From interview of Betty Fennelly by Carol Van Etten, February 21, 1987.