

# Conrad Meussdorffer

By Fran Cappelletti

Conrad Meussdorffer. Perhaps you don't recognize his name, and I'll bet you can't pronounce it, but if you visit San Francisco and Ross, it is quite likely you'll see some of his work.

Conrad was an architect well known for many turn of the century buildings. Unfortunately, many of his buildings were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire. But loss can lead to opportunity. According to the June 1912 issue of *The Architect and Engineer of California, Pacific Coast States*, he had an impressive set of projects just a few years after the disaster.<sup>1</sup>

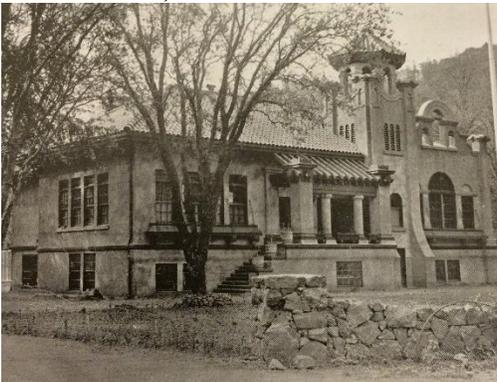


## Marin County Connection

His home was not in San Francisco, but in the small town of Ross, across the Golden Gate in Marin County. His home at Laurel Grove and Winding Way was of his own design. From old photographs of the house, it appears very different from any of his luxurious work in San Francisco; it was a country house with a casual, rustic style. The original parcel was subdivided through the decades, and in the 1990s, the home, locally referred to as “The Log Cabin,” was razed.<sup>2</sup>

Several Marin projects are credited to Meussdorffer in the early 20th century. The *Architect and Engineer* article published many photos of his works.

## Ross School, Ross



Built in 1911 or 1912, it replaced a one room schoolhouse and was in use until 1940, when a new school was built on the same site.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Moya del Pino Library – Ross Historical Society, Ross, California: The People, the Places, the History (Ross Historical Society, 2008) 65.

<sup>2</sup> “Some Recent Work of C. A. Meussdorffer, Architect,” *The Architect and Engineer of California, Pacific Coast States*, June 1912: 47-78. Photos here were part of this article.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, California, 141.

### **Residence of Dr. E. E. Perry, Ross.**

This house on Bridge Road was built in 1912 for a San Francisco dentist. Later the long time residence of the Graves family, it has had several owners since and still stands today.

### **El Recreo Sanitarium and Residence of Dr. F. J. Hund, Kentfield**



Dr. F. J. Hund, a well-regarded surgeon in San Francisco, operated El Recreo from 1907 until he sold it in 1921.<sup>4</sup> Before Ross Hospital opened, this was the place to go if you were injured.

The Sanitarium and Hund residence were later purchased and used by the Dominican Province of the Holy Name. During their stay, the buildings were replaced. In the 1970s it was sold for home sites and the Priory Tennis and Swim Club, still operating to this day.<sup>5</sup>

### **Tamalpais Center, Kentfield.**

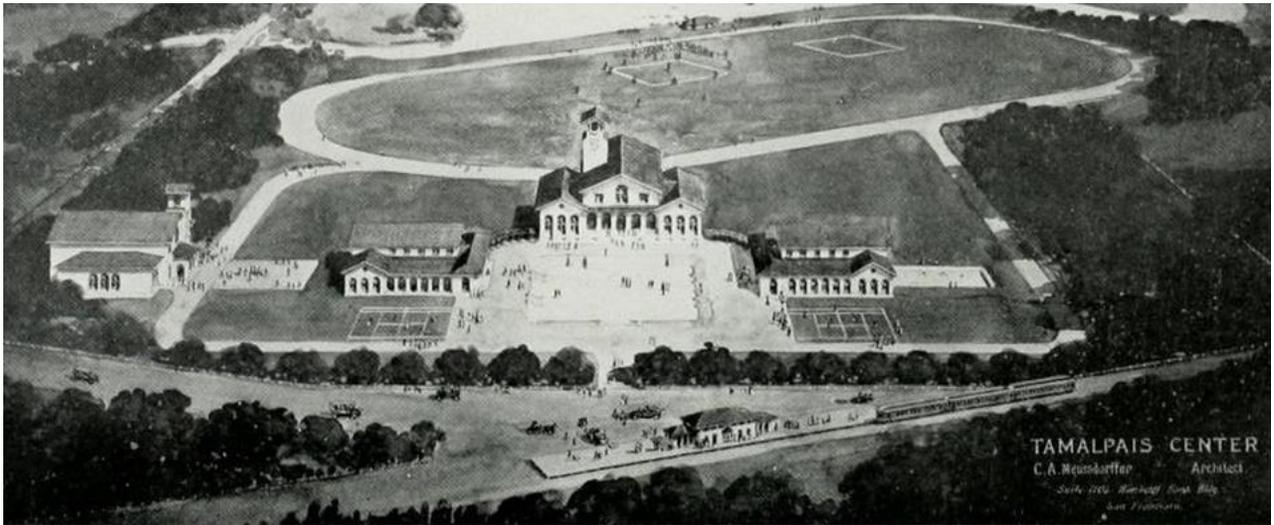
Occupied today by Kent Middle School and the College of Marin gymnasium and athletic complex, Tamalpais Centre was the inspiration of Adaline Kent and her son William. With the support and cooperation of many prominent Marin residents, this complex was organized and built in 1909. A social experiment intended to promote healthy pursuits over 'lowly endeavors', this site included a large clubhouse and recreational grounds. Club meetings and talks were common and the baseball fields and playgrounds were popular. The Centre was never successful enough to sustain itself.<sup>6</sup> One proposal for use of the site was in The Architect and Engineer article, showing a high school design by Conrad. Though never realized, it was an ambitious proposal for a high school in Ross Valley, with public high schools showing up several decades later.

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<sup>4</sup> Dewey Livingston, In the Heart of Marin, The History of Kentfield and Greenbrae, California (Kentfield-Greenbrae Historical Society, 2014) 210.

<sup>5</sup> Livingston, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Livingston, 104-116.



## A man of many talents

According to the book, Ross, California: The People, the Places, the History, Meussdorffer was very active in his community. On his estate, his barn was a commercial workshop where he and his son produced alarms, sirens and fire nozzles. You can still find some of their products, from a brass nozzle and siren on exhibit at the Jose Moya del Pino library to videos of working sirens on Youtube.<sup>7</sup>

He was on the first Board of Trustees for the Town of Ross, serving from 1908 to 1918. Significantly, he was involved in the purchase of an automobile fire engine. It was a significant decision, even coming under criticism when no cost comparison to the horse drawn alternative was provided. Town minutes further show he was involved in many other decisions related to fire equipment, always critical in the Northern California climate and terrain.

## San Francisco Architect

Meussdorffer is most famous for his design of elegant apartment buildings in the City. David Parry, a San Francisco real estate historian, writes extensively on San Francisco architects. In his article on Meussdorffer, he provides an impressive list of pre and post 1906 properties still standing. Two of his apartment buildings, the St. Regis, at 1925 Gough, and another at 2006 Washington Street, are among the finest in the City.<sup>8</sup>

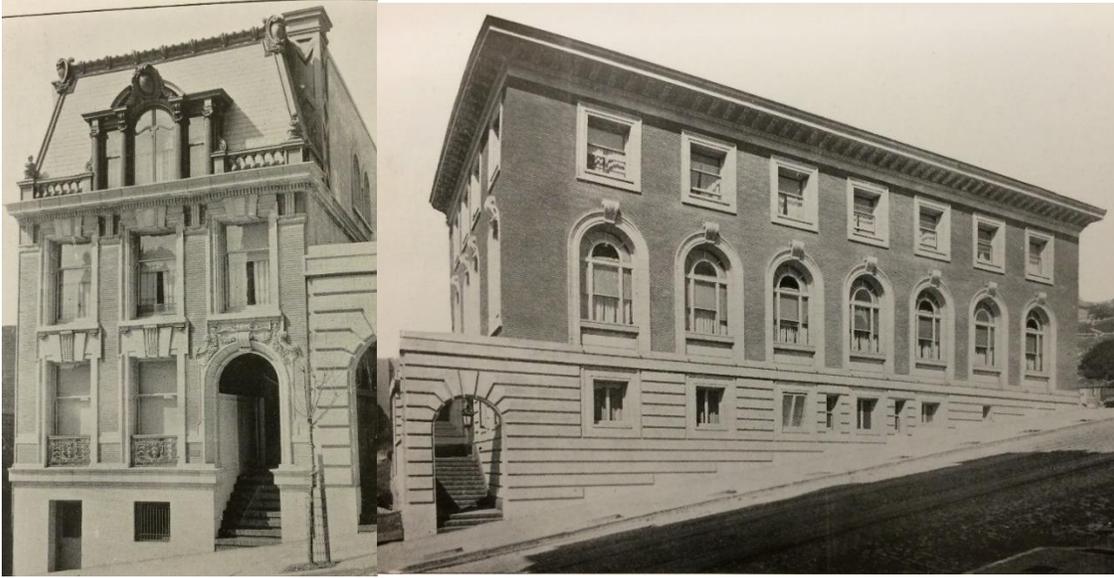
He is also credited with The Tamalpais, 1201 Greenwich Street, famous for its appearance in the Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall film, Dark Passage. The exterior still has the fire escape where he makes his escape from a climactic scene near the end of the film.<sup>9</sup> This beautiful property is very close to the top of the Crooked portion of Lombard Street and has wonderful views of San Francisco, Marin, and its namesake, Mount Tamalpais.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTcp2YyaLnw> .

<sup>8</sup> Parry, David, "Pacific Heights Architects #15 – Conrad Meussdorffer," 2003, at <http://150290062.homesconnect.com/AccountData/150290062/NF15Meussdorffer.pdf> .

<sup>9</sup> San Francisco movie locations from classic films, San Francisco, USA, CITYSLEUTH@REELSF.COM, DARK PASSAGE – MADGE'S APARTMENT, January 31, 2011 at <http://reelsf.com/reelsf/dark-passage-madges-apartment-interior> .

Two more of his buildings are on Powell Street. The first is the clubhouse of The Family, a private social club, at 545 Powell Street.



According to the book, *The Family Story*, Conrad offered the building and site to the club under a lease arrangement when they were looking for a site in 1908. After extensive negotiations, the deal was made, with the Club eventually purchasing the property as their permanent home. While it is clear he was involved in the project, it is possible he shares credit with Clarence Ward, another well-known architect and member of the Club's building committee.<sup>10</sup> Next door, to the left, is 535 Powell Street, originally designed by Meussdorffer for George M. Perine.<sup>11</sup> It was later the residence of Tessie Wall, a famous madam. The history of the building is retold in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article.<sup>12</sup> Tessie may also be the inspiration for the fictional character, Bessie Hall, in the Evelyn Wells novel, *Champagne Days of San Francisco*.<sup>13</sup> Both buildings are still well preserved on Powell Street. You can also see these buildings in the stairwell at Coit Tower as they are part of the Lucien Labaudt mural depicting Powell Street in the 1930s or just take a stroll up Powell Street in person to see them today.

### **Lasting Legacy**

Conrad Meussdorffer died in Santa Rosa, California, on March, 27, 1945. His two sentence *San Francisco Examiner* obituary mentions nothing of his large body of work. Yet his buildings in San Francisco will long stand as sentinels marking his impact.

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<sup>10</sup> Hargrave, Arthur, *The Family Story* (The Family, A Corporation, 1986) 45-51.

<sup>11</sup> "Some Recent Work of C. A. Meussdorffer, Architect," 68.

<sup>12</sup> Hamlin, Jesse, *San Francisco Chronicle*, A feisty madam's mansion receives new calling as Meridian Gallery haven, July 2, 2007 at <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/A-feisty-madam-s-mansion-receives-new-calling-as-2583223.php> .

<sup>13</sup> *San Francisco, Building the Dream City, The Fin de Siecle City, 1890 – 1906*, James Beach Alexander and James Lee Heig.