

ONLINE HISTORY JOURNAL OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

The History of the William Kerr House

By Carey Casey



Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History
705 Front Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060
www.santacruzmah.org

May, 2021

The History of the William Kerr House

By Carey Casey

A nearly-forgotten Victorian-era home witnessed over fifty years of Santa Cruz County, California, history in the area now known as Pasatiempo.

Santa Cruz County still has many of its Victorian-era residential buildings, but many more have disappeared over the years: victims of fire, flood, and earthquake—but especially redevelopment. Old houses were not always valued as much as they are today, and many were demolished simply to make way for something new. The William Kerr house was one such casualty, but it had a long and interesting history before its demise.

William Kerr was born in Ireland in about 1828.¹ He and his wife Elizabeth came to Santa Cruz County no later than 1876,² and bought a large portion of what had originally been the

Rancho de Carbonera, roughly corresponding to today's Pasatiempo Estates.

The 1889 "Hatch Map" (see image on page 2) shows the Kerr ranch, labeled with the family name.³ The large letters running vertically identify the property as part of the former Rancho Carbonera (spelled "Ro. de Carbonero"), and the north-south road along the property's eastern edge is labeled "San Jose Road."

In 1888, Kerr hired local architect Daniel Damkroeger to design a new house for the ranch, in the tall Stick-Eastlake Victorian style popular at that time. Damkroeger was a very active and popular designer in Santa Cruz at that time, as evidenced by the lengthy list of buildings attributed to him.⁴

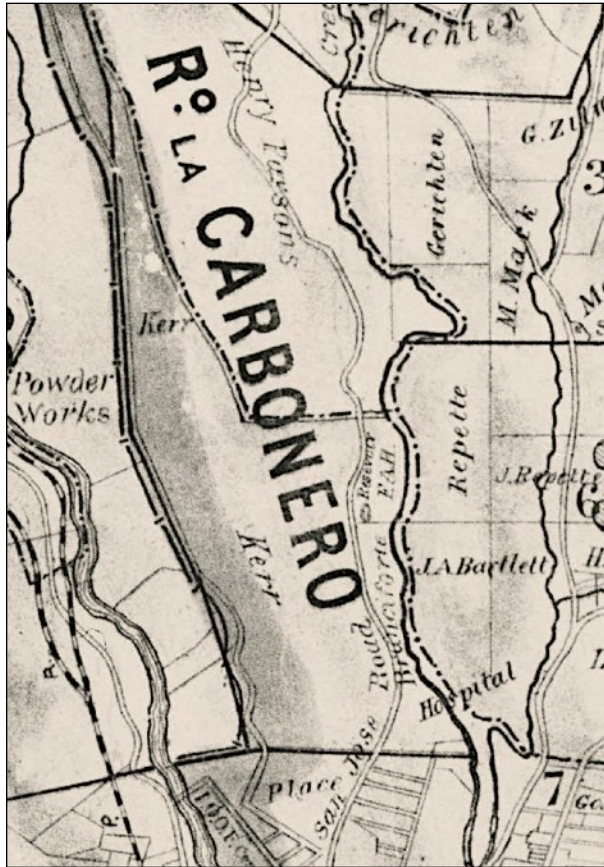
Several of the many Damkroeger-designed residences remain; one of the best-preserved can be seen at 320 West Cliff Drive. His firm was active in Santa Cruz for only a few years; from about 1887 to 1892.

William and his wife Elizabeth moved into their new home in 1889, along with their grown son, Earl T. (the middle initial distinguishes the son from William's brother Earl). A long *Santa Cruz Surf* article praised the new Kerr home for its "Comfort, Good Taste, Fine Architecture and Quiet Elegance."⁵ The article further noted that Kerr had owned the property for twenty-seven years, and that granite for the foundation came from a quarry on the ranch.

The house was large and well-detailed for its time: "There are eight rooms on the first floor; six



This photograph was printed in *History of Santa Cruz County, California* by Edward Sanford Harrison, 1892, page 54. The caption in the book reads, "Residence of Wm. Kerr, Near Santa Cruz."



This detail from the *Official Map of Santa Cruz County*, 1889, compiled by A. J. Hatch, shows the Kerr property.

and bath on the second . . . The house . . . reflects great credit on the architectural skill and taste of D. A. Damkroeger who drew plans and elevations . . . The building was under his supervision from first to last.” Son Earl, noted as “a talented amateur photographer,” had his own bedroom suite and a darkroom.⁶

A photograph of the still-new Kerr house appeared in Edward S. Harrison’s 1892 *History of Santa Cruz County* (see image on page 1). Young trees and other landscaping surrounding the house testify to the recent construction.

From that time forward, however, the Kerr family fortunes declined. The family’s only son, Earl T. Kerr, died suddenly in 1893 at the age of 31, followed by his father in 1896, and his mother in 1897. In 1899, the ranch went into foreclosure, and was bought from the bank by Frederick W. (“F. W.”) Billing.⁷

Billing, a native of Germany, was a businessman and talented amateur landscape painter who moved west from New York for his health. He had made a fortune in mining-related ventures in Utah before

coming to California with his wife Wilhelmina in about 1885, establishing a winery in San Mateo County near today’s Woodside.⁸

Billing’s daughter Bertha, meanwhile, had married an Englishman named John F. Coope. The young couple moved to Ben Lomond around 1880, and John Coope got involved with his father-in-law’s wine business purchases of vineyards in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, and also invested in Big Creek Power Company. In the course of such ventures, Coope met a local real estate investor and middleman named James Whitesides (“J. W.”) Forgeus. When the Kerr property went into foreclosure, Forgeus facilitated Billing’s purchase of it from the bank.⁹



This detail from a Sempervirens Club group photograph shows William F. Billing (left), and John Q. Packard (second from right). (Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History)

Billing’s business partner John Q. Packard also moved to Santa Cruz, building his own house across the “San Jose road” from Billing (now upper Plymouth Street, which serves as a frontage road to the Highway 17 freeway). The trio of Coope, Billing, and Packard began to invest in various local ventures, including: Big Creek Electric Power

Bertha Billing
Coope, circa
1880s. (Santa
Cruz Museum of
Art and History)



Company, Ben Lomond Wine Company, Santa Cruz Mountain Wine Company, Valencia Oil Company, and Santa Cruz Lime Company.¹⁰ The three were also involved in the beginnings of the Sempervirens Club (see image), which promoted the creation of Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

Family tragedy struck again, however, when John Coope died suddenly in 1902 of diphtheria.¹¹ Business affairs seem to have languished after that. Packard died in 1908, Billing followed in 1914, and lastly Wilhelmina in 1916.

The Billing fortune passed in equal shares to daughter Bertha, granddaughter Ethel, and Ethel's husband Mackenzie Gordon, all of whom lived in San Francisco.¹² The ranch and house were maintained as a summer getaway.

That state of affairs continued until 1927, when the Billing heirs sold the ranch property to ambitious developer Marion Hollins.¹³ She formed a development corporation, and named it Pasatiempo. A champion golfer and horsewoman, Hollins came to Santa Cruz already a successful golf course developer.¹⁴ This time she had something larger in mind, however. On the expansive Kerr/Billing ranch, she envisioned a championship golf course surrounded by large homesites in natural settings, with strict architectural standards. That combination was a radical idea at the time, though golf had been played on the rolling terrain for over thirty years.¹⁵

The golf course opening and homesite sales were announced to great fanfare on September 5, 1929. Among the guests at a September 9 exhibition golf event celebrating the opening were Bertha Coope and Mackenzie Gordon.¹⁶

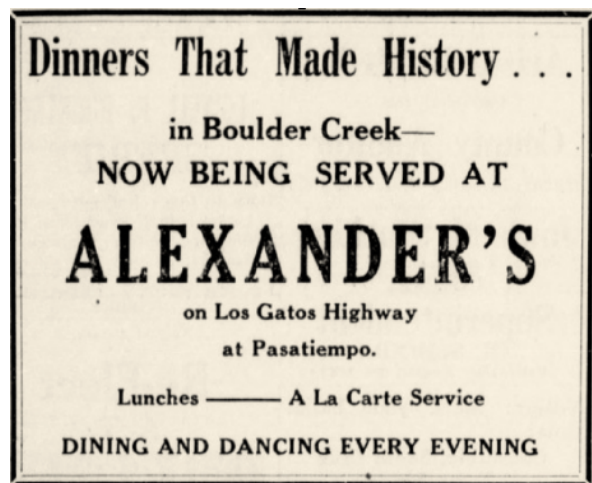
In *The Pasatiempo Story*, by Margaret Koch, is a photo taken on the golf course opening day, with a

caption noting that: "The Billing's [*sic*] mansion" is visible in the background.¹⁷ Pasatiempo Inn can be seen today by looking in the same direction from the same spot on the golf course, confirming that today's hotel site is where the Kerr house once stood.

Unfortunately, the Great Depression drained both Hollins's financial resources and health. She died in 1944 at the age of 51, no longer owner of the development she created.¹⁸ Pasatiempo remains, however, as a testimonial to her dream.

Marion Hollins built a new house for herself at Pasatiempo, and there is no evidence that she ever lived in the Kerr house. The old house did find a new life, however, during the Hollins era.

W. D. "Alec" Alexander, proprietor of a restaurant and resort in Boulder Creek, decided to add a second location, and found the residence available for lease from Marion Hollins. A news article sub-head stated that the new operator "Will Make Old Billings [*sic*] Home Into First Class Resort." The article further noted that: "A few rooms in the old mansion will be kept for transients [guests] who wish to remain overnight or for longer periods."¹⁹



This ad ran many times in 1934, in the *Santa Cruz Evening News*.

The new restaurant's first newspaper ad appeared in June of 1934, noting that its new location was "on Los Gatos highway at Pasatiempo."²⁰

In a 1935 ad, the restaurant had a new name: "Casa Pasatiempo."²¹ That was perhaps a sign that things weren't going so well, and the newspaper ads ended late in 1936. The Pasatiempo Country Club began catering dinner events around the same time.

The house/restaurant failed to make the news after 1937, even when local contractor/developer Harald A. Sundean²² acquired the site in 1953 and announced plans to build today's Pasatiempo Inn.²³ Newspaper articles about the project made no mention of the house, so it's not known whether it was still standing by that time.

An exhibition of Frederick Billing paintings came to Santa Cruz in 1975.²⁴ Included in the catalog was a concise biography of Frederick W. Billing, followed by the author's name: Mackenzie Gordon (Senior or Junior not specified - see Research Notes below). The biography can be found reproduced at the beginning of an online article.²⁵

As evidenced by the following research notes, the Kerr house has sometimes been either forgotten or misremembered, which has created some historical confusion, so a main goal of this article is to clear away some of that fog. Beyond that, the fifty-plus-year history of the William Kerr house provides the framing for what is, for this author, an interesting look at how a number of otherwise unconnected Santa Cruz people and events became associated with this one particular residence.



This photograph (#0151 from the Santa Cruz Public Library Local History Photograph Collection) shows the house at a later date, with mature landscaping.

Research Notes

An undated photograph (above) of the house can be found in the Santa Cruz Public Library (SCPL) Local History Photograph Collection. The cryptic and incorrect caption reads, "R. Billings House," noting that the identification was provided by Pasatiempo Golf Club. The mature greenery indicates a much later date than 1892, but there is

no visible restaurant signage. Also, since the photograph came from the golf club, it seems likely that it was taken after Marion Hollins bought the property, so a guess at the date range would be 1927-1934. Incidentally, "R. Billings" was a real Santa Cruz resident, but was not the owner of this house.

The same photograph was published and misidentified in one otherwise excellent work of local history, where it appears with the caption "F. A. Hihn Mansion."²⁶

The Pasatiempo Story includes a photograph (on the same page as the one cited above) taken from nearly the same spot as the SCPL photograph, with the caption, "The Billing's [sic] mansion, now the site of the Pasatiempo Inn." An elderly couple, possibly Frederick and Wilhelmina Billing, can be seen standing on the front steps. If it is them, the date range would be 1899-1914, probably toward the later years.

Regarding Alexander's restaurant, an autobiographical article by someone who lived in the area at the time includes the following line: "... Alexander's, an excellent Italian restaurant, in Billings' [sic] big Victorian near the highway."²⁷

Although not related to the house, an interesting Billing family drama played out from 1913 to 1915. Granddaughter Ethel Coope, living in San Francisco, had married a Scottish singer named Mackenzie Gordon in 1909. California had voted to give women the vote in 1911, but Ethel learned that she couldn't vote because of a 1907 federal law stating that a woman's citizenship automatically switched to that of her husband when she married. She filed suit to challenge that rule, taking it all the way to the Supreme Court, only to have the 1907 law upheld.²⁸ Even after the 19th Amendment granted U.S. women the right to vote in 1920, the Expatriation Act of 1907 remained in effect for many more years.

Another revelation from the "Mackenzie v. Hare" court case was that Mackenzie Gordon's legal name was Peter Gordon Mackenzie. Ethel regained her U.S. citizenship only when her husband was naturalized in 1921—a year after passage of the 19th Amendment gave most women the right to vote. Two years prior, P. Gordon Mackenzie had changed his legal name to match his professional name. The couple later had a son they named Mackenzie Gordon, Jr.

Notes

¹ 1880 US Census.

² Real Estate Transfers,” *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, Jan. 1, 1876, 3:3. A notice states that F. A. Hihn sold land to Kerr, adjoining land already owned by Kerr.

³ *Official Map of Santa Cruz County*, 1889, compiled by A. J. Hatch.

⁴ John Leighton Chase, *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*, 3rd edition (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Museum of Art & History, 2005), 306-307.

⁵ “The Kerr House,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, Aug 17, 1889, 5:1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Real Estate Transfers,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, Aug 24, 1899, 7:4.

⁸ Thanks to Stanley D. Stevens for sharing his research on Kerr, Billing, and Forgeus.

⁹ “J. W. Forgeus, ‘The Man Behind’ In Car Deal: An Appreciation of the Worth of One of the Biggest Men In Santa Cruz County,” *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, Jul 14, 1906, 11:5.

¹⁰ Frank A. Perry, Robert W. Piwarzyk, Michael D. Luther, Alverda Orlando, Allan Molho, and Sierra L. Perry, *Lime Kiln Legacies* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Museum of Art and History, 2007), 107-113.

¹¹ “Death of John F. Coope,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Aug 12, 1902, 3:3.

¹² “Noted Singer Gets a Third of Fortune,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Dec 6, 1916, 1:2.

¹³ “Deal Closed For Billings [sic] Sightly Acres,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*. Oct 25, 1927, 1:7.

¹⁴ Hollins’ previous effort was the prestigious private Cypress Point Club on the Monterey Peninsula.

¹⁵ Leon Rowland, “Circuit Rider,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 11, 1943, 4:5.

¹⁶ “Luncheon Spread By Miss Hollins On Slightly Hill,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*. Sep 10, 1929, 1:6.

¹⁷ Margaret Koch, *The Pasatiempo Story* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Pasatiempo, Inc., 1990), 36.

¹⁸ “Onetime Golf Ace Is Dead,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Aug 29, 1944, 1:4.

¹⁹ “‘Alec’ Signs House Lease At Pasatiempo: Will Make Old Billings [sic] Home Into First Class Resort,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, May 24, 1934, 2:2.

²⁰ *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Jul. 20, 1934, 6:1.

²¹ *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Jul. 2, 1935, 8:1.

²² Sundean is best known as the owner/builder of Santa Cruz Community Hospital in 1959.

²³ “Rancho Type Motor Hotel Planned For Pasatiempo,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Nov 8, 1953, 1:2-6.

²⁴ “Frederick Billings’ [sic] Art Show at Library,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Jun 29, 1975, 15:1-4.

²⁵ Robert L. Nelson, *Old Soldier: The Story of the Grand Army of the Republic in Santa Cruz County* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: The Museum of Art & History, 2004), 186-187. Santa Cruz Public Library Local History Articles. <https://history.santacruzpl.org/omeka/items/show/133052>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2021. One caveat: the article includes the Billing biography by Mackenzie Gordon, from the art show catalog mentioned above. The text misstated the year when Billing purchased the former Kerr property as “around 1889.” Research showed that the purchase happened in 1899.

²⁶ Charles S. McCaleb, *Surf, Sand & Streetcars: A Mobile History of Santa Cruz, California* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: History Museum of Santa Cruz County, 1995), 11.

²⁷ Harriette Jessup Proctor, “Full Life, Empty Pockets,” *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 2, (Santa Cruz, Calif.: History Museum of Santa Cruz County, 1995), 35.

²⁸ “Mrs. Ethel MacKenzie Cannot Vote, Says U.S. Supreme Court,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Dec 7, 1915, 8:1.