

# N O R T H C O A S T E R

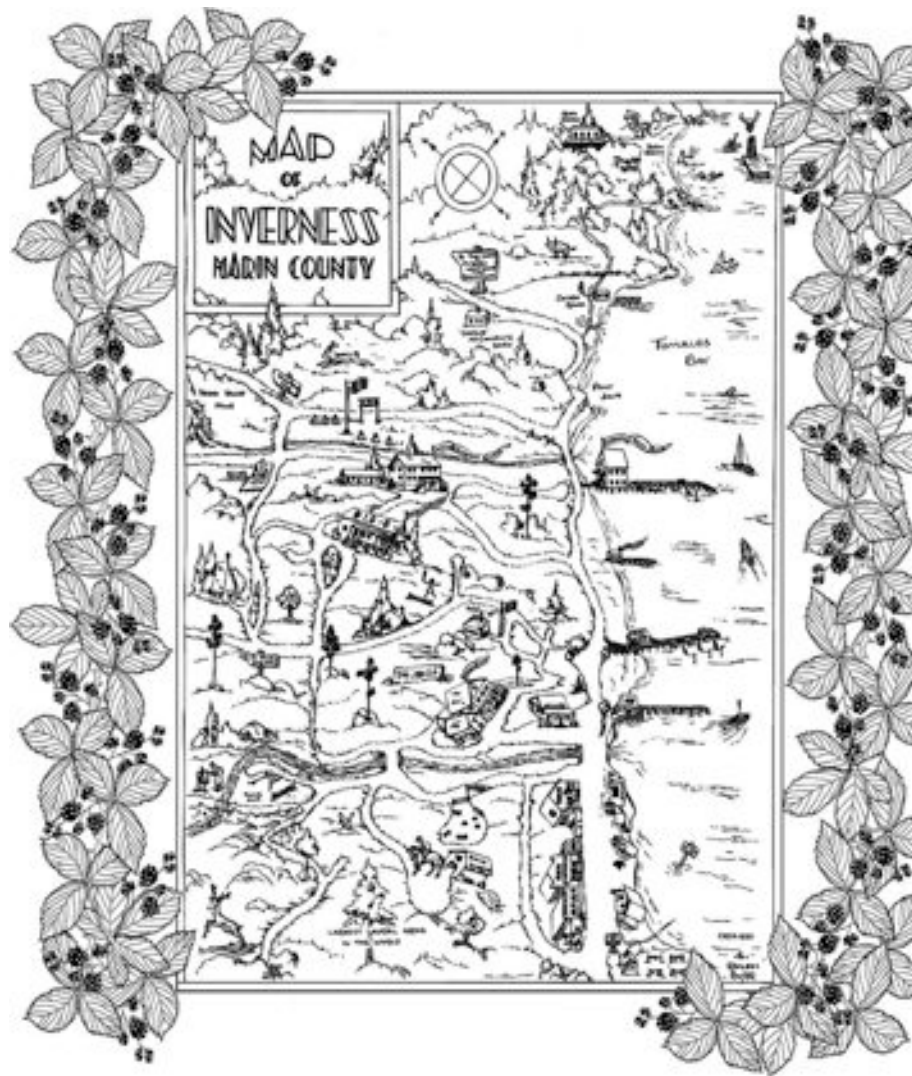
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Village stories — Road notes — Travel guide



## Inverness: An uncomplicated view of village life

by Elisabeth Ptak

Few will remember Charlie McConnell's dairy, though in its time it was a good-sized operation with cows that grazed above Tomales Bay in the area now called Seahaven. Charlie's hayfields most likely crowned another nearby hill. The ranch is memorialized in an old map of the village of Inverness hand-drawn more than 75 years ago by G. Rolph Burr. A reproduction of that map hangs on the wall at Priscilla's Pizza.

The map gives an uncomplicated view of village life: a smiling pelican flies over the bay; a sailboat lists in the wind; a church bell rings "bong, bong"; a rabbit bounds over an American flag; a buck leaps; a girl plays tennis; a man in a smock paints *en plein air*. Like those charts drawn by the earliest explorers, this rendering offers a hint of danger, but just a hint: a leaning sign warns of "Mud Flats." And what looks like a sea monster pokes an inquisitive head through the waters off Point Julia. But is that monster winking?

Burr's naïve drawing has the same flat-world sensibility as early maps—there's no perspective in the artistic sense, and the cartography is nothing if not Inverness-centric. A single signpost points to "The Ocean, Pt. Reyes Lighthouse, Japan, China." As in Saul Steinberg's famous 1976 New Yorker map of the Big Apple (updated to New Yorkistan by Maira Kalman and Rick Meyerowitz after the

9/11 attacks), the rest of the world is just out there somewhere. I can understand the mapmaker's feelings.

On an overcast weekday morning at the Inverness Library, it's easy to see why a person might think the world begins and ends at latitude 38.101N and longitude 122.855W. Fading wisteria perfumes the pathway that winds through an old-fashioned garden and leads to the building's front door. Inside, the little library is abuzz—well, not abuzz exactly, since there is only one patron other than myself. Perhaps it is the seldom-occurring possibility of its being abuzz that best defines the library and, in fact, Inverness itself.

Inverness is surrounded by forest and farmland and flanked by the Pacific Ocean and Tomales Bay. The San Andreas Fault lurks under the bay's normally benign waters, and that hidden potential gives a certain frisson to life here.

Generally speaking, though, not much is shaking in Inverness. Except on the weekends, when visitors pass through on their way to hike or enjoy the beaches in Point Reyes National Seashore, it's a quiet place with many more birds than people. Experts report that 20,000 birds wintered here this year (including at least one bald eagle), while during the last census, people counters tallied a mere 1,400 souls. We await the 2010 results to learn exactly how many people are hidden in the Inverness hills today.

Modern libraries are all things to all people, and the Inverness Library is no exception, even though it's housed in one of the oldest homes in Inverness. The Gables was built in the 1890s, purchased by Jean and Jack Mason in

1958, and bequeathed to the town when they died. Now it houses the library and a small history museum hosting art exhibits and meetings, and serving as a comfortable reading room when the library is open.

I set up my laptop on the polished oval dining table, sink down into an overstuffed Victorian dining chair, and join the library's wireless network. Inverness Garden Club members tend the garden; one of the women brings in a bouquet of camellias and puts it in a vase on the table. She also brings a coffee cake to share. Nancy, the librarian, offers tea (as long as I promise to wash my own cup). By the time an hour has gone by, a congenial group has converged at the other end of the big oval table, and a friendly conversation ensues. A buzz, you might say.

By the time Mr. Burr drew his Inverness map in 1930, the trains that traversed the eastern shore of Tomales Bay would have made their last run through Marshall to Cazadero and the redwoods. The sound of that final whistle echoed across the bay to Inverness in 1927. But in studying Burr's map, anyone could observe that many other features depicted so long ago, both natural and man-made, seem very familiar today.

The map isn't drawn to scale, and many of the landmarks—Charlie's dairy, for example, or the Bath Houses at Shell Beach, a Riding Academy in First Valley, and the Song Lee Laundry on the banks of Tomales Bay—no longer exist.

But the natural resources of Tomales Bay, the creeks that feed it, and the valleys nourished by those creeks, still endure. And the village charm an artist took time to note three-quarters of a century ago still endures, too.