

History of Prince Memorial Greenway

Many Santa Rosans have come to love the Prince Memorial Greenway, a beautiful walking, biking, and jogging path that follows Santa Rosa Creek from Santa Rosa Avenue to Pierson Street. But few know the story of how the Greenway came to be the jewel it is today.

During the 1960's, Santa Rosa's urban creeks were channelized using concrete riprap for flood control. Not only did this destroy the aesthetics of the creek along with the habitat for native species, but it created a perfect place for homeless encampments, drug use, and vandalism. The Prince Memorial Restoration Project itself began on a Saturday morning in February, 1989, when six residents explored the downtown channel in a walking meeting. The City's General Plan update was just beginning and land use decisions would profoundly affect any effort to return the creek to a natural feature in downtown Santa Rosa. The group decided to reconvene with others that would be interested and a steering committee composed of 25 diverse stakeholders was created in order to explore options, and the project for the restoration of Santa Rosa Creek was begun.

In addition to looking for general ways to improve the downtown core, there were specific goals that the committee members were trying to accomplish. One major issue was that there had been significant changes to the creek so that during spawning season the endangered fish species, steelhead, could no longer safely make it up past the damaged area to lay their eggs and back down again. In addition to the steelhead, endangered species such as the red legged frog and the western pond turtle were being negatively affected and were suffering due to the altered environment as well.

The damage to the creek came from a number of different sources. When Santa Rosa was first developing, the gravel that lined the banks of the creek was used extensively for roads, creating a situation that caused silting and the general widening of the creek, making it much shallower as well. There were also several canneries and a tannery that dumped wastes directly into the creek. Most recently a gas station had underground tanks which leaked into the creek where Prince Gateway Park is now. Along with the channelization, the creek had become a dismal place for native animals and plant life. In order to restore the creek, there was a great excavation process that involved removing earth, pumping contaminated water out, and injecting ozone and hydrogen peroxide to help counteract the damage that was done.

Much of the funding for the Prince Memorial Greenway, and the name, came from Ray Prince, a businessman and landowner who owned property in both Santa Rosa and Petaluma. When he died in 1946, he left over 1 million dollars in the form of a trust to his wife, Tillie, and his mother, Matilda. They both had access to the money for their every day lives, along with another relative and widow, Florence Abrams. After Matilda's death, the trust was to be held for 25 years or until both Tillie and Florence Abrams had died. At that time it would be divided equally between their hometowns,

Santa Rosa and Petaluma, to build parks and playgrounds that should bear the family name. The trust was maintained for not 25, but 41 years, and eventually held more than ten times the original amount. The trust was split, and over \$5 million was given to each city to build two Prince Parks in order to honor the family that had been so generous.

The Prince family would be very happy to know that their money has helped create such a beautiful landmark. The effort to make the Prince Memorial Greenway what it is today has not gone unnoticed by the community either. In 1996, the Committee for Restoring Santa Rosa Creek, which has promoted this project since 1989, received the Conservation Partnership Award from the National Park Service. In that same year, they also received the "Conservation Hero Award" from the Department of Interior in Washington D.C. Since then the Prince Memorial Greenway has won other awards as well. For instance, in 2004, the California League of Cities awarded the Helen Putman Award of Excellence, and in 2008, the Waterfront Center awarded the Excellence on the Waterfront Award. In total, hundreds of people have been involved with the Prince Memorial Greenway over the years, and it is the hope that there will be a continued presence and maintenance of it for many years to come.