



### **Saving the Meadows and the University – Then and Now**

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**“Any manicuring of this area will produce a commonplace effect.”**

– Ansel Adams, on what would become the University of California, Santa Cruz campus<sup>1</sup>

It was with an unpleasant shock, like the remembering of a long-past assault or piercing insult, that last year I learned of a plan to build a massive housing development on a large part of the meadows that share the University of California, Santa Cruz campus.

These meadows hold inherent value as rich ecosystems that have become very rare in the Monterey Bay area. While a mix of introduced and native species, these coastal terrace prairies are still home and habitat to diverse plants and animals whose ancestors lived here before the word “California” had been penned by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo. These grasslands owe their existence and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted as someone who viewed the Cowell Ranch during the planning for the future University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Campus, p. 24 in the 1963 Long Range Development Plan

persistence due to thousands of years of indigenous fire management, and they endured for millennia before the first Spanish missionary travelled West.

Known as the East, West, and Great Meadows, they are functionally one system. Beyond their inherent worth, these areas serve the campus in many ways as well. For science and the arts, they serve as classrooms that no building could ever replace. For everyone who comes and goes from UCSC, they offer a breathing and transition space in our travel between the City of Santa Cruz and the City on a Hill. Perhaps most importantly, these meadows are not only part of the physical center of the built campus, but are central defining parts of the history and character of UCSC itself.

The unpleasant shock of learning of this plan came that because I was realizing that a pitched battle that we had barely won three decades ago was once again in danger of being lost.

### **“The Great Meadow Can’t Be Paved! HELP SAVE THE GREAT MEADOW”**

– April 1991 Campus Flyer

If it has not been discovered, a time capsule is buried near the center of the campus. It lies underneath the perimeter of a large California live oak, near the upper edge of the Great Meadow. Under the vision of Professor Jim Pepper, our class planted it there as members of the Spring 1991 Environmental Studies 151A seminar, Environmental Assessment.

I no longer recall everything that we placed in that container. I do remember each of us reading poems and other thoughts which we had written down, and then set inside of the box. These ideas and other objects we included were offerings -- offerings both to our own futures and the future of the Great Meadow. We stood in a circle, holding hands beneath the dappled light coming through the oak canopy on a warm, late-spring day. I remember feeling deeply connected – with both the people in my class and that particular place.

The moment was especially meaningful because a number of us in the course had been actively working to protect the Great Meadow. We had been fighting an ill-conceived campus plan that would have diagonally bisected the meadow with a road—the Meyer Drive Extension. It would have led to the replacement of most of the oaks and grass with buildings and parking lots. The plan perversely claimed to save the Great Meadow, by redefining the meadow to whatever would be left below the newly built road. At best becoming the “not-so-Great-Meadow,” the remainder would more likely become a poorly maintained drainage basin.

In the Spring semester of 1991, many of the students who enrolled in the class had been in a fairly constant rush, continuously learning the theories behind environmental assessment and then immediately trying to apply them to the dilemma at hand. As we stood together, we did not yet know the outcome of our efforts. The decision to accept or reject an Environmental Impact Report for the Meyer Drive Extension was scheduled to be made during summer break. This timing was good for the road’s proponents in the Administration, as it fell right after most of us would have graduated and when the campus student population was at its summertime nadir.

While we didn’t know the outcome when we stood there, we knew we had testified and we had protested. We had placed a non-binding vote on a campus ballot and 94% of the students opposed the road. We had begun a letter writing campaign to the incoming Chancellor, Karl Pister – just in

case. We had tried to promote a future for campus development that did not sacrifice what to is and to UCSCs founders had made this place and community special, and sacred.

**“The site demands unique attention. Everyone who saw it during the planning stage was awed and impressed by the need to keep it as unspoiled as possible.”**

– 1963 Long Range Development Plan

For many of us, our path to be engaged in this effort came from two gifted graduate students who were teaching assistants, Ken and Gwen Alley. I no longer remember exactly how or when I learned from them about the existence of a colony of burrowing owls at the foot of the Great Meadow, in a bowl of land just above the farm. *Athene cunicularia*, the genus named after Athena, Greek goddess of both wisdom and war.

I do remember clearly what I first learned – of the conservation status of these owls, their cohabitation with ground squirrels, and their part in a larger collection of plants and animals that inhabited what I learned was ecologically classified as coastal terrace prairie.

It was from the Alleys I also learned that the Great Meadow was to be axed in two, to further the ignoble cause of moving cars around campus. In addition, while denied by the administration, the growth-inducing effects of this road were clear, as it would open up significant building sites across the meadow, each with commanding views of Monterey Bay.

Pre-Instagram, Facebook, organizing was mostly done by hosting tables outside dining halls and the Bay Tree Bookstore, writing letters to campus and town newspapers, and posting flyers around campus. Despite these now laughably primitive methods, we connected with each other and built relationships and momentum.

As the end of the spring semester approached and the acceptance or denial of the proposed EIS was nearing, some sympathetic faculty members managed to have a resolution brought before the Academic Senate. It served as a high point of this struggle. I remember speaking, and being agitated, sometimes incoherent, and likely possessing the arrogance of the young true believer. But I also remember thinking of and speaking about how in the original campus plan. McHenry library was purposely placed at the center of campus. And I remember saying that if the library was the intellectual center of campus, the meadow was the spiritual center of campus, where there was the physical, natural space that necessitated a pause in mind and heart critical to all great transitions in life and knowledge.

If I recall correctly, we lost the Senate vote as they declined to oppose the roadway.

And, on June 10, 1991, we lost the entire battle.

**“Going against the recommendation of 94 percent of students and numerous faculty members, UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Robert Stevens approved the Meyer Drive extension late Monday.”**

– Santa Cruz Sentinel, June 12, 1991. “Chancellor OKs controversial UCSC roadway”

However, like the seeds of the meadow grasses, apparently, we had done some things which would lead to our eventual victory. As I mentioned, a few of us had begun to write to Karl Pister at

Berkeley, after his appointment as incoming Chancellor had been announced. Perhaps it made a difference.

In an oral history interview of Chancellor Pister (<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pn93507>), he relates the following in a few excerpts:

Jarrell: People were lobbying you even before you were here[?].

Pister: Yes. The problems with the Great Meadow, and I think even the music facility came to my attention at that time. I remember getting an e-mail from the Friends of the Great Meadow. One of the people I remember sending me e-mail was [Professor of Physics] Michael Nauenberg, whom I knew from previous senate work. We'd been on the same committee together back in the 1970s. So I knew Mike. He was lobbying me right away about the Great Meadow and Meyer Drive. And [Professor of Physics] Peter [L.] Scott was another one. I think he was one of the friends of the Great Meadow who ride bicycles, or something like that. That was prominent in my memory.

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There are some other organizational things that I'd like to talk about. Even before I came to the campus, formally in August, I attended the May, 1991 senate meeting here. One of the major decisions, the debates and ultimately the decision of that meeting was for the faculty to vote on the extension of Meyer Drive through the Great Meadow. I listened to the debate. I was struck, I remember, by one of the faculty getting up and reciting a sonnet that he had written in memory of the Great Meadow. The vote, as I remember, was narrowly in favor of extending the road through the Great Meadow. But there was a resolution passed at the same time offered by professors Ruby and Pepper. The Ruby-Pepper resolution or amendment, I can't remember what it was called exactly, said that this vote extending Meyer Drive through the Great Meadow ought to be conditional upon a satisfactory transportation and circulation plan being developed for the campus. I listened to all that debate and little did I realize how important it was that I had listened to that debate and the importance of it in my administration later on.

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We totally relocated the Meyer Drive extension. By the way it didn't take me more than a couple of days to realize the stupidity and in a sense the error, in trying to put Meyer Drive through the Great Meadow. I don't know . . . that might have been a cost effective way to move people across campus but it would have done tremendous harm to that beautiful meadow. I started to walk through the Great Meadow every morning and that's really what did it for me. I took six o'clock walks down and back up again. I said there is no way that I'm going to be the one that wrecks this meadow."

**There once was a beautiful campus  
In a holy place called Santa Cruz  
But there's some people wantin' to pave it  
So—we're singin' the Meyer Drive Blues**

- Celia and Peter Scott, "THE MEYER DRIVE BLUES, OR: ACRES OF CARS

So, it appears the execution of the campus meadows was halted, barely, by a stay, and not a permanent cancellation. It is perhaps to be expected that the open, relatively flat, and more easily developed meadows will always be tempting to develop to bureaucracies whose need to honor budgets outweighs the need to honor visions and other intangibles.

Perhaps our previous loss, followed by a victory, may provide some hope to those who now lead the efforts to save the meadows.

As I write this in late June of 2020 – twenty-nine years after that first bare victory -- I have just read that the lawsuit filed to protect the East portion of the campus meadows was only partially successful.

But some things are very different. We are also at this time currently living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and during a period of fortunate political upheaval where the brutal racist history of the United States is once again being reckoned with. There is also simultaneous economic downturn of unknown length and depth which will challenge the people of California and the world in all sorts of ways, including in how our public universities will grow and operate.

Can we understand that our renewed battle for protecting the campus meadows lies in this much greater context? Certainly, this effort lies within the context of the optimistic and unusually visionary history of the campus with respect to how it would occupy its lands. But this struggle also lies within the larger effort to democratize and broaden higher education in California, in the US, and the world. Can we see the fight over these meadows lies within the racist history of actions that led to these once native held and managed lands to be taken into private ownership for the accumulation of capital, and only much later to be dedicated to a more noble cause, public and democratic education?

For me, one part of the liberation of the meadow and our lives intertwined with the meadow, is to see this campus belongs to its meadows and forests. The campus just as much belongs to the meadows as the meadows legally belong to the Regents of the University of California.

Can we see the world in that way? If so, what do we do?

I am unclear on what kind of organizing and relationship building these perspectives may lead to. However, I have a sense that if we are expansive and diligent in our work, we may win again. The campus meadows may, once again, help lead us to reconsider how we form this community and University, and how we move forward into the uncertain future.

