

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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Into the Wilder-ness

By Victor Ryerson



The Wilder development in the Orinda hills

Photo Victor Ryerson

It may be a bit of an exaggeration to say that the residents of Wilder are pioneers, but being the first homeowners in a whole new community is a phenomenon Orinda has not witnessed since the middle of the last century. Surrounded by open space and accessible only from Highway 24, Wilder is isolated like no other Orinda neighborhood, yet it is a stone's throw from downtown, and just a little farther from the bright lights of the East Bay. Wilder residents can easily choose between the two for their shopping and entertainment needs, yet they are cloistered in a valley so rural at this point that they have to take precautions to ensure their pets do not become dinner for the coyotes that roam the hills around them.

Once part of a ranch owned by airline mogul Ed Daly, tucked in the Gateway Valley between the Orinda

crossroads and the Oakland Hills and set on 1,600 acres of land, with homes boasting 2,500 to 6,000 square feet of living space, Wilder is its own oasis. It took almost three decades for Wilder to get to the point where homes started rising on the newly graded hills, and the path is nearly as littered with defunct developers as the Chilkoot Trail is with the artifacts of Alaska gold seekers. With 16 of the 19 finished homes actually occupied, their occupants, at least for now, are very much pioneers in Orinda's outback.

They are coming from places close by like Lafayette and Berkeley, and from faraway places like Atlanta and New York. They are predominantly families of young professionals with children ranging from newborn to college age. Their reasons for coming are familiar to all Orindans: Orinda's proximity to the metropolitan

centers of San Francisco and Oakland; its celebrated schools; and the quality of life in a remarkably peaceful semi-rural town buffered from the urban world just over the hills by seemingly endless open space.

Mark and Shannon Vicencio, the third residents to move into Wilder, came from Lafayette with their two teenage sons. They have lived there for over two years, enabling them to get a feel for the rhythm of life in the new community. "I love it," Shannon says of her life in Wilder. One feature of the development that she finds particularly appealing is what she calls the "stadium effect" of the construction, with houses built either uphill or downhill from one another, which means that neighbors will not be looking across the street into each other's living rooms.

For Madelyn Mallory, 60, and her husband, Dr. Mark Bresnik, 64, Wilder's location was an important factor in their decision to move from just over the hill in Berkeley's Hiller Highlands neighborhood. Mallory, a financial planner who works in San Francisco, had previously lived for many years in Orinda and was eager to return. Bresnik, who works in San Mateo, supported her aspirations, but made it clear that Wilder was as far as he was willing to commute from the Contra Costa side of the tunnel. It was a good compromise: She takes BART from Orinda, arriving early enough to find parking at the station, while he battles the traffic to get to his job in Foster City.

Not surprisingly, real estate in Wilder does not come cheap. Lots have been selling in the range of \$700,000 to \$1.5 million, and homes from about \$1.8 million to just under \$3 million. The demographics of its inhabitants reflect these prices.

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