

Paul Liberatore: Grateful Dead's contributions to Slide Ranch subject of tribute dinner

Paul Liberatore

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Every time I think I know a lot about the rock 'n' roll history of Marin County, something new comes to my attention that makes me think again.

That happened recently when I heard that Slide Ranch, the teaching farm on the Marin coast, is hosting a \$750-a-couple dinner in honor of the Grateful Dead on Tuesday night at Fort Baker's tony new Cavallo Point Lodge.

The evening includes music by the Celtic jam band Wake the Dead, and a "silver trowel" presentation to former Grateful Dead guitarist/singer Bob Weir.

If you're like me, you may be wondering what in the world the Grateful Dead had to do with Slide Ranch. Surprisingly, a whole heckuva lot.

Executive director Charles Higgins has done considerable digging into the history of a ranch that was once a ruin and now gives 8,000 city kids per year a taste of life on a working, organic farm.

He tells us that:

Ed Washington, co-producer of "The Grateful Dead Movie" in 1977, was the ranch's first director.

Danny Rifkin, the Dead's first manager, had a lot to do with connecting inner-city kids to the bucolic 134-acre spread.

Jerry Garcia, the band's lead guitarist, was its first

major donor, contributing \$500 - a lot of money 40 years ago.

I was reminded that my colleague Nels Johnson and I attended a Saturday afternoon benefit concert for Slide at the Stinson Beach Community Center by Garcia's short-lived bluegrass band, Old & In the Way.

Over the years, the Grateful Dead's Rex Foundation came through with much-needed grants at critical times.

Originally a 19th century dairy farm owned by a Portuguese family, the ranch had degenerated into a haven for drug dealers and counterculture outlaws in the freewheeling 1960s.

In 1969, through the joint efforts of Marin attorney Doug Ferguson and the Nature Conservancy's Huey Johnson, Slide Ranch was purchased and protected from commercial development and cocaine cowboys.

Once the deal was done, Susie Washington-Smyth, who co-founded Slide with her husband, Ed, recalls bounding down the ranch's precarious driveway with Ferguson and Johnson only to be confronted by shotgun-wielding drug dealers on horseback.

"These guys had on cowboy hats and big duster coats and snarled at us, 'What the hell do you want here?'" she recalls. "Huey (Johnson) looked at them and yelled, 'I'm your new landlord and you've got 30 days to get out of here.' I was convinced they were going to shoot us. When they left, they just trashed the place."

The Washingtons and other members of the Grateful Dead extended family spent months cleaning up the ranch grounds and its falling-down outbuildings, constructing a Buckminster Fuller-inspired geodesic dome as a primary program area.

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It became "the anti rock 'n' roll place," Higgins explains, for the folks, mostly women, who were into milking goats and going back to the land, providing a healthy environment for their children and for inner city kids to learn about the earth and how to take care of it.

Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Garcia, Jerry's wife, remembers coming out to the ranch from Stinson with her two young children, Sunshine Kelsey, Ken Kelsey's daughter, and Annabelle Garcia, Jerry's girl.

"The driveway was a nightmare," she recalls. "They didn't call it Slide Ranch for nothing. By the time it became an environmental center, everyone had put in so much work. There were tons of garbage. We had to break the foundation out from the old cow barn, which was crumbling old concrete, and that took months. Everybody we knew came out and participated."

Since those volunteer-driven beginnings in 1970, more than 175,000 people from diverse backgrounds and communities, most of them youngsters, have participated in Slide Ranch educational programs.

With an eight-person staff, the ranch offers family and group programs as well as summer day camp for 8,000 visitors a year. These are hands-on education activities on a working ranch with farm animals and organic gardens.

"Slide Ranch has always been a different kind of place," Washington-Smyth points out. "It's never been your mainstream summer camp. It's always been right on the edge of idealism and practicality. And that's one of the reasons it's been successful."

"When we started in 1969, it was with a wish and a prayer," she says. "One of the most surprising things to me is that 40 years later, Slide Ranch is still going

on stronger than before."

IF YOU GO

- What: Slide Ranch and the Grateful Dead Silver Trowel Award Dinner

- Who: Special guests Bob Weir, Rob Wasserman, Jay Lane, Henry Kaiser, Dennis McNally, Rep. Lynn Woolsey, Brian O'Neill, Gary Fisher, Doug Ferguson

- When: 5 to 9 p.m. Tuesday

- Where: Cavallo Point Lodge at Fort Baker, 601 Murray Circle, Sausalito

- Tickets: \$750 per couple

- Information: 381-8758, charles@slideranch.org

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