

## HAROLD FRENCH BENCH DEDICATION – SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

### Background Information from Noël Siver

When I first learned that this bench dedicated to Harold French was going to be installed on the Overlook Trail in Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve, I wondered how much of a connection there was between Harold French and this preserve and between Harold French and Robert Sibley.

With a little bit of research on the Internet (my favorite indoor activity), I learned that Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve was originally known as Round Top. Having hiked to its summit many times, Harold French knew this extinct volcano well.

He wrote about it in one of his earliest articles, an article that was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on August 14, 1904. It was entitled “Who Built the Prehistoric Walls Topping Berkeley Hills? Do the Miles of Mysterious Stone Barriers, Which Serve No Modern Purpose, Bespeak a Lost Civilization of Toltecs or Atlanteans?” In his article Harold writes that

This peak is of sufficient interest to the Sierra Club to cause a number of its members to erect a cairn of boulders on its summit, the apex of which is ornamented with the skull of a deceased bovine. This dome is of sufficient wildness to attract many for the mere purpose of beholding its view, but it is here that the most interesting walls are found.

On its southern shoulder, overlooking the head of beautiful Redwood canyon, which is reached by the Moraga road from Piedmont, a wall extends for over 200 yards to the east and then plunges down a steep canyon to the south. Near the angle thus formed is a level stretch through which there appears to have once been a road.

Harold French also wrote about Round Top in an article entitled “The Contra Costa Hills,” that was published in the *San Francisco Call* on December 11, 1909. It was part of a series of 13 articles that Harold wrote for the *Junior Call* section of the newspaper. His articles were intended to encourage young people to go out hiking and become acquainted with the natural scenic beauty all around them. He also included practical tips such as appropriate footwear for hiking and how to waterproof a pair of leather hiking boots.

As regards Robert Sibley, I learned from my research that Harold French had, in Harold’s words, been “most pleasantly associated” with Sibley from the days of the 1933–1934 campaign to create the East Bay Regional Park District and its Board.

Born in Alabama in 1881 and raised in Georgia, Robert Sibley moved to California with his family. He graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1898 and from UC Berkeley in 1903 where he earned a degree in mechanical engineering. After teaching mechanical engineering in Montana for eight years, he returned to Berkeley where he taught in Cal's department of mechanical engineering. From 1925 until 1948 Robert Sibley was the Executive Manager of the University of California Alumni Association. He built up the organization to be the largest of its kind in the world, with a membership of over 40,000 individuals.

When he was recovering from an illness, Robert Sibley was told by his doctor that he needed to walk. He began walking in the hills above Berkeley and became an avid hiker. Then, when he read in the newspapers in 1929 that East Bay MUD had changed the source of the water it distributed to the East Bay and was planning to sell off its watersheds in the East Bay hills, he immediately got involved in the process of securing these properties and turning them into East Bay parks.

Robert Sibley was director of the East Bay Regional Park District from 1948 until his death in Paris on July 22, 1958 while on a world tour with his wife. He was 78. It was on June 17, 1969, that the name of Round Top Regional Park was changed to Robert Sibley Regional Park. In 1981 it was changed to Robert Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve.

In our CCHC archives there is a copy of a letter from Robert Sibley to Harold French, dated May 13, 1952, in which Robert Sibley wrote: "I look back to the good old days of long ago when you and I worked so hard to get the parks started. Be assured I appreciate any suggestions you have to make from time to time."

When the East Bay Regional Park District was inaugurated in 1936, Round Top Regional Park was one of the three original parks, along with Tilden and Temescal.

In 1919 Harold French had begun channelling his campaigning energies into local issues related to nature, its enjoyment and its preservation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he spent many of his waking hours thinking of ways to protect and promote the natural environment. He wrote numerous letters, accepted appointments to various local committees, and spoke before a variety of local organizations. He also enlisted the aid of members of the Contra Costa Hills Club, the Sierra Club, the California Alpine Club, a large number of Bay Area civic organizations, and interested members of the public. Many of the campaigns in which he participated took years to achieve their goals. It is largely due to the patience, persistence, and perseverance of Harold French and like-minded individuals that these missions were accomplished. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude.