Monkeys on Mill Creek and a garden of stone

Columns tend to raise more questions than they answer. Some are rhetorical—such as "Don't you think Sonoma County has one of the more interesting histories of any county in California?"—and don't require an answer. But specific questions should be attended to. In an effort to set a good example for columnists everywhere, I will endeavor to answer a couple of questions today. Don't expect a common thread. Both answers and continuities are too much to ask.

NUMBER ONE: "Do you know anything about a rich woman who had a ranch on Mill Creek Road where she kept chimpanzees?"

Now, there's a starting point. Chimpanzees in rural Healdsburg.

The woman in question is the late Thelma Tharp Doegler. And there are, in fact, still a few monkeys on their remote ranch in the hills off Mill Creek Road, which is still owned by the Doegler Trust. But don't go looking for it, because there is no sign and the caretakers won't let you in anyway.

Thelma was the wife of Henry Doegler, the near-legendary San Francisco builder who built on the sand dunes of the city's Sunset District, and created a post-World War II subdivision in Daly City he named Westlake. Doegler made somewhere in the neighborhood of $160 million dollars and, at one time, owned or had an option on most of the land between Daly City and Half Moon Bay. San Francisco columnists made reference to "the white cliffs of Doegler."

The Doeglers bought the 1,200-acre ranch 19 miles north of Healdsburg in 1947, two years after he and Thelma were married and one year after he used the profits from the San Francisco hot dog stand to buy a lot in the sand dunes for $1,100 and sell it two months later for $25,000—the seed money for his substantial fortune.

They gave it one of those amalgam names—Thelbendo Ranch—and, as their financial lot improved, used it to entertain business associates and Bay Area politicians as well as family friends. The ranch also became a haven for Thelma's animals.

Thelma loved animals. A tiny, platinum-haired woman, she looked even smaller in her big station wagon with her four Great Danes as she traveled Mill Creek Road. She had burros on the ranch and built a special house with appropriate climate controls for the 21 monkeys and apes she collected from all over the world.

The deer and raccoons from the hills above Mill Creek were fed daily on the ranch and, during deer season, Thelma hired guards to keep hunters from trespassing and shooting her deer. During her lifetime she was active in campaigns to outlaw pit-bull fights, was a supporter of the movement to save the deer on Angel Island and was a benefactor of the hearing dog program.

Even before Henry's death, which came while he was on a tour of Italy in 1976, Thelma was spending much of her time at the ranch. When she died in 1983, at the age of 85, she left $1 million to Bay Area humane societies, including the Healdsburg society, and a $1.5 million to Primarily Primates, Inc. Before her death she endowed the primate center at the San Francisco Zoo with $1 million and gave another $100,000 for the remodeling of the zoo's lion house. Richard Avanzino of the San Francisco SPCA still speaks of Thelma as "the most incredible person I've ever known."

People were not forgotten. In the years after her husband died, leaving their children well provided for, Doegler gave millions to heart research at Stanford Medical Center and the Henry Doegler Heart Center in Daly City and established a senior center and an art center in Westlake.

Born on a Nebraska Indian reservation where her father was a Cavalry officer and reared on another military post in the Philippines, Thelma Tharp came to Santa Rosa as a teen-aged in 1915 and finished school here. Although the Burbank House Museum has no record of it, the obituaries written at her death say her first job was as a private secretary to Luther Burbank. She worked at the Russian consulate in San Francisco before the Bolshevik Revolution. She met and married Doegler while he was still peddling hot dogs and worked alongside him in his early development projects.

QUESTION NUMBER TWO: "I took a wrong turn up the hill off Summertime and found a kind of miniature village made of stone—with a trench and a construction fence around it—at the end of the road. What's that?"

That's what is left of John Medica's amazing rock garden.

The late John Medica was a Slovenian immigrant who started building a stone wall around his house on his east Santa Rosa turkey ranch in 1955. Using the chips of basalt left from the old quarry on his property, he built a wading wall which he liked the look of so much, he kept on building. Two years later he sold his turkeys, declaring his 27-year experiment as a poultry farmer a bust, and devoted his days to his stone work.

He built castles with 7-foot towers and houses 3 feet tall and fountains and a miniature replica of the Golden Gate Bridge. He installed lights and turned them on at night so they shone on the fountains and the waterfalls. He worked 18 or 12 hours a day for nearly 30 years until almost four acres of his land was covered with his "stone garden."

"I invent everything," the cheerful, blue-eyed old man told me when I visited him in 1980. "I don't have any picture. All in my imagination." Medica was not a skilled craftsman. "I learned," he told me. "I was learning every day that I worked. Every day I learned more. It wasn't because I was knowing. No. After I got through I didn't know how I did it, all the mistakes I made.

Medica, at 85, was as delighted as a child with his creations. 29 structures, mostly tall and slim, were being shown to him off to a visitor. "Now say the place should belong to the people," he said. "I would agree."

But it was already too late for "the people" to save Medica's stone garden. He had sold off most of the 100 acres he bought in 1932. Part of it was included in Spring Lake Park, part in Castrock subdivision.

Neighbors who lived on steep, narrow Medica Road didn't want the public beating a path to the gardens. And, while folk art organizations were interested in acquiring it and, in fact, it was even evaluated as a State Historical Landmark No.289, neither Medica nor his attorney were ready to make a deal.

When he died in 1989 the property was in escrow. The prospective buyer was future Rep. Frank Riggs, in his developer role, who proposed to negotiate with the city to have the stone art moved (a prospect that seemed unlikely given the character of the structures) to a public park. But the escrow was nullified by Medica's death and, since his heirs (mostly nieces and nephews he had never met) lived in Argentina and Yugoslavia, the property was offered in a probate sale.

Enter developer Michael Sashi who bought the land in 1990. Sashi tried to interest government agencies and private trusts in a gift of the central area and a half of the garden. But he got no takers. The county wasn't interested in making it part of adjoining Spring Lake Park. Nor would the city consider any attempt to move the structures or to take over the ownership and maintenance of the garden.

So, with the approval of the Cultural Heritage Board, which ruled Sashi had "acquired it by working and the property was offered in a probate sale.

The city's public works department mailed a reminder to Sashi that the subdivision agreement calls for the public improvements to be completed by June 15, just two months from now. But Sashi isn't worried. All the underground work is done, he said, and the builders, Young America Homes will hand the streets in by next month. Stone mason Bob Bilekowske (whose 86-year-old Yugoslav father-in-law, Joe Britocki, was a friend of John Medica's and helped him when he began his long "construction project") has been hired to repair and tender the structures. Meanwhile, vandalism does worry developer Sashi. People are stealing abalone shell decorations from some of the castles and the stained glass is missing from the windows of his wife died.

But the wildflowers are blooming along the stone walkways and there are at least two deer families who looked quite comfortable in their folk art home.