Taking steps to nowhere

It's a sunny day in early February, but the trails around Valle Vista staging area in the East Bay Municipal Utilities District are still mud-soaked from the recent rains. My five-year-old and I walk along the grassy edge of one of the widest trails, trying to avoid the muck. A man and his wife pass us, heading in the opposite direction.

ROBIN SCHOETTLER FOX
Around the Corner

"This trail only leads to a swamp," the man warns.

Scotty and I smile. The man doesn't know what we know — this is the way to the "Steps to Nowhere."

Scotty and I found the steps last year. On our first exploration of this EBMUD land, we saw remnants of a wall made of cantaloupe-sized rocks skirting this trail. We followed the wall until it reached a chest-high, stone column. The column had deteriorated at its neck so that its top looked as if it teetered on its base.

Scotty and I stopped to admire the effect. That's when we saw the concrete steps built into the hillside, steps that started several feet up the path that began at the column. The steps looked as if they led to nowhere.

We headed up. The steps ended at a landing, as many staircases do. There we rested on a weathered concrete bench that was upholstered in moss and peppered with dry leaves, brittle and brown.

From our spot, Scotty and I surveyed the land. Across the valley, horses grazed. Closer in, other rock walls scalloped the hill alongside the stairs we had just climbed. Our new kingdom was a terraced garden, un-kept and overgrown, that hinted of better times.

We continued along the path and found two more moss-covered benches. The path wound up the hill to a short set of steps onto a two-level concrete foundation with brick wall ruins.

"Nowhere" had become more interesting with every step we took. Even as we walked back down the stairs to go home, we knew we would return. And we have — today, almost a year to the date of our first climb.

Scotty and I watch the man and his wife hike around the bend. Then, we continue along the trail until we spy the column standing sentinel below the "Steps to Nowhere." Its neck is gone; the top of the column has fallen to the ground.

The stairs. The moss-covered benches. The foundation. They are all as they were before. Studying the wall closest to the main trail, we find a second set of steps into the garden.

Scotty says the "Steps to Nowhere" belong to the two of us, that we are the first to climb them since Native Americans lived on that land. I stare at the hills of Moraga from where I think a porch might have been and imagine a family that once lived in the house. Maybe they farmed all the land that I see before me.

Scotty and I are both wrong. I found the truth in the files of the Moraga History Center (www.moragahistory.org).

Valle Vista was once a growing neighborhood. With houses built as early as 1914, this subdivision may have been Contra Costa County's first commuter suburb, because some of the people who lived in Valle Vista traveled to work by rail taking the train that ran on tracks where we now walk the Lafayette Moraga Trail.

In the early 1920s, the East Bay Water Company (EBMUD's predecessor) became concerned about controlling water quality in the area. It started to buy Valle Vista property, a process that continued until 1971 when EBMUD purchased the last parcel. Valle Vista is currently protected watershed, but anyone with an EBMUD pass is free to enjoy its trails.

Meanwhile, the Moraga History Center preserves Valle Vista's story — the "Steps to Nowhere" were once a neighbor's steps home.

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