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News

## Hulet Hornbeck, former East Bay Regional Park land buying chief, dies



By **DENIS CUFF** | [dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group  
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Hulet Hornbeck, an expert navigator and map reader, took nearly half his life to find his bearings for his biggest calling: protecting natural lands.

He wasted no time afterward in leaving his mark on the East Bay landscape.

Hornbeck, who died of heart disease Jan. 7 at the age of 92, changed his life when he was 46 years old.

After a doctor wrongly told him he would die of skin cancer within five years, Hornbeck, a Martinez insurance attorney, quit his job and signed on with the East Bay Regional Park District.

He proceeded to buy 49,000 acres — 76 square miles — of land in Contra Costa and Alameda counties from 1965 to 1985 to expand what has become the largest regional park system in the nation.

“We would not have many of the regional parks we have today if not for Hulet Hornbeck,” said Bob Doyle, the park system’s general manager. “There are many places like Briones Park that would be developed with houses today if not for Hulet.”

The park district’s land acquisition chief, Hornbeck also stitched together a regional trail network of more than 200 miles.

Hornbeck relied on his understanding of geography, maps and math to plan and carry out purchases that expanded the recreation system from eight to 46 parks and from 13,000 to 62,000 acres. It now has 110,000 acres.

He worked hand in hand with the late Richard Trudeau, the park district general manager during much of that era.

Hornbeck was a tenacious advocate for protecting natural lands, said co-workers, friends and family.

“His dedication and enthusiasm gets people off the ball to act,” the late state Sen. John Nejedly, of Walnut Creek, told this newspaper in 2005.

Before the park district hired him, Hornbeck helped galvanize support for the 1965 ballot measure when Contra Costa County voted to join the park district.

He grew up in a poor family in New Jersey, where his mother took him by bus and train to the countryside to appreciate nature.

During World War II, Hornbeck served as a bomber navigator on several missions in the Pacific Theater. He guided the plane that spotted the Japanese fleet before the battle of Coral Sea.

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#### HULET HORNBECK

Born: Oct. 14, 1919. Died Jan. 7 in Pacific Grove

Residence: Lived in Martinez for 55 years

Memorial Service: 11 a.m. Feb. 26, Tilden Park, Brazilian Room, Wildcat Canyon and Shasta roads, Berkeley

Survivors: Daughter, Jane Hornbeck Consani, of Carmel Valley; son, Lawrence Hornbeck, of Martinez; and a sister, Margaret Hornbeck Steele, of Walnut Creek.

Memorial Gifts: To Regional Parks Foundation, P.O. Box 21074 Crestmont Station, Oakland, CA 94620; American Trails, P.O. Box 49197, Redding, CA 96049-1797; or Save Mt. Diablo: 1901 Olympic Blvd., Suite 320, Walnut Creek, CA 94596



**Denis Cuff** Denis Cuff covers environmental, water, and outdoor recreation news for the Bay Area News Group. A graduate of Stanford University with a B.A. in communications, he enjoys hiking and cycling in his spare time.

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