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John Muir National Historic Site

THE JOHN MUIR NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE (historic site, park) was established on August 31, 1964 as a public national memorial to commemorate the accomplishments of John Muir. “John Muir affected the quality of life in this country more profoundly than have all but a few Americans. Mountaineer, writer, scientist, athletic-philosopher, and framer of the conservationist ethic, he gave this country reason to cherish and protect its landscape at a time when, in Muir’s own words, ‘materialism ruled supreme’” (Engberg, 1981, p. 11).

The original Strentzel-Muir ranch encompassed 2,300 acres in the Alhambra Valley, located within an unincorporated area of north central Contra Costa County and just outside and south of the City of Martinez. Today, urban residential and commercial development, highway and railroad corridors encircle much of the park and the remaining 326-acre ranch where John Strentzel (Muir’s father-in-law) and John Muir lived and worked.

The John Muir National Historic Site consists of three areas: a ranch with the former of home of John Muir, the family cemetery and Mt. Wanda. (Killion and Davison, 2005).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SITE

“The property acquired under this Act [Public Land Law 88-547] shall be designated as the John Muir National Historic Site and shall be set as a public national memorial to John Muir in recognition of his efforts as a conservationist and a crusader for national parks and reservations” (Harpers Ferry Center, 2010).

SCOPE OF THE HISTORIC SITE

The John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez, California consists of three separate parcels: 1) The Muir House, where he lived from 1880 until his death in 1914, and a 9-acre representation of the original 2,300-acre fruit orchard and oak woodlands where Muir lived, wrote and farmed. The Martinez Adobe built by Don Vincente Martinez in 1849

is considered a part of the ranch. 2) Mt. Wanda, a steep 326-acre grass and oak woodland open to hikers and horseback

riders. 3) A small family cemetery situated in a small residential neighborhood at the foot of Mt. Wanda (Harpers Ferry, 2010).

[3]

The Strentzel-Muir Ranch

Both John Strentzel, Muir's father-in-law and Muir played key roles in the development of early California agriculture.

AGRICULTURAL HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA

Many new California settlers in the 1850s eventually turned to farming because they found it far more prosperous than the gold fields. They found land that was fertile and flat. California climate featured rainy winters with hot and dry summers. Some farmers were fortunate to find land with remnants of orchards already laid out from abandoned farms of the Spanish missions. Wheat and barley were the primary crops and shipped to European markets, setting an early precedent for international exports. Large-scale operations used laborsaving devices and needed the help of immigrant labor (Killion and Davison, 2005; Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).

By the 1890s, soils were depleted of nutrients. Because many of the farmers were former gold miners, they knew little about how to maintain the richness of the soil. They

failed to use crop rotation, fertilizer and other commonly held best practices to maintain soil productivity. Grain production decreased in quality and the farmers eventually turned to intensive fruit cultivation in place of grain. Fruit orchards increased and grain production, once a staple crop for the state declined (Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).

The rapid growth of irrigated acres started in 1880 and tripled between 1900 and 1930

Olmstead and Rhode (1997) reported that in 1889, orchards accounted for more than 20 percent of the value of all farm production. By 1909, the value was nearly even with grains. The production value of fruit orchards continued to increase to nearly four-fifths by 1929.

Explanations for the causes and timing of California's structural transformation [during the period of 1850-1900] have long puzzled scholars. The traditional literature yields numerous causal

factors, including: (1) increases in demand for income-elastic fruit products in eastern urban markets; (2) improvements in transportation, especially the completion of the transcontinental railroad; (3) reductions in the profitability of wheat due to slumping world grain prices and falling local yields; (4) the spread of irrigation and the accompanying breakup of large land holdings; (5) the increased availability of “cheap” labor; and (6) the accumulation of knowledge about California’s environment and suitable agricultural practices. Yet a careful investigation of the transformation yields a surprising result: much of the credit for the shift to intensive crops must be given to exogenous declines in real interest rates and to “biological” changes as farmers learned more about how to grow new crops in the California environment. (Olmstead and Rhodes, 1977, p. 6)

During the 1880s farming became increasingly more complex because science merged with agriculture to study and treat pests and diseases. Insects were invading California farms because produce was being shipped in and out of state; and bringing unwanted insects. Eventually, this led to the origin of pesticides and insecticides. Some farm workers used homemade solutions and had no protection when they sprayed the trees with a mix of dangerous chemicals. (Street, 2004).

Farmers learned through experimentation about soils, irrigation patterns and the yields of different varieties of fruits to maximize their profits. Each state

established an Agricultural Experiment Station to conduct agricultural research and become a resource for farmers. California’s first station was located in Berkeley. The Agricultural Experiment Stations eventually became the California Agricultural Extension Service (California Native Grasslands Association, n.d.). The Alhambra Grange became a local source for knowledge of new technologies and science-based techniques for farmers. (Olmstead and Rhode, 1997; Johnson and McCalla, 2004; Killion and Davison, 2005).

In 1910, “California emerged as one of the world’s principal producers of grapes, citrus, and various deciduous [annual] fruits.

California agriculture at the end of the 19th Century had already experienced several transformations, from mission agriculture to cattle, to sheep, to wheat. Another transformation was under way that would forever shift California agriculture from extensive-dryland agriculture to intensive-irrigated agriculture The rapid growth of irrigated acres started in 1880 and tripled between 1900 and 1930 (Johnson and McCalla, 2004).

Farm irrigation that was both productive and cost effective became an issue that continued to challenge farmers into the next century and extends into contemporary farming practices (Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).

At the turn of the century commercial orcharding faced another important

challenge. Industry was taking farm laborers away from the field. The cost of labor was rising. Working conditions were so poor on some farms that laborers walked away from their jobs. A series of farm worker labor laws demanding safe and humane business practices began making their way to the California Legislature (Killion and Davison, 2005; Street, 2004).

Killion and Davison (2005) reported that census data from 1910 revealed that 25 percent of bearing fruit trees were lost in the first decade because of the loss of laborers working the fields. By 1930, half of the trees were gone. The farms that survived were those who took advantage of new scientific techniques to improve productivity while reducing cost. During the era of experimentation in the 1870s, it was common to grow hundreds of varieties of fruit. By 1910, the numbers were in the tens.

Farmers applied what they learned about biology to understand how to handle the fruit during shipping and the impact of spoilage on appearance and their profits. Using newly conceived orchard management techniques meant shaping the tree canopy so it was more resistant to wind. Shorter trees with lower branches made it easier for farm workers to prune, spray and pick fruit. Combining effective pruning techniques with orchard layout was far more productive than the “wild and untrimmed” trees of the late 1800s. The study of horticulture reflected in California’s reputation for offering higher quality products (Killian and Davison, 2005; Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).

In 1910, “California emerged as one of the world’s principal producers of grapes, citrus, and various deciduous [annual] fruits (Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).” The access to the rail transportation, refrigerated cars, improved roads, the new focus on understanding biology of the fruit and the introduction of new industrial technologies such as canning, packing and machinery accelerated California’s agricultural standing to a position of global leadership.

Other major investments in research during the early twentieth century focused on how to make the ground more productive for growers. The next challenge was bringing water to the fields through land management - reshaping rivers, building levees and digging irrigation channels for thousands of miles. Farms across California were often subdivided to irrigate and manage more effectively (Olmstead and Rhode, 1997).

According to Olmstead and Rhode (1997), the distinguishing feature of current California agriculture in contrast to other regions is more than the sheer volume of output. The wide diversity of crops, the capital intensity, the high yields, and the special nature of the state’s agricultural institutions set California apart.