



CULTURAL HISTORY MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK

MOUNT DIABLO ROAD PROMISED STUNNING VIEWS 19TH-CENTURY ENTREPRENEUR SAW A GLITTERING FUTURE FOR SCENIC SPREAD.

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THE MOVERS and shakers of Contra Costa County were all there that night in Pacheco to hear Joseph Seavey Hall, late of New Hampshire, talk about a project he said might make them all a nice pot of money.

Nathaniel Jones, prosperous Lafayette farmer and former county sheriff, gaveled the meeting to order. It was Oct. 30, 1873. The weather had turned a little nippy. Most of the people who showed up had put on their winter clothes.

Among those in attendance were Hiram Mills, county district attorney; Michael Kirsch, a carriagemaker from Walnut Creek; and Albert Sherburn, who owned a general store in Walnut Creek with the publisher of the *Contra Costa Gazette*, C.B. Porter.

Hall pointed to the southeast, telling the group that in this very county was one of the greatest recreational resources of the West. From the summit of Mount Diablo, one could see San Francisco Bay and the Farallones to the west and the snow-covered Sierra Nevada to the east. There wasn't a view equal to it anywhere.

Mount Diablo had "more rare attractions to the lover of nature and fine mountain scenery than any mountain of the same altitude, perhaps in the world," Hall told the crowd at the Oddfellows Hall in Pacheco.

What was missing? Hall answered his own question: a hotel and a road to the top. Hall said he had enough money to build the hotel. It was the road he needed help with. Wouldn't cost much, he said. Could be done for \$22,000. He knew about roads because he had built another to the top of Mount Washington in New Hampshire.

He described that project in glowing terms. Tourists came benefiting the "owners of stables and horses, and farmers who furnish the beef, the butter, the lamb, the chickens, the pigs, the fruit, the vegetables to feed the multitude."

There could be two roads leading up to the top. A 12-foot-wide road beginning at the end of the county road in Ygnacio Valley, some 8¼ miles long, would cost \$10,000. A wider, 16-foot road would be \$16,000.

In addition, he suggested a branch road joining the summit road from the Green Valley side of the mountain to take advantage of the Hayward trade. This three-mile road would add another few thousand dollars. If the paperwork was started immediately, the project could be completed by May 1.

"My object is to make money in an honest and legitimate way, and I ask no advantage over any gentlemen who may take hold with me and not pay for any services," said Hall.

It was Porter who introduced the motion to incorporate the Mount Diablo Summit Road Co. On Nov. 4, incorporation papers were filed at the county clerk's office.

The capital of the company was \$25,000 divided into 2,500 shares of \$10 each. Hall was chosen as president of the board of directors. W.W. Camron, who had married Alice Marsh, the heiress of John Marsh's fortune, was named treasurer.

Once Hall had the financing secured for the road, he began to promote the mountain's attractions. Porter made sure the Contra Costa Gazette informed its readers of the wonders they could see from Mount Diablo. However, Hall also made sure that the rest of the Bay Area knew what was going on.

He began to take travelers on horseback up the mountain, following the route of the projected road. The San Francisco Chronicle published an account of one of these excursions. One traveler reported that Hall had showed him the spot he had picked for his hotel. It was on a plateau, two miles from the summit. Visitors could either ride a horse the rest of the way to the top or walk.

"A cool spring bubbles near (the hotel site); to the left Pulpit Rock rises in solemn grandeur, crowning the top of a lofty ridge."

Hall actually made his deadline. On May 1, 1874, people began arriving in Martinez; some came from San Francisco. There was to be a picnic and ceremonies on the top of the mountain to celebrate the road's opening.

It rained, and the San Francisco guests had to wait out the drippy weather. The next day, the sun was shining. Seeley Bennett readied his new six-horse mountain carriage to take 20 riders to the top of the mountain.

"It was a perfect road," reported the Gazette.

The only problem seemed to be a few low-hanging branches over the road, which had to be batted out of the way with a stick.

"This little performance usually scattered down a light shower of caterpillars, which elicited sharp screams from the timid members of the party."

Two miles from the summit, Hall greeted his guests at what he now called the Toll House. A dining room had been set up in a tent. The Gazette reported that a first-class meal was served.

But before the group could make it to the summit, "fog closed round us like a curtain, shutting out the anticipated prospect." It was a disappointment. The group listened to speeches from Porter, the Gazette publisher; Hall; D.J. Staples, vice president of the California Pioneers; and President Gilman of the State University.

For a brief moment the fog lifted, and the group could see San Francisco Bay, Goat Island (Yerba Buena) and the Golden Gate.

During its first month of operation, 800 people used the road up to the summit. The Mount Diablo Summit Road Co. made 25 cents for each person using the road.

Tourists flocked to see Mount Diablo view

SAN FRANCISCO VISITORS were told they could make it to the summit of Mount Diablo and back in a single day using the new toll roads built by Joseph Seavey Hall and W.W. Camron in 1874.

The roads went up the mountain from both the north and the south sides. Hall had overseen the construction on the north side, while Camron worked the south side. Visitors could catch stages from either Martinez or Hayward once they got to either of these spots from San Francisco.

By July 1874, hundreds of visitors had visited the Mount Diablo's summit using the new toll roads. Some did make it a one-day trip, staying two hours on the top of the mountain; others stayed overnight at Hall's 16-room hotel.

Bartholomew Phillips Moore, a San Francisco merchant who wrote travel pieces on the side, recommended a two-day trip and published it in the July issue of the Pacific Odd Fellow. The article was reprinted in the Contra Costa Gazette, whose editor, C.B. Porter, had invested in the company that built the toll roads. Porter took every opportunity to praise the new road. Moore's description must have sent his spirits soaring.

"Leaving San Francisco at 1 p.m. we reached Oakland and got fairly off by 2 o'clock taking what is called the Walnut Creek route via Lafayette . . . The road through the canyon is beautiful. All along we catch views of the valley and the Bay of San Francisco that would inspire a poet or a painter."

Once on the other side of the Oakland-Berkeley hills, Moore went on to Danville, where he reached Camron's ranch about 6 p.m. At this point Moore had been on the road for five hours, but it didn't seem to faze him.

He apparently stayed the night with the Camrons before continuing his ascent up the mountain. He found Camron's portion of the road excellent and said so.

"The new road just completed is one of the very best in the country. It is 16 feet wide . . . and the greater portion of the way so easy a grade that a pair of horses need not break their trot. It joins the Hall Road from Martinez about two miles from the summit, the grade of which is not so easy nor the road so good."

In fact, Hall's portion of the road was only 12 feet wide and very steep, but nevertheless it got Moore's admiration. Hall had actually finished his road, which came up the north side of the mountain, before Camron, and so earned Moore's accolade of being the "pioneer" on Mount Diablo.

"His (Hall's) is the first and only house on the mountain and is called the Toll House, where visitors and tourists may rest and register. It is a cozy little nook at the junction of the two roads with a spring of pure water."

Moore was astounded when he reached the top of the mountain.

"With a good glass you may take in at a single sweep more than 500 miles incircumference. From the great ocean on the west to the snow-capped Sierras on the east."

The idea of a permanent telescope on the top of the mountain inspired Hall when he heard that the Pacific Division of the United States Coast survey was going to make an observatory station on Mount Diablo's summit. From Mount Diablo, signals would flash to Mount St. Helena 50 miles away and to the Sierra Nevada 150 miles distant for the purposes of making height measurements.

On June 16, 1876, the chief of the Pacific Division of the United States Coast Survey went to the top of Mount Diablo with his family to supervise construction of the station. No doubt they stayed at Hall's Toll House hotel and enjoyed Sarah Jane Hall's chicken, fresh-baked bread and molasses.

Hall's telescope arrived in Martinez from the East Coast a few days later. The Contra Costa Gazette printed the details.

"It is a magnificent instrument over six feet in length, with an object glass of five-inch diameter. The instrument was manufactured by the same firm who have the contract for the telescope for the Lick Observatory, Clark & Son of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is a field as well as an astronomical telescope."

The telescope was in place by June 24. Visitors could now go up the mountains and see Jupiter's moons and the rings around Saturn in the evening. By day they could see Mount Whitney to the south and Mount Shasta to the north.

"More than 30 of the towns, cities and larger villages of the State may be examined in detail with the aide of this instrument," wrote the Gazette.

Hall now installed a tent with a wooden floor at the top of the mountain so guests could stay at the summit overnight. While the Gazette continued to publish laudatory accounts from visitors to the mountain, Hall got into money troubles. He sold his hotel and the telescope, which continued operating for 15 years.

The mountain site became a popular place to hold weddings and christenings. Word got around that no traveler was considered to have seen the West until he or she had been on top of Mount Diablo.

On July 4, 1891, it all came to an end. Fire broke out in Morgan Territory. It swept up to the top of the mountain from the east and destroyed the telescope and observatory station at the summit.

From then on, fewer people visited the top of the mountain. Ranchers didn't want visitors crossing their cattle ranges. They succeeded in getting the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors to close the Mount Diablo roads.

The doors and windows were removed from Hall's hotel, and, eventually, the ranchers burned the building to prevent it from being used by wandering hikers or campers.