



CULTURAL HISTORY MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK

EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF MOUNT DIABLO

by Steve Elliott

Steve Elliott is a docent at Mt. Diablo State Park and an experienced tour guide.

Excited laughter and shouts of glee echo off the rocky outcrops of Mount Diablo's Wind Caves as kids scurry from one cave to the next, oblivious to the history all around. Little do they know that the squeals of Miwok Indian children echoed in this same spot a thousand years before. Best known as a towering East Bay nature sanctuary, Mount Diablo is home to intriguing history as well. Ancient Indian cultures, Spanish explorers, Mexican soldiers, miners, and a century of ranchers have all shared this place.

Indian Lore

The first stop on a tour of the history of Mount Diablo should be the Summit Visitors Center. Besides being the “highest museum” in the Bay Area (at 3,849 feet above sea level), and perhaps the most compact, the museum well chronicles the geological and cultural history of Mount Diablo. Among the displays is one devoted to Bay Area Indians. Native people have lived within sight of Mount Diablo for at least 5,000 years. The mountain was in the territory of the Bay Miwok Indians. A tribe within the Bay Miwoks, the Volvons, spent much time on the oak-covered hills of the mountain.

As food gatherers, the Volvons found the area, now known as Rock City, a great source of nuts, grains and berries on which to subsist. The most obvious legacy of the Volvons are the many grinding holes they left behind. Using a crude pestle, these indentions in rocky outcrops were used to smash nuts, such as acorns, into a fine powder. This powder was then mixed with water to create a paste or cooked into cakes. Generally the size of a small mixing bowl and no deeper than a coffee can, these holes can be found on large rocks near caves, water sources and places where the natives may have camped. The grinding holes at Mount Diablo range in age from several hundred to a thousand years old. The most accessible specimens are in the Rock City and Live Oak Areas of the Park.

A Trail Through Time

The Indian grinding holes are one stop on Mount Diablo's new Trail Through Time. Being completed in 2005, this new trail stretches from the Park's southern boundary to the summit. It will include about twenty interpretive displays stationed at key points of geological and cultural interest. Many of the display panels are already in place. The trail primarily showcases the geological evolution of Mount Diablo. It also weaves in tidbits of it's human history, such as the story of the Indians and the Park's early days. Craig Lyon, one of the curators of the Trail Through Time, suggests visitors explore at least a portion of the trail. “Panels on the Trail Through Time tell the story of the mountain's dramatic rise and

provide a timeline of geological development.”

Blackhawk Quarry

The Trail Through Time provides an introduction to treasures like the Blackhawk Quarry. Unknown to many people, the Blackhawk Quarry is one of the richest mammal bone beds in the United States, second only to the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. Supervised by the University of California, the Quarry is on private property at the edge of the Park. It has yielded bones of 7 to 12 million-year-old horses, camels, rhinos and mastodons. A display at the Summit Visitors Center includes some bone and fossil specimens from the Quarry and other sites around the Park.

CCC at Mount Diablo

One particularly interesting part of Mount Diablo's history is the role the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) played in the Park's development. A depression era public works program, the CCC built park roads, hiking trails, ranger residences, maintenance buildings, campground and picnic facilities... and most prominently, the Summit Building during the 1930's. Subsequently adopted in the many California State Parks that followed Mt. Diablo, the CCC initiated “rustic park architecture” became the standard for State Park System. Carl Nielson, a senior ranger at the Park, encourages visitors to explore this CCC history. “The Summit Building was built using stone quarried in the Park and emphasizes how man-made structures can tie into their natural surroundings.” Nielson further noted: “Another interesting point about the Summit Building is that it is essentially geological display as well. The rock used in it contains fossils of sea creatures that are millions of years old.”

Also, while at the Summit, you might ask about the survey marker and beacon. The survey marker commemorates Mount Diablo was the starting point for the first survey of the Western United States (1851). Now located on top of the Summit Building, the beacon, used in the early days of night aviation, was turned on by Charles Lindbergh in 1928.

The Ranching Days

There are many old ranch sites within the Park. Acquired over the years as extensions to the original Park land, these ranches date from the mid to late 1800's. All are marked on the Park map and make a nice destination hike (or a stop on a scenic drive in a couple of cases). They include: the John Donner Cabin Site (1880) in Donner Canyon (no, not related to the ill fated Donner Party); the Olofson Homestead (1886) in Mitchell Canyon; Macedo Ranch (1909) at the end of Green Valley Road; Green Ranch (1938) about mid mountain; and, Turtle Rock Ranch (1952) on North Gate Road. Varying in degree of remaining structures and accessibility, each ranch tells its own history of a pioneering family or early homesteading. For example, Turtle Rock Ranch, named for a large nearby rock formation, was originally part of one of the earliest Mexican land grants, the 1834 Rancho Miguel. While most of the remnants are gone, some relics still dot the Park's trails. For example, there is an old water storage tank just above the Mitchell Canyon Staging Area. Elsewhere, you will run into old horse troughs and the like.

John Muir Slept Here

Among the favorite Mount Diablo stories is that of the Mountain House Hotel. Built in 1874, at the convergence of roads from two sides of the mountain, the Mountain House was the darling of a fledging tourist business on the mountain. Operating for about 15 years, Mountain House was quite popular for weddings, christenings and other special celebrations. The Hotel's twice-a-day horse-

drawn carriages brought many distinguished guests for a night or two stay. Having closed in 1895 and burned down in 1901, the remains are long gone, but the interpretive panel at the site is worth a stop. It is accessed by a short, easy walk up a trail just across from the present Junction Rangers Station. Please note that the location is now a park supply area and you have to close your eyes to picture John Muir standing on the porch, as he once did.

Mayday, Mayday!

Perhaps the most unusual historical site on Mount Diablo is an old airplane wreck. On April 8, 1946, a U.S. Army Air Corps twin engine transport plane crashed in clouds and fog at about 3,000 feet up the mountain. Today, portions of the aircraft still remain. Located near Ransom Point, it is quite a hike to get near the site. It is now completely covered with a canopy of thick foliage and is virtually impossible to find. Nonetheless, it is fun to explore the Park looking for such historical sites.

Moonshiners

Among its colorful past, Mount Diablo was a favorite spot for moonshiners in the 1920's and 1930's. Chronicled in her book, *The Morning Side of Mount Diablo*, Anne Marshall Homan tells it this way: "During Prohibition years, many hardscrabble ranchers in the Black Hills (of Mount Diablo)—always strapped for ready cash—set up stills and secretly made liquor besides their traditional wine." One such spot, named by the local residents "Jackass Canyon" makes for interesting exploration. Jackass is slang for whiskey (because it allegedly had a bite like a mule and a kick like a horse). On the Park map, but challenging to get to, the history of Jackass Canyon has slowly been uncovered through periodic finds of distilling equipment.

Who knows what you might stumble over. While Mount Diablo is blessed with interesting geology and wildlife, it has some intriguing history to explore as well. For more information about the Park's history, go to the Summit Visitors Center or purchase the *Mount Diablo Guide* (available at Park locations or on the internet at mdia.org).

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