



CULTURAL HISTORY MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK

THE GREEN RANCH

by Deborah Green Seymour

Diablo was my mother's place—a place where she rode her horse, walked the trails, and where at times her spirit was renewed.

We all called it “Diablo”. It was also known as “The Green Ranch” although officially its title was “Greenhill Ranch”. It wasn't really a ranch, just a small piece of land on the south side of Mount Diablo stretching from the Blackhawk Ranch northern boundary up to 9/10 of a mile from the summit.

My mother was born on a ranch, Rancho Los Alamitos, outside of Long Beach, California. From the time she could walk, she was on a horse, and as she grew older, she participated in various cattle ranching activities. Throughout her life riding was important to her and she was known as an expert horsewoman. When my parents decided to look for a place in the country not too far from our home in Berkeley, a place where my mother could keep horses and find riding trails, they found it on Mount Diablo. Originally part of a Spanish land grant the 180 acres was purchased in 1938 from the Garcia brothers, who had given up trying to raise cattle in the property.

My parents hired an old college friend, William Wurster, later Dean of the Architecture Department at U. C. Berkeley, to design a house for the ranch. Then they hired Mr. Appleby, a contractor, to build the house. He lived in a tent on the property during the months it took to complete the building. He built the swimming pool first, then the house. The house when finished went on to win several architectural awards for Mr. Wurster's firm.

The first time I went to Diablo I was six years old. I had never driven on a winding mountain road and became so car-sick I had to be laid out on top of a picnic table at Pioneer Camp and sloshed with spring water before we could continue on down the steep fire trail to the ranch. In those days automobiles had running boards. My father put us on the running boards while he drove up the mountain at a fast pace and we were so busy hanging on that we forgot to be car-sick.

The house was finished in 1939 and we moved in there to spend most weekends and summer vacations. What a wonderful experience! We quickly began to learn about the wild life surrounding us. Deer came grazing right up to the house in the evenings. My father named the dominate stag “Buster”. We came to know raccoons, skunks, occasional coyotes, mountain lions, buzzards, hawks, quail, jays, tarantulas, black widow spiders, king snakes, rattlesnakes, bats, and mice, mice, mice.

During the various seasons we looked for and found golden poppies, blue lupine, red Indian paint brush, wildcurrant, toyon berries, tarweed, mustard, and plenty of poison oak. The pines, oaks, mistletoe, scrub brush and wild oats were everywhere. We four children learned to swim, hike, and

ride. Two of us took to riding, two didn't. My younger brother and I had our own horses and would get up before dawn, saddle up and pack our saddle bags with provisions, and ride up to one of the picnic grounds, there to eat breakfast while watching the sun come up; then we would ride over the mountain trails and be home in time for lunch.

All of us learned to drive on the mountain—first in the parking lot at the summit, then on the mountain roads. My older brother and I learned at the same time and soon devised a contest to see who could drive the pick-up the fastest on the twisting roads—the object of course being who could make the other sickest quickest, careening around curves we would occasionally meet other cars thus eliciting angry phone calls to Park Headquarters, a visit from the Head Ranger, and appropriate punishment from our parents. Every year my father took the four of us on the “Annual Hike” to the top of the mountain. Mother stayed home. It was always in August, and always on the hottest day of the year. It was only 9/10 of a mile—straight up and through the stickiest tar weed and densest buck brush. My sister and I always fared the worst and each year had to be tossed into the back of a ranger's truck, with gunny sacks on our heads, and driven practically comatose back down to the house. My father never planned this, it just happened.

Because Diablo was socially remote my parents imported our friends. We all slept on two screened sleeping porches and would talk back and forth until late in the evening where we would watch the fog come up from the valley and drift through the screens into our sleeping area. In the early morning the fog would dissipate and we could see it below covering the Livermore Valley—looked like the ocean. Both of my parents were Scout leaders and held Boy and Girl Scout campouts on the ranch and annual jamborees that included scout troops from all over the East Bay. They also hosted riding parties and musical weekends. My father had a rich baritone singing voice and would bring up his fellow singer and musicians from the Bohemian Club to perform for their families and friends. The first time I heard the duet from Bizet's [popular opera by Georges Bizet] “The Pearl Fishers” was on the large front porch of the Diablo house, the sounds that beautiful music floating out over the valley below. I could hear no other sounds. I think the animals were listening too.

We learned a lot at Diablo. What we gained from our parents and the rangers was a love and respect for the mountain and its inhabitants, and the responsibility for taking care of this special place, and indeed any other place in which we found ourselves throughout our lives. No one whoever visited the the ranch on Mount Diablo ever forgot it—it was a beautiful and unique spot on this earth.

Deborah Green Seymour, May 8, 1995

“The Greenhill Ranch” was the property of Berkeley residents Robert Clarke Green (1905 - 1981) and his wife Deborah Bixby Green (1904 - 1958). In 1938, they built a summer/country house on their south-facing, 170-acre parcel near Mount Diablo's summit. The renowned architect, William Wurster, designed the house. The summer estate included a large swimming pool, tennis court, and guest quarters. The State of California acquired the property in 1965. The house was demolished in 1993. Efforts are underway to return this area to nature. In 1995, one of the Greens' daughters, Debo

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