



CULTURAL HISTORY MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK

BLACKHAWK & THE MOUNTAIN— A TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY

by Beverly Lane
in conjunction with Save Mount Diablo
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Today the name Blackhawk conjures up a vision of luxury homes a few miles east of Old Town Danville. It began as a ranch with that name some 80 years ago, at the southern base of Mount Diablo. But Blackhawk is a development of fairly recent vintage and in the 1970s it was so controversial that the debates were called the “The Blackhawk Wars.” For most of the twentieth century it was a quiet ranch.

Blackhawk Ranch Established

The Blackhawk Ranch was established in 1917 when Ansel Mills Easton and his son-in-law William Q. Ward purchased 1200 acres of a small valley, east of the San Ramon and Sycamore Valleys. The name was derived from a famous Irish race horse, called Blackhawk, which Easton’s family had owned decades earlier. Architect Louis Muffgardt designed a large family house for the Easton and Ward families. The ranch became well known for its prizewinning horses and shorthorn cattle.

The Danville Grange Herald on February 24, 1923, wrote:

“16 head of fashionably bred Shorthorn cattle, imported by Easton and Ward, of Diablo, Ca. from the most famous herds of Scotland, arrived here last week. The Blackhawk Ranch has a large number of imported cattle, and their herd of Shorthorns is one of the best in this country.”

Ranch Changes Hands

In 1934 the ranch was sold to Raymond Force, owner of the Caterpillar Tractor Company. He and his wife lived in Piedmont at first, using the Ranch as a summer home. One hundred acres of walnuts were planted, Arabian horses were raised and a large Hereford cattle herd were operated on the ranch, all served by well and spring water. He increased the acreage by purchasing the adjacent Wilson, Frietas, Sousa, Frick and Goid properties. The Forces moved to the Ranch in 1941 and Mrs. Force, an ardent gardener, planted and maintained a beautiful garden and grounds.

Force also used the land to test new versions of farm equipment and tractors, transporting the experimental vehicles under wraps so they could be tried out in secret. Beginning around 1930 an extraordinary array of fossils were found at the Blackhawk Ranch quarry site and digs have taken place ever since under the auspices of the University of California Museum of Paleontology. Force donated 97 acres north of the Ranch and near Curry Point for use by the Boy Scouts. In 1988 the “Boy Scout Camp”, as it was known, was acquired by the State for addition to Mount Diablo State Park.

After Force died, a firm called Castle and Cook Ltd. owned the Ranch from 1956 to 1964. Enter Howard Peterson (owner of Peterson Tractor). Peterson had known and admired Force and the Blackhawk Ranch for many years. According to conversations with Mr. Peterson in 1987, Force had offered to sell

him the Wilson Ranch section of the property at one time. Instead Peterson purchased the Two-County Ranch on the boundary of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, renaming it the JJJ Ranch for his daughters. His office was in San Leandro and he could drive easily to work over the old Highway 50 (today's I-580 route).

Howard Peterson Buys Ranch

One Saturday in the sixties Peterson learned the Blackhawk Ranch was available. He was in the habit of going north from his ranch to get his hair cut in Danville. He recalled that one day Bill Flett, of Geldermann Realtors, saw him in the barber shop. Flett said to him "Howard, how'd you like to buy the Blackhawk Ranch? It's up for sale." Peterson said he could hardly wait to get out of the barber chair. He bought all 6500 acres of the Ranch in 1964. As described in a Valley Pioneer Centennial Edition in 1958, the ranch had 140 acres of walnuts, 500 acres of hay, 1000 head of beef cattle and seven acres of well landscaped gardens.

Peterson said he and his wife loved the ranch. They rebuilt the Easton-Ward house to create a beautiful ranch house with large picture windows looking in all directions. When EBMUD was expanding to the Valley and came to Diablo Country Club, Peterson said the water company policy was "to bring water to people's yards near the main pipeline." He said he convinced EBMUD that he simply "had a big yard" and the entire ranch went into the water district's service boundary.

Mount Diablo State Park gains 2100 acres

He recalled that, at the time of his purchase in 1964, Castle and Cook had been transferring 2100 acres to Mount Diablo State Park. Peterson accepted this transaction as a completed fact, since he understood it was "sell or be condemned." He would have liked to keep that acreage as well, he said. These acquisitions included part of BBQ Terrace near Wall Point, much of Curry Canyon and the Knobcone Point area, including Balancing Rock.

The Petersons grew walnuts, grazed cattle and raised quarterhorses. Like other large ranchers, he had a walnut processing plant at the ranch. One year he sold 103 tons of walnuts to Diamond.

According to Mr. Peterson, he sold Blackhawk because the county re-assessed the Ranch as a potential subdivision, raising the taxes to \$100,000 a year. He decided not to go into the land development business himself and chose to sell it to one buyer, keeping 300 acres of the core home and headquarters.

Immense Controversy Surrounded Blackhawk's Development In The Seventies

Discussions began with representatives of Florida developer Ken Behring in 1973 and finally concluded in 1975, according to Peterson's records. Behring's Blackhawk Development Company envisioned a housing development of 4800 dwelling units on 4200 acres. The I-680 freeway had been completed in 1966 and the new Planned Unit Development zoning designation permitted developments with shared open space and other amenities. The Baldwin Ranch (now Danville Station) and the Meese Ranch (now Greenbrook Homes had been transformed in a short time from orchards to homes.

But the Blackhawk Ranch Development proposal of 4800 homes was much larger than the others; it was the largest ever proposed in Contra Costa County and was miles away from the freeway where other new developments were just appearing. Opposition came from environmentalists and Diablo residents who organized as "Amigos de Diablo." Charges rang out, citing "leapfrog zoning," environmental damage, urban sprawl, serious violations of the County General Plan and destruction of

the Mt. Diablo foothills. Save Mount Diablo, just a few years old, led some of the first hikes on the Ranch to educate the public about what was being proposed.

Anthony Dehaesus, the County Planning Director during this period, said:

“The issue of Blackhawk was not just the development of the land. The project brought up the questions of how was the land being served, what are the future impacts? For the first time the matter of public costs versus private costs was raised.”

Overriding county staff recommendations, the Board of Supervisors approved the development of 4800 homes in 1974. The Amigos collected signatures for a referendum and a law suit was filed. Petition signature-gatherers recalled being harassed as they collected signatures. But attorney Dan Van Voorhis defended these opposition activities and said that Blackhawk was “attempting to clarify the situation by putting truth squads on the street,” paid for by the company.

Referendum to halt development fails

The referendum did not make it to the ballot; it was dismissed by a judge as not on point. Blackhawk Development Corporation sued Amigos members for libel, an early SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) suit. The Company ultimately reduced the number of homes to 2400 and dedicated more than 2000 acres of open space, at no cost to the public, to Mount Diablo State Park.

The first homes opened in 1979. More than 40 builders participated in the development which was essentially complete by the early 1990s. Two 18-hole golf courses, two clubhouses and several sport complexes are part of the gated community we know as Blackhawk. Modest access to the State Park is available to trail users who have access through the Blackhawk gates.

2000 acres dedicated to State Park

The more than 2000 acres dedicated to open space were added to the State Park as development phases proceeded. The entire dedication process was watched over and prodded along by Save Mount Diablo. 1131 acres—areas as wide ranging as Wall Point, Jackass Canyon, part of Dan Cook Canyon and part of both sides of Southgate Road below the State Park entrance—were added in 1980. Another 410 acres along Blackhawk Ridge were dedicated in 1987.

Final parcel of more than 500 acres to be dedicated soon

Save Mount Diablo has continued to watchdog the final dedication and it is very likely that this year the final parcel of more than 500 acres, spectacular land below Oyster Point, will be added to the Park.

Peterson’s remaining 300 acres of the Ranch, accessible only through the Blackhawk gates, passed through several more hands before being proposed for development in 1989. Eventually developers and **Save Mount Diablo** negotiated a compromise whereby 24 acres were developed and 252 additional acres, below Devil’s Slide and including the lower reaches of Sycamore Canyon, were dedicated to the State Park last year.

There is no doubt, Blackhawk left its mark on the greater San Ramon Valley and Contra Costa County. Under several owners the ranch was prominent and unusual, and from 1973 to 1976 no development received more public meeting attention and newspaper headlines.

Mount Diablo State Park has grown as former Blackhawk Ranch lands have been added to the Park, beginning with sales to the State by Peterson and later with dedications from the Blackhawk Development Company as a Condition of Development of the remainder of the Ranch. Development

of Blackhawk has had a tremendous effect on Contra Costa County. It has also set a precedent making common dedications of open space as a condition of development and has greatly benefited Mount Diablo State Park.

Bibliography and Sources

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Editor's Note: Beverly Lane is a member of the Board of Directors of the East Bay Regional Park District, a former mayor of Danville, and curator and organizer of the Museum of San Ramon Valley's exhibit last year, "City Close, Country Quiet", 1945-1985, which examined the development history of the San Ramon Valley. The exhibit included research and materials related to the history of Blackhawk.

Save Mount Diablo is planning a public dedication of the final Blackhawk acreage to be added to Mount Diablo State Park later this year. For more information, call (925) 947-3535.