

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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Wilder Ranch Still Wild

We are fortunate today to have Wilder Ranch State Park and all of its uncrowded beaches, coastline and terraces, as well as its 34 miles of trails, literally in our backyard. In the late 1960s we almost lost those 4000 acres and that coastline to a large development.

In 1871, Deloss Wilder, in partnership with L. K. Baldwin (of Baldwin Creek fame), bought 4000 acres with two and a half miles of ocean frontage from Moses Meder, another early Santa Cruz pioneer. Wilder, like most of the area's early settlers came from the east, originally Connecticut. He came west to seek his fortune in the California Gold Rush, but after six years of digging, and not finding the fortune he had hoped for, Wilder moved west to Marin County in 1859 and started a dairy and chicken ranch. In 1871 he moved south to Santa Cruz, and along with Baldwin, built up the largest and most productive dairy in the county.

In 1885 Baldwin and Wilder dissolved their partnership and the ranch, with Wilder taking the parcel closest to the city. If you bike to Wilder Ranch today, and turn down the first entry road to the ranch buildings from the bike trail, you will be riding downhill on a stretch of pavement that was the original Highway 1, and which passed right in front of the old ranch buildings and farm houses.

Deloss Wilder and his two sons ran a herd of 350 dairy cows, three milk routes through the city and churned a ton of butter every day. The Wilders also developed a successful waterpower system using the water pressure from Wilder Creek through a device known as a Pelton Wheel.

The Pelton wheel was invented in 1870 and is very efficient at using the force of moving water that has a low flow volume but a large elevation difference, or hydraulic head. This was ideal for using the small flow of water from Wilder Creek that was at a high enough elevation upstream from the ranch to generate power.

The ranch used this mechanical power to run a number of tools in the barns on the ranch, such as saws, lathes, and water pumps that are still there today, as well as a

small electrical generator that produced what was reportedly the first electrical lighting system in Santa Cruz.

Wilder's sons, Deloss Jr. and Melvin, operated the dairy until about 1937 when the ranch turned to cattle raising and also leased out the coastal terrace land for artichokes and Brussels sprouts.

The economics of ranching and farming changed along the coast in the late 1960s, however. Although I am not sure who made the decision, property values at that time were assessed and taxed based on their development potential, not their value as farmland.

The dwindling income from farming and the increased property taxes led the Wilder family to sell to a land development firm in 1968. That transaction changed ownership of the land for the first time in 97 years, and nearly altered the entire character of this wonderful piece of coastal landscape.

A Canadian development firm bought Wilder Ranch, and by 1972 had developed a plan based on a "new town" concept, which would have ultimately constructed 7 "villages" that would have housed 35,000 people.

The next time you bike or hike on Wilder Ranch, or drive by, try to imagine 35,000 additional people filling up those 4000 acres of special places where you can find solitude and nature preserved today.

It's equally difficult today to think about anyone even proposing such a project. Yet it was very real at that time and immediately sparked a controversy about how that coastal land should be used, as well as the impacts of nearly doubling the size of the city of Santa Cruz.

A small group of people initiated an effort to oppose the development of the property and ultimately, the conservationists and environmentalists, who were in relatively short supply 41 years ago, won and the state bought the property in 1974 for a new state park. Thanks to those early efforts we can all enjoy the land and coastline today.