

# Old Santa Cruz

• • • By Ernest Otto

Today's dedication of the Henry Cowell Redwood State park brings back happy memories of old times. There is no question that the writer was taken to a picnic in the "Big Trees" 80 years ago as it was a favorite picnic spot for all Santa Cruz families.

It was what seemed a long drive over the circuitous Big Trees road which was known by many as the "toll road," the toll house standing at a turn.

The first memory of the middle seventies is that of the bridge across the San Lorenzo river. This was a huge fallen tree which extended from bank to bank. The top had been shaved flat with adzes and on either side were hand railings. How the children would run back and forth across this crude bridge. Both sides were considered part of the picnic grounds. There was no dividing line then between the Welch grove and the Cowell grove. They were one and the same.

There was no Southern Pacific railroad track running through the east side of the grove.

The present entrance is located in what was the north end of the grove. Here there was a division line formed by an old time picket fence.

The crossing then was without a bridge, and drivers of vehicles were forced to ford the river and drive their horses up the bank into the grove, which looked then much as it does now.

Like today there was the outstanding "giant" tree. But it was not surrounded by a fence to keep vandals from cutting off bits of bark as it is today. In those days it was covered with the business or personal cards of visitors. This practice had to come to a stop when it was necessary to protect the tree's bark from vandals.

It was a usual custom for several persons to stand hand in hand and encircle this forest giant and count to determine the number needed to surround it. A group so posed was a favorite picture target for tourists.

In the days of those early picnics, there usually were lines of people who would enter the "General Fremont" tree. There was no plank floor then, nor any electric light illumination. Electricity was a thing of the future then, but there was enough light from the large windows cut through the charred inside to the redwood exterior.

Nowadays, the bark has continued to grow until one window is completely covered by the burly redwood and the other is open only a few inches, showing the extent of the redwood's growth. General Fremont visited the tree in 1846, according to Elliott's history.

The "Jumbo" with its head and trunk nearby had not been named in those days. But there were the "Three Sisters." One since has gone, felled in a winter windstorm. Then the "Sisters" were turned into a bar with a counter across the front for picnics.

Among the trees which had names in those early days was the "Ingersoll's Cathedral," now just "The Cathedral." Not far away was the "Association" tree, named

when a special train brought delegates to a national convention of the Young Men's Christian Association from San Francisco to the Big Trees. It is likely this is the only tree ever dedicated with prayers and hymns.

Sometime later, the trees were identified by giving them the names of important personages.

There was no railroad bridge or track during the earliest visits of the writer to the Big Trees. A path at the south end of the grove led some distance beyond the present railroad. Here stood an old log cabin which was another favorite place for tacking cards.

The tanning vats had hardly started to rot then. Now the first tanning place soon will be a thing of the past from the effects of decay. It is said that Graham and Ware tanned there, working mostly with bear and deer skins.

The same buildings were there when the writer was a lad. There was an open air dining room on a porch not much different from the present.

Across the river, the woodsman's axe had not yet wrought destruction, and there was a virgin forest between the banks of the river and the Big Tree road. Now many cottages, homes and camping sites dot the area.

Many would cross the single tree bridge and eat their picnic lunches under the towering redwood trees. Just below the bridge was the mouth of a beautiful creek in which lovely tiger lilies usually were growing.

When the log bridge finally gave way, a pedestrian bridge was built and was a great source of pleasure to children who loved to jump on

summer and almost impassable mud in the winter, much more circuitous than at present.

At intervals, the road was enlarged to provide a passing place for teams, and drivers would hustle to one of them when the warning bells on the necks of the mule teams or sometimes the picturesque ox teams.

At what is now the lower end of Paradise Park was the 15-foot high plank fence of the California Powder works; later the E. I. DuPont de Nemours Powder company. At one time, it was a paper mill and was carried out by a flood.

The mountainside on the west side above and below the road on the Cowell property held a virgin forest of redwoods. When these were cut, they were succeeded by a growth of the wild lilac which made a beautiful sight in the spring, with the unusual blue of the lilacs literally covering the mountain. Redwoods can never be killed and as the second growth appeared, the lilacs disappeared, leaving the second growth redwoods to be preserved in the Henry Cowell Redwoods state park.

On the east side a virgin forest of pines remains, one of the finest remaining stands of timber in these parts, and also a part of the Cowell state park.

The river, splashing below among the rocks, also is a part of this large park and is considered one of the finest streams, particularly the turn at Inspiration Point, below the "Garden of Eden" swimming hole.

At the end of the new park at Rincon is the location of the powder works dam from where water

The South Pacific Coast railroad and then the Southern Pacific went through the towering groves of the Big Trees and carried thousands of sightseers to the marvelous grove.

A large open air dance platform was in the center of the grove for the bands, because in those days all large picnics were accompanied by brass bands. How the music would reverberate through those forests.

A large redwood stump, smoothed on top, with seats around it, was a favorite resting spot.

Practically all of the notables coming to California would visit the Big Trees. A great event was the posing of General Fremont beside his tree.

The only method of reaching the grove in the horse and buggy days was by the "toll road." The gate at the toll house usually was open and the gatekeeper would be inside the bar room. Sometimes drivers would rush through without paying.

The Big Tree road, now a concrete highway, was a one way road, dusty in spite of sprinkling in the

There were two tunnels for the railroad when it was built in the middle seventies through the park. One was at Rincon and was replaced by a deep cut. The other is beyond Inspiration Point.

What a great gift to posterity is this Cowell State park!

The writer, on his first trip to Yosemite park, took the day stage trip to the Wawona Big Tree Grove in that park. While standing and looking at the giant trees, he remarked to the ranger that the trees at Santa Cruz seemed taller but were smaller in circumference. The ranger answered: "I am glad you noticed that as many who have already seen those trees thought them larger. You are right on both counts."

In the log cabin at Wawona were specimens of curly redwood. The person in charge asked if the writer wanted to buy anything and my answer was: "We have plenty of that in my home city, Santa Cruz." He asked if I knew J. W. Dickinson of Santa Cruz, and I said, "Of course." He then said: "All the burl redwood stock here came from Dickinson in Santa Cruz."