



Above, Green Oaks Ranch house as it looked in palmier days when Will and Catherine lived there and their garden was famous for its flowers, shrubs and trees. At right, Catherine as a little girl in Texas, and below, General Frederick Steele who corresponded with President Abraham Lincoln.



By MARGARET KOCH
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Recipients of gifts usually do not return them to the giver...but San Mateo County has done just that, and a hunk of land is involved which once was part of Santa Cruz County.

To go back a few years: in 1967 Catherine Steele gave the pioneer Steele home and 13 acres, Green Oaks Ranch, up the coast, to San Mateo County.

The only string on it was a use reversion clause and now the property has reverted to Catherine.

The property is a State Historical Landmark and also is entered in the National Registry of Historical Places.

The gift was made by Catherine to carry out the wishes of her dying husband, Will Steele, who was a well-known rancher and sportsman.

The house at Green Oaks was built by Will's grandfather in 1862.

"It was a veritable treasure trove of family keepsakes and artifacts that dated back to early Colonial

days and early California days," Catherine says.

"Unfortunately, San Mateo County gave the place no protection and much of its heritage has been lost."

Catherine was able to save some of it, and the family's important collection of General Frederick Steele's Civil War papers is at Stanford University. So are the priceless Lincoln Letters, a collection of personal letters from President Abraham Lincoln to General Steele regarding Lincoln's Policy of Reconstruction which Steele was carrying out.

Will Steele was a grandnephew of the General.

Catherine discovered the valuable letters when, as Will's bride, she was looking through trunks stored in the attic. She came upon General Steele's folding field desk and the letters were in it — had been there for years.

She could hardly believe her eyes when she realized what she had found.

Stanford has in safekeeping also the Steele Ranch papers which cover more than 100 years of coastal dairying and ranching in California. And West Point has a collection of the Steele mementos, Catherine Says.

"However, some of the things I cherished, like old fashioned kitchen utensils, and Will's hunting trophies, were vandalized or stolen," she says.

At the time, she was hospitalized in Santa Cruz.

"The whole situation was inconceivable to me."

She comes from a distinguished pioneer family in Texas where the state's history is revered and relics are treasured. Both her grandfathers, Theodore Wolters and John Christian Baumgarten, fought in the Confederate Army. Historical research has been her hobby for many years. Fort Wolters in Texas was named for her uncle, General Jake Wolters.

"It's so interesting — it's fascinating history," the former school teacher says.

She came to the Steele Ranch as a bride in 1923. Her dream in recent years was for the ranch to become a repository for the papers

A Gift That Bounced...

and information from all the Steele Ranches. There were two in San Luis Obispo County, one in Marin County, and Green Oaks and Cascade in Santa Cruz County.

Originally, the family purchased the Rancho Punto del Ano Nuevo, and split it into Cascade and Green Oaks, then split it further in later years. Rensselaer and Isaac Steele were the founders of the coastal ranch

dynasty, and in 1872 they divided their holdings.

In 1967 Green Oaks contained 22 buildings, including a packing shed (vegetable crops were raised also); a horse barn, trophy room, bunkhouses, a big barn made by Chinese workmen who hand hewed the beams and boards, a ranch and auto equipment shop and several sheds.

For years, Green Oaks was famous as a coastal

dairy ranch, sending its cheese and butter to the San Francisco market via steamship, then stagecoach or horse and wagon.

"I was able to save some of the dairy equipment. I gave it to the California State Dairy Museum at Sacramento," Catherine explained. "It has already been displayed at the State Fair."

She says that negotiations were carried on with San Mateo County over the property until the last minutes. But things didn't work out.

"One group inspected the ranch and said the house was not structurally sound — another group said the place had no historical significance," she says.

The Steele Ranch actually was once part of a 30-square-mile area which was part of

Santa Cruz County until 1868.

The two counties squabbled for several years over the land area — but residents wanted out of Santa Cruz and into San Mateo — the roads made it impossible to reach Santa Cruz in the winter, at times, they said.

It was easier for them to get to Redwood City.

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