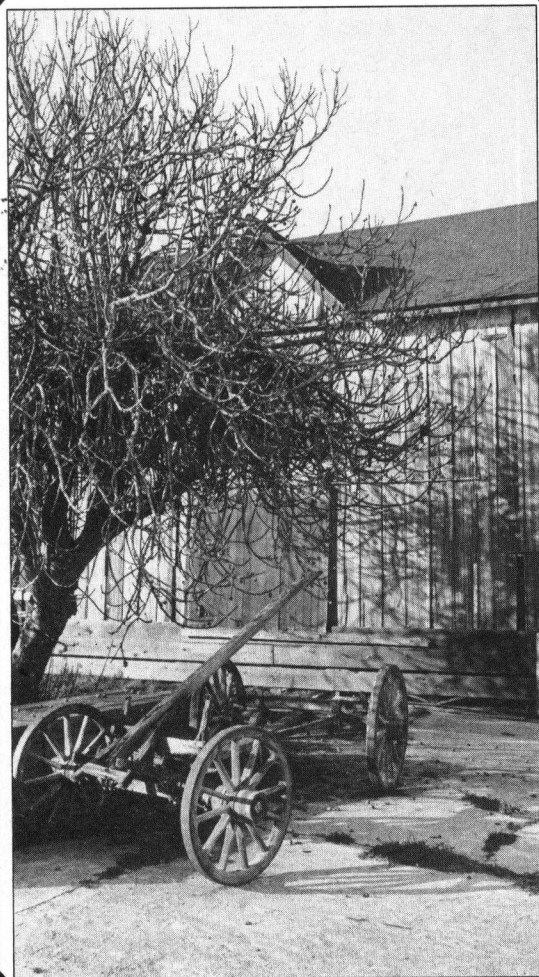
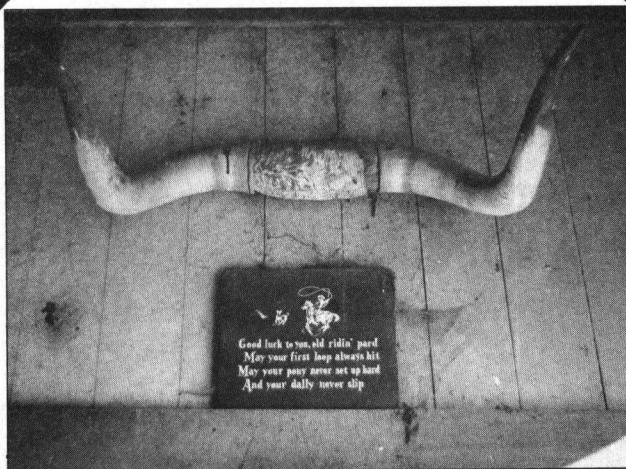


WILDER RANCH:

GREG PIO



GREG PIO



AN HISTORIC TREASURE goes public May 6, when Wilder Ranch officially opens as a state park.

On land once used by Costanoan Indians for hunting and gathering, this century-old dairy has been preserved through the tireless efforts of many strong-willed people in the Adobe Coalition, the Friends of Wilder and the state Parks Department.

The ranch buildings tell a tale of California's growth, from the Bolcoff Adobe (built in either 1781 or 1841, depending on which tale you choose to believe) to the Pelton Wheel, which enabled the dairy to become the first electrically-lit location in Santa Cruz County.

The first non-native settlers on the land that would become Wilder Ranch were John Bolcoff and his wife, Candida Castro. Known as Rancho Refugio, the land was granted by the Spanish government to Joaquin Castro, who passed it to his three daughters. Jacinta Castro became a nun and later was mother superior of the Benicia Convent. Maria de los Angeles Castro married Joseph L. Majors, Santa Cruz County's first treasurer, who challenged Bolcoff's claim on the land and lost in a ruling handed down directly from California's first governor, Alvarado.

Bolcoff was a Russian sailor who jumped ship in the Monterey Bay in 1815. A naturalized Mexican citizen, he ran the Santa Cruz Mission and was alcalde (mayor) three times. Among his contributions were the county's first jail and an ordinance prohibiting liquor sales after 8 p.m. Bolcoff modified the governor's land grant for Refugio, erasing his wife's name and entering his own, acting as both judge and recipient in the matter.

The Bolcoff children sold the land to Mormon settler Moses Meder, who in turn sold a third of it to Joseph Majors, the first man to build a dairy in the vicinity.

The Wilder era was born in 1871, when Deloss D. Wilder and Levi K. Baldwin bought 4,030 acres of Refugio. Wilder had come west from Connecticut in 1853. He mined in Placer County, then operated a chicken ranch in Marin County before coming to Santa Cruz.

In 1885, the partnership dissolved, and the two men amicably divided the property by sight. Wilder got the prime land, 2,330 acres of it, and built his dairy.

ALBUM OF A NEW PARK

by Rick Hildreth



Wilder butter was known across the nation as the finest butter available. He sweetened it with sugar, which led to its success. An avid technologist, he ran all the dairy and farm equipment he could from power derived from Meder Creek, which he dammed to run the Pelton wheel. His son, Melvin D. Wilder became an electrical engineer and added a dynamo that provided power for incandescent lighting in all the buildings, as well as three carbon-arc lights to illuminate the grounds at night, allowing cows to be milked as early as 4 a.m.

Health regulations instituted during the 1930s prevented the dairy from turning a profit, and beef cattle were introduced to the ranch in 1937.

The land was leased out in parcels for Brussels sprout and strawberry growing. Melvin Wilder and his brother Deloss R. raised rodeo horses as a hobby on the property.

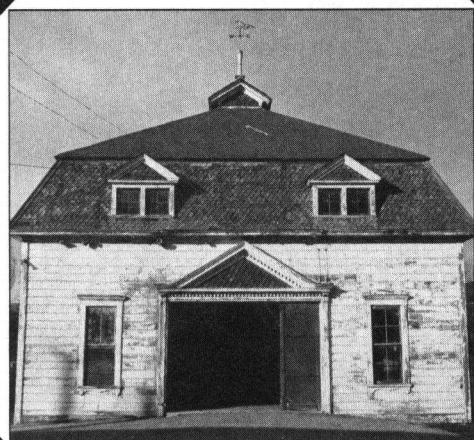
Granite Cement Company took a 40-year lease on 300 acres of the property for a sand plant in 1959, and the plant is still going strong, although it's isolated from the new public park.

Land values and changes in tax laws caused the Wilders to suffer increasing losses on the property each year. In 1945, the property tax was \$5,000. In 1968, the tax was \$28,000, and the total income made from the land was \$50,000. In 1970, the income hadn't changed, but the tax was \$80,000.

An investment firm bought the property in 1969, and major development was planned. A mere two miles from the Santa Cruz city limit, visions of housing and shopping developments — even a golf course — danced in capitalists' heads.

The environmentally-conscious 1970s scuttled developers' plans. The existence of rare snowy plovers and other concerns caused the Coastal Commission to prevent development. The state bought the land in 1974.

Efforts by the Adobe Coalition, the Monterey Bay Natural History Association, the Friends of Wilder and Jim Fife of the Parks Department led to the development of the new park. □



OPENING FESTIVITIES HERALD HISTORIC OCCASION

THE OPEN HOUSE festivities on May 6-7 will have something for everyone: Square dancing, a petting zoo, goat milking, demonstrations of farming and dairy techniques and machinery, blacksmiths and tours of the renovated structures, including the Victorian mansion. A 1930 Model A Ford and a 1916 Dodge touring sedan will be on display, and horse-and-carriage and wagon rides will be given. And this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Future plans for Wilder Ranch include converting the Ranch House into an environmental living study center, where schoolchildren from around the state would learn what farm life is all about, said Renie Gallagher, president of Friends of Wilder. Within five years, she hopes a creamery can be built, so the students can make the famous and long-gone Wilder butter (the family has provided the recipe).

The greatest value of this new history center is to remind us all of what came before, said Gallagher.

"We've got to realize milk doesn't come from cartons," she added.

After this open house, the park will be open to the public on a regular basis.

Wilder Ranch is located on the coast side of Highway One, some two miles north of Santa Cruz. For more information, call 662-0178. □