

The Home Ranch of the Cowells

By Josephine Clifford McCrackin

[Editor's Note: The N-word is used in this article as the name of a dog.]

The Gate through which we drove had been put up in 1854, and every pointed paling brought from San Francisco, together with the posts supporting the arch which even now proclaims the grandeur of the place to which it led. Not that it was at all picturesquely dilapidated, any more than was the house, which had been the home, those early years, of Harry Cowell, one of the very largest of the large landholders of California throughout the State, who still had a fondness for this, his country home, near Santa Cruz. The son now living, S. H. Cowell, spends about one-half his time here, year in, year out, living in the same house, modernized only as far as necessary, but in the same state of stupendous completeness as the entrance gate.

I had long wanted to see "the old Cowell place;" I had heard so much of the gardens and the grounds and the ancient Monterey Cypress there, but was always told that though I might walk to the place, I should never be able to walk over it, which I realized while driving over it in a very comfortable carriage.

Any one familiar with the growth of trees in California can imagine the size of the English walnuts forming the avenue from the gate to the wide circle of Monterey cypress, and the size of these latter trees. Those who have not seen these cypress can never picture to themselves the great, straight trunks of the trees, about which fluted columns are clustered that reach up into the branches, where these rise tall and dark from the shaft. Nearer to the house, the cypress avenue opens upon a view of the building, one-storied, dark red, with wide veranda and windows wide and deep. Roses, fifty years old; the Passion vine of Mission times; a jessamine that has learned to climb by force of circumstances, all these droop and sway from the branches of locust, elm and other New England trees that seem to hold house and garden in their shelter. And here is something else from New England, a water-lily in the fountain basin, the particular *Nymphaea* that has the light pink fragrant blossom; and it came from Wrentham, Massachusetts, from the old, old Cowell home, which still belongs to this conservative family. In the center of this fountain basin, where ferns and foliage plants are always kept moist and cool by the drip and the spray, is a most remarkable growth—a young Monterey cypress, which has seeded itself and is pushing its way up among a lot of other things that were never planted, but grew there at their own sweet will.



The Entrance to the residence on the Cowell home ranch.

Though I was a complete stranger at the place, the dogs seemed to take me on trust. Wonder, the big water spaniel, and Hector, a lovely satin-haired Irish setter, quite deaf and almost blind with age; but Nigger, the watch dog at the stable, said: "How do I know but what you want some of our fine horses?" So I said: "Never mind, Nig.; here are lots of things to welcome me."

For though I was greeted at the front door, two fat little lambs came around from the kitchen door; they were orphans, and they never lost sight of each other; and a fat, black cat came, and a fat, short-tailed yellow cat, and pretty soon they all lay down together, the nearest approach to the lion and the lamb, for Buffy may have been the descendant of a wild cat.

Hector, the Irish setter, immediately took possession of the seat I had occupied in the buggy, and before it was fairly on the way again he was fast asleep. In this way he drove all over the ranch, and to the farthest outposts at Felton, well aware that he was carefully looked after and protected.

The day was fine; we were in no hurry to go in, and I was out to discover what I could. A peacock! The most magnificent, proudest, most graceful bird I ever saw. Yes, graceful; no lady could have managed her six-yard-long train better, and his train must have been fully that length, and of the most gorgeous, green-gold shimmering colors that ever were, with a neck and breast of the rarest blue under the heavens. How I did want to see his tail spread! It was said that the vain bird would go into a trance when he spread his tail and you held a looking glass before him. Yet you could not help but respect the bird for his domestic habits; he sleeps every night on the same locust tree, a main stem bending clear over like a branch, and the places of his wife and the four pea-chicks are beside him, rain or moonshine. Their daytime residence is in the orchard, where there is most always bloom of some kind among the trees, oranges, almonds, lemons, cherries, peaches, olives, quince and pears.

But they are not the only residents there, gold pheasants, silver pheasants, Japanese importations, beautiful black Minorca chickens, white turkeys, young and old, numberless wild birds, robins, larks, anything that will feed with the chickens; though the flock of tame quail generally feed with the pigeons in the other corral, where the trout basin is situated. And every step or two you see another horse, one of the fine carriage horses, either taken out of a buggy or harnessed into a buggy, or tethered for a bite of grass, or led for exercise; and all these fine-grained, fine-strained horses are pets, and Mr. Cowell calls them all by name.

I had seen so much of this part of the ranch that while we were taking lunch in front of the open fire-place, above which a niche is let into the wall higher up, I ventured to make a suggestion to Mr. Cowell. I said: "The interior of your house, or this part of it, is in Mission tints; that niche is certainly a reminder of Mission days; then why not take down the large vase and put a small statue in place of it, the statue of some saint, of course."

At the time I had Saint Francis in my mind, who called the birds his little brothers of the air; but when I had seen the rest of the ranch, or a greater portion of it, I came to the conclusion it should be Saint Anthony, for he takes care of beasts as well as birds; and though Mr. Cowell is not a saint, nor even a Catholic, he said, simply: "Every living creature wants a home;" and every living creature for miles around drifts to that ranch for food and shelter, whether wild or tame.

Before leaving the house for our drive, Mr. Cowell laid before me a book, day-book or entry-book, I believe it is called, in clean, clear handwriting, his father's, and he turned to the day and month we were writing, but it was in 1860.

Beautiful though the ranch is with its long stretches of green fields and meadows, its hill plateaux covered with great, spreading live-oaks, its mountain sides o'ertopped with redwoods, its glens and canyons filled with laurel and madrone, ever and again there rises a sheer, threatening wall of rock suddenly from out among waving trees and gurgling springs, or a deep fissure drops suddenly hundreds of feet beside the road you are passing over. This, strange to say, is where the lime rock was taken out in years gone by, and if you keep your eyes open, you will see some of the ancient lime kilns, more picturesque now than while the fires were hot in them, for redwood and madrones now grow from their top.

To be sure, there are still lime-kilns of that kind on this vast estate; but I knew there was quite a modern institution at their Rincon kiln, where oil is burned, and this Mr. Cowell had promised to show us at the end of our drive. But there are so many things new to me: the factories, mills, blacksmith shops, on the place; the vegetable gardens for the three hundred odd men to be fed from; the abattoir, the corrals, the pastures; the dams with their colts; the cows with their calves; the sheep in care of their herder; and one band without herder, the fat porkers ready for the oven.

Then come the heavy teams meeting us, enormous, heavy horses, six of them always, all bred on the ranch drawing enormous loads. I know these well; many a word of praise had their drivers had from me, an officer of the Humane Society, on the streets of Santa Cruz, though I did not know Cowell was the owner. Mule teams, too, and pack-mules, sleek and fat, and working hard.



Photo of grazing Angora goats

Across, on a rising hillside, a glistening snow seems spread. "Fred Swanton's lawn-mowers," I am told; the flock of Angora goats that keep the grass down on the new Casa del Rey Golf Links, at the Country Club home.

But it is not this I am looking at; oh, no. The golf grounds lie away down at our feet, though it is said there is a superb view even from there. What, then, must it be from here, so many hundred feet higher that the golfers below look like ants, and the golf links like a child's play-ground. All this below is of the Cowell land, too; but the most sublime point is this, where the carriage stops. I thought I had seen all of Santa Cruz, separately and in one, on different occasions, but I see it now for the first time as a whole. Now, really, I

don't want to boast of Santa Cruz because it is my home, but only because it is truly a grand sight. A large, widespread, picturesque city, white, with strips of green forest in its outskirts, and the broad, blue, sun-smiling ocean enfolding it, till the green hills and the dark blue mountains of the Santa Cruz Range, come down to the Bay of Monterey in the east, to hold the City of the Holy Cross in their embrace.

Then we drive on, for miles, it seems to me, to Rincon, quite a village of workmen's houses with the boarding house in the center, across the track from the formidable-looking plant of tank houses, oil reservoirs, and I don't know what-all on this side of the railroad track. I heard the noises long before we got here, but I said nothing: I only tried to think, "Who's afraid?" Then we enter this most modern-constructed of kilns, and all sorts of blazing, super-heated, red-hot wonders pass before my bewildered eyes.

"Now, we'll go above," says Mr. Cowell, holding out his hand to help me up a sort of iron staircase, no doubt quite safe to mount.

But I shrink back. "N-n-no, th-thank you, not to-day," I quaver; "I'm a little nervous."

"Oh, you're afraid," he says, quite dispassionately. "Very well, you can look at it from a distance."

And another ton of lime rock being dumped into one of the cylinders above, with the rush and the crash of an earthquake, just then, I get down and out as quickly as I know how.

Then moving away to a convenient distance from this modern imitation of a—we will say Biblical place of eternal punishment, I sum up my impression of this wonder of our century in the words: "A Hades in three stories; and since I have been through a part of it myself, I mean to be very careful after this how I consign my worst enemy to eternal torment in that hottest of all places."

Sources

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