

January 19, 1971

RANDOM NOTES ON THE COWELL FAMILY AND RANCH

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Henry Cowell (1819-1903) and his brother John (1809-1899) came to California from Wrentham, Massachusetts, the family home town. They arrived prior to 1850 -- 1849 is the probable year. The family was moderately wealthy. The brothers went into the drayage business in San Francisco and soon expanded their trips to include Stockton and the gold fields. John returned to Massachusetts because of ill health.

Henry Cowell bought a ranch in San Rafael (the first of his extensive land holdings) and this is where several of his children were born. His wife was Harriet E. Carpenter (1822-1900). They were married in 1854. Their children were:

Roland (or possibly Raymond) Cowell	d. 1858	(born 1857)
Isabella Marion Cowell	d. 1950	(born 1857 ??)
Ernest Victor Cowell	d. 1911	(born 2-7-1858)
Samuel Henry (Harry) Cowell	d. 1955	(born 1861 or '62)
Helen Edith Cowell	d. 1932	(born 1866 ??)
Sarah Elizabeth Cowell	d. 1903	(youngest child)
(also referred to as Sarah Agnes)		

The original portion of the Cowell Ranch was owned by Issac E. Davis and Albion P. Jordan. It was purchased by them in 1849. In 1865 Henry Cowell bought out Jordan's share and the company became Davis and Cowell. In 1888 Cowell purchased the Davis holdings. The company was known as the Henry Cowell Company until incorporation in 1899 when its name was changed to Henry Cowell Lime and Cement Company.

The yellow house near the entrance to the campus was originally built by Jordan. When Henry Cowell moved his family in, he built a sizable addition in the front. It remained the Cowell family home until 1897 when the family moved to San Francisco. (Some newspaper accounts put the date at 1879, but George Cardiff, for many years the local business manager for the Cowell Company, was certain it was 1897.) The Cowell children attended the old Bay View school. The only child who married was Ernest; he had no children.

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Following is a list of the lime kilns operated on the Cowell Ranch:

Adams kilns (also known as S&A and Upper kilns) - located near Wilder Creek. Said to have been opened in 1850 or '51. Closing date not yet known -- probably shortly after the turn of the century.

H.C. Kilns - located west of the family home, (i.e. the ones near the cookhouse). The quarry originally used for these kilns stretched along the right-hand side of the road opposite the cookhouse. The kilns were opened in 1851. They were later fed rock from the lower quarry on the University property. (The lower quarry is the big quarry in the meadow just to the west of Hagar Drive.) A horse-powered tram line carried the rock down from the lower quarry to the kilns. The kilns were most likely abandoned around 1920.

Bonny Doon kilns - located near the present Bonny Doon store. They were opened in 1900 and operated a very short time.

IXL kilns - at Felton. I have seen conflicting dates concerning these kilns. They were apparently opened in 1870, yet the Cowell Company is said to have run them only from 1903 to 1908. It is possible that the Cowell Company purchased them in 1903 from the IXL Company, but this is only a supposition on my part. A barrel-stave mill was also located near Felton.

Rincon kilns - on the San Lorenzo River. They were operated from 1908 to 1946. The quarry that is now the amphitheater on campus provided the lime rock for these kilns. The Rincon kilns were opened up because a railroad line could be used to haul oil for fuel. In earlier years 8' lengths of wood had been used, but when the wood supply began to diminish, it became uneconomical to haul oil into the IXL kilns, thus the Rincon kilns were opened.

The following information about the operation of the kilns was given to Harold Richey, the late manager of Provenzano Bros., by Frank George, the Cowell ranch manager, shortly before Mr. George died:

It took 325 tons of selected lime rock to fill a kiln. An arch was first constructed from the rock; the arch went the length of the kiln and the fire was placed under it. After the arch was constructed, the balance of the rock was placed on top until the kiln was filled. After the burning, 135 to 150 tons of lime remained. When wood was used it took 140 cords of 8' wood to complete the burning and the total time needed was 6 days. When oil was used it took 1500 gallons and the burning time was 4 1/2 days. An even heat had to be kept; the temperature was somewhere between 1500 and 2400 degrees.

The size of the rock determined to some extent the time needed to "cook" it. Since no chemical determinations were run in those days, the men judged whether or not the rock was done by its appearance. At night the rock was transparent; in the day it had a yellow-golden color when cooked. The rock did not decompose into powder; it remained in solid chunks and was placed in the barrels that way. The lime powder one sees today has undergone a grinding process before being bagged.

After the lime had been burned it was allowed to cool from 36 to 48 hours. It took 2 to 3 days for the men to draw out the burned lime.

I have not been able to find out how many men were employed in the ranch's heyday. As late as 1925 there were 30 to 35 men; about 15 were located down near the ranch headquarters and used the University Cookhouse and 15 or 20 were located at Rincon where there was another cookhouse. Each cookhouse had a cook and a helper. After the lime production was stopped, the ranch continued as a cattle ranch. The University Cookhouse continued in operation until around 1950. When the ranch employees got down to around 8 or 10, the cookhouse was closed and the men were paid more money to compensate for the lack of board.

Henry Cowell (the father) was known as a "lime" man; I have been told that he had little interest in agricultural holdings and bought mainly lands that had industrial potential, e.g. his Santa Cruz ranch. His son Harry, though, was always a "cattle" man. He developed fine herds and also (on another ranch) bred race horses. He loved to ride through his ranch lands and considered a herd of fine cattle one of the most beautiful sights on earth. He was also devoted to oxen and kept his oxtteams long after others in the county had switched to horse or motor power. He finally changed over to horse power and it wasn't until 1925 that he purchased the first truck to be used on the ranch.

Harry Cowell was also a conservationist. He did not allow the annual burn-offs on the ranch that had been the custom until his brother Ernest's death. He had ideas of making this a conservation area, but found that trespassing hunters made this impossible. Around 1925 he imported a herd of elk (they were kept near Pogonip) but hunters succeeded in killing them all within a few years. He next had a herd of buffalo shipped in from a government preserve in Montana. They thrived for a year or two but then got a disease that eventually killed the whole herd. He also had bobwhite quail shipped in but hunters took care of them in short order.

Regarding ranch buildings, the blacksmith shop was used as late as the fifties and several of the cabins on the ridge across from the cookhouse were used as late as the fifties. The building in front of the kilns was known as the cooperage and a barrel-head mill was located next to the stone house. For years hazel wands gathered on the ranch were used as the barrel hoops. Men were paid \$1.00 or \$1.25 per thousand for gathering them. There was always a pigsty in front of the cookhouse (the pigs were the garbage disposal) and a meat house was at the south end of the cookhouse. The slaughter house is still standing on a rise to the south of the lower quarry. Roughly one steer a week (a very tough one) would be killed there and used to feed the men.