

If Trees Could Talk

The Useful Tan Bark Oak

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Staff Writer

It's an oak but it doesn't look much like one . . . the tan oak tree played an important part in the development of Santa Cruz County's historic leather business.

Tan bark oaks in this county are said to have as much as 17 per cent tannin, a product used for tanning leather in early days. The tan bark oak is one of about 60 different kinds of trees found in the county. There are about 100 varieties in the state, according to authorities.

In the old days, starting with the Spaniards who raised cattle for their hides, leather

tanning was big business here. Tan oak workmen "stripped" the trees of bark, or sometimes felled them, working with special stripping tools for the former operation. The bark was cut into four-foot lengths and stacked up to dry where it was harvested, Fred Wagner recalls.

Fred, who is almost 93, remembers well the interesting bark operation. His father, John Wagner, operated a leather tannery in Scotts Valley from 1863 to 1873, in partnership with Robert Anderson and Gottlieb Zeigler. It was located near Lockwood Lane junction, and had been built by Paul Sweet, another local

pioneer.

That was slightly before Fred's observing days, but he remembers other tan bark operations.

"The hills were full of tan bark oaks," he says. "Up above Davenport there were a lot. A man ran a six-mule team down regularly, loaded with tan bark for the tannery on River Street." Joe Majors from "up the coast" ran a pack team for years, too.

In the woods, the piles of dried tan bark were loaded onto pack mules that carried it out to "landings," where it was picked up by regular teams of horses pulling large wagons. The teams hauled it to the local tannery, also up

to Redwood City where a large tannery was located.

At the tanneries, the bark was ground up and put into vats with water to make the "liquor" used in tanning the hides.

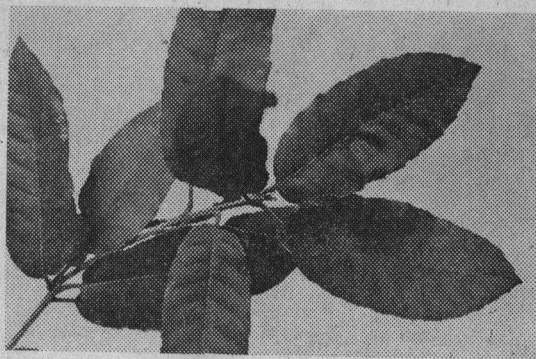
Fred also recalls his father had a "horse-power" grinder for the bark. The horse was attached to a pole and walked in a circle, causing a set of gears to revolve which put a grinder into motion.

Today all this has changed and hides are tanned chemically. No longer are the tan bark oaks felled or stripped.

And only old timers like Fred remember when they were.



Fred Wagner holds a piece of tan bark he saved because of its unusual thickness. The tan oak, *Lithocarpus densiflorus*, grows widely in Santa Cruz County and played an important part in early-day economics. At right, tan oaks along a road in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park near Felton. Above, closeup of the leaf.



Coffee for Candidate

Mr. Roger Harvey and Mrs. Lawrence Edler are giving a coffee Tuesday from 12:30 to 2 p.m. at 102 Northrop Place for Dr. Eugene Johnson, incumbent city

school board member seeking reelection.

Santa Cruzans are invited to attend the coffee and meet Dr. Johnson.