



BULLETIN

Fall 2021

Mount Diablo State Park's Centennial 1921-2021

A View from the West

Beverly Lane

Mount Diablo's foothills and summit have been enjoyed by people for centuries. Bay Miwok Tatcan Indians probably lived in the Rock City and Live Oak campground area for at least part of the year and annual autumn festivals drew native peoples from long distances. The summit was a powerful, sacred site into which only religious initiates were allowed. The area is still sacred to Californian tribal descendants.



Mexican Ranchos were granted in the 1830s and 1840s on all sides of the mountain, encroaching on native homelands. One Concord rancho, Monte del Diablo, had a name which later explorers affixed to the mountain itself.

Settlers after the Gold Rush hiked, hunted and picnicked all over the mountain. Bret Harte, who tutored the four sons of Abner Bryant in Tassajara Valley, probably hiked there in 1856 with his charges. His 1863 Atlantic Monthly article, "The Legend of Monte Diablo," is well known. Roads, a hotel, an observatory, a historic country club and a beacon were built and excursions and car races to the top were documented in newspaper articles.

Leaders in the San Ramon Valley and County promoted recognition for Mount Diablo as a state park even though it was entirely privately owned. There was interest in creating a state park in 1911, according to the minute books of the Danville Grange No. 85. The son of Danville's Presbyterian minister, Robert Noble Burgess purchased the enormous Oakwood Park Stock Farm, the summit and other mountain land. He promoted the Mt. Diablo Park Club and multiple visits to the summit, beginning in 1912.

The first dedication 1921



On May 11, 1921, the Danville Grange Worthy Master Charles J. Wood named a small committee to work on the Mount Diablo Park project. State Senator William R. Sharkey (former executive director of the Contra Costa County Development Association) successfully introduced legislation which created 630 acres around the summit as the Mt. Diablo State Park and Game Refuge in 1921. It became one of seven state parks created prior to the establishment of the State Park system.

An estimated 500-1000 people celebrated the creation of the State Park during a June 19, 1921 dedication sponsored by the Mt. Diablo Parlor of Native Sons of Martinez (see photo prior page). There were speeches and music at the Diablo County Club at 11:00 am and a basket lunch with refreshments provided by the Danville Grange. Next came a climb to the top and a 3:00 pm dedication at the summit. The weather was ideal and this picture shows the members of the Martinez Band and a large crowd at the event.

Visitors still had to pay a toll to private landowners to get to the summit. During the twenties the Mt. Diablo State Park Commission, the Grange, a group called the Mt. Diablo State Park League and many others promoted enlarging the Park and removing the tolls. The State Park system was established in 1927 and a State Park Commission replaced various local Commissions.

According to his diary, young George Wood of the Wood Ranch in Sycamore Valley worked on this project in several ways. On March 19, 1928, he wrote:

Got up early and left for S. F. Had Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Clark sign letters to State Board of Park Commissioners asking for enlargement of Mt. Diablo State Park. Took the letters to Hotel Witcomb where meeting was held by the Com. to hear proposals from all over Cal. A great many were submitted, and meeting lasted till 5 p.m. I presented the Mt. Diablo program for S.R.V. Chamber of Com. Many people there. Returned home this eve.

He was involved in surveying potential sites for the Park, preparing maps, getting signatures and organizing Sierra Club hikes on the mountain. Hazel and Ed Weister frequently attended the same meetings. She was active in the Danville Women's Club which supported an expanded Park.

A second dedication 1931

Finally, success was achieved and commemorated in 1931. A huge celebration was planned for April 26 which included a parade beginning in Martinez.

Wood wrote:

Maevie & I were guests of honor at Mt. Diablo Park Dedication. We were transported in the Parade from Martinez to Diablo Country Club, and were to have gone to Rock City where a program was arranged. Heavy rain forced abandonment of that part, so parade broke up at the Country Club. We were among the guests at dinner there in the evening given by Contra Costans Associated - Ralph Wight, Chairman, Mr. W. E. Colby Speaker. Gov. Rolph was present for the parade.

From 630 acres in 1921, to 1400 acres in 1931, the State Park has grown to 20,000 acres today. It is the linchpin for regional, city and water district parks and preserves totaling 120,000 acres. This iconic mountain became a park because of the vision and hard work of people throughout Contra Costa County and beyond. We'll celebrate the 1921 park establishment this year and, in 2031, plan for another commemoration.

Major Sources: Seth Adams, History of Mount Diablo (a chronology from Save Mt. Diablo); Contra Costa Gazette June 24, 25, 1921; Danville Grange Minutes, 1911, 1921; Edna Purcell, History of Contra Costa County; George Wood, Diaries, 1927-1931.



Editor's Corner: Three Years in California, 1846-1849, Rev. Walter Colton



I love to read original sources, particularly involving California history. One of the most engaging and informative works is the journal kept by the Rev. Walter Colton, who was appointed Alcalde of

Monterey at the beginning of the Mexican-American War in 1846. For three years, this Yale-educated protestant minister watched and reported on the momentous changes occurring in California. His keen observations, written in a witty and poetic style, are a joy to read, and provide valuable insights into the California lifestyle which was just then receding into history. The war, followed by the Gold Rush, quickly followed by statehood, spelled the end of the romantic era of the Californios, and it was the Rev. Colton who viewed it all. But the Reverend says it best:

California will be no more what she has been: the events of a few years have carried her through the progressive changes of a century. She has sprung at once from the shackles of colonial servitude to all the advantages and dignities of a sovereign state.

As Alcalde of Monterey, Colton combined the powers of a judge, mayor, and chief of police. His jurisdiction covered over 300 miles and his decisions could not be appealed. This almost unlimited power disturbed him, but his fairness, kindness, and wisdom kept his power in check. As he said: “Better to err a furlong with mercy than a fathom with cruelty. Unmerited punishment never yet reformed its subject; to suppose it, is a libel on the human soul.”

On July 28, 1846, Commodore Stockton of the Pacific Fleet, informed the reverend (he was a naval chaplain) that he was appointed Alcalde of Monterey. This was totally unexpected: “I had dreamed in the course of my life . . . of the thousand things I might become, but it never entered my visions that I should succeed to the dignity of a Spanish alcalde.” The journal that he kept has lifted him from a minor historical footnote to a well-known

chronicler of one of the most important periods in California history. It is my intention to include in each newsletter some of the alcalde's observations, space permitting. With that said, let's begin with some comments on the commencement of the war with Mexico, and the reaction of the Californio:

The event was wholly unexpected by the Californians, and struck the public heart with the deepest surprise . . . The people were more astounded than indignant, and quite as intent over problems of preservation as measures of resistance.

*At a meeting held in Monterey . . . the question of throwing the territory under the protection of England . . . was excitingly discussed. But this proposition received its quietus under the successful raillery of Don Raphael, of Monterey. ‘Our object’ said the witty counselor, ‘is to preserve our country; but she is gone, -- California is lost to us; and this proposal to invoke the protection of England, is only to seek another **owner**. The redress is worthy of the market-woman: a dog had robbed her hamper of a leg of mutton, and she sent another dog more powerful after him to get it away; when asked what good that would do her, she replied, it would be some satisfaction to see the **first** dog deprived of the stolen leg. And so it is with us; the mutton is gone, and a choice of the dog only remains: others may prefer the bull-dog, but I prefer the regular bound; he has outstripped the other in the chase, and so let him have the game.*

The coming of the war with Mexico caused varied reactions to the inhabitants, including outright rebellion against the American soldiers and sailors, but some admirable qualities were revealed:

Though a quasi war exists, all the amenities and courtesies of life are preserved; your person, life, and liberty, are as sacred at the hearth of the Californian as they would be at your own fireside. He will never betray you; the rights of hospitality, in his generous judgment, require him to peril his own life in defence of yours. He may fight you on the field, but in his family, you may dance with his daughters, and he himself will wake the waltzing string.

Speaking of waltzing, and the Californian's love of music and the fandango, Colton has this to say:

Nearly all the houses in Monterey are of one story, with a corridor. The walls are built of adobes, or sun-baked brick, with tiled roofs. The centre is occupied by a large hall, to which the dining-room and sleeping apartments seem mere appurtenances. Every thing is in subordination to the hall, and this is designed and used for dancing. It has a wood floor, and springs nighly to the step of those who are often greeted in the whirl of their amusements by the risen sun. The dance and a dashing horse are the two objects which overpower all others in interest with the Californians. (to be continued)

1862 Election Campaign Reveals Limits to John Swett's Progressive Outlook

John Greitzer



John Swett

While skimming newspaper clippings from the *Contra Costa Gazette* of the early 1860s in our archives, I came across a column from 1862 supporting John

Swett for election as state superintendent of education. The column referred to a racial controversy concerning Swett and defended Swett from the accusations.

This led me to further research this incident in our other collections at the History Center.

Swett, a schoolteacher in San Francisco, won the 1862 state superintendent election handily and went on to greatly improve the state's young public school system during his five years in office. However, Swett was dealing within the constraint of racial inequality among school children that existed at the time and he chose not to push those boundaries.

During Swett's campaign, in August 1862, critics accused him of allowing "Negro" children into the Rincon Grammar School in San Francisco where he was a teacher (admitting non-white children into white schools was illegal at the time). His chief opponent for state school superintendent, Reverend O.P. Fitzgerald, distributed fliers throughout the state depicting African American children in a classroom with white children, implying that Swett was an abolitionist and would integrate California's schools. This campaign was aimed at the significant contingent of Confederate sympathizers in California's population.

Swett wrote a response in his own defense and had it published in some newspapers in September 1862. Summarized in the *Contra Costa Gazette* article, his

response was that it was another teacher who had allowed the two African American girls into the school, not him. When he saw the two girls in class, he persuaded the head of the school to expel them. The *Gazette* declared: "Mr. Swett is not now and has not heretofore been in favor of the admission of black children into the same public schools as white children." In the *Stockton Independent* of September 1, 1862, Swett wrote that "No one but a fool would advocate the mixture of whites and blacks in school, and none but idiots will believe the charges." The campaign tactic against Swett failed, and he won the 1862 election with 58 percent of the vote. He won the vote on the strength of his growing reputation throughout the state as an effective educator, and strong support from teachers and school officials.

Swett made his reputation by fiercely lobbying the Legislature for more funding for public education (including the state's first school tax), opening up more educational programs for girls and night school for adults, setting up ongoing training programs for teachers and raising their salaries, and getting schools built in every county. Legislators sometimes remarked how combative and persuasive Swett could be on these issues. His passion and commitment evidently didn't extend to integrating schools, something that was not legally required until well into the 20th century.

He had visited schools for African American children in southern California – the public schools were separated by race at the time -- and wrote about how poorly these schools were equipped, but did not advocate for integration in public schools.

Swett bought a ranch in Alhambra Valley near Martinez in 1881 at the urging of his friend John Muir, and eventually retired there after his career was over. He died at the home in 1913.

The racial controversy and Swett's response to it serve as yet another reminder that some of our most admired historical figures had faults and limitations that are less well known than their successes.

Note: Aside from the *Stockton Independent* quotation, all of the information in this article is from our archives at the History Center. Specific sources: *Contra Costa Gazette* Newspaper Clippings 1862-64, in the Dorothy L. Mutnick Special Collection; Obituary Files, John Swett; Biography Files, John Swett; and two books in our library: John Swett: The Biography of an Educational Pioneer by William G. Carr, PhD, and John Swett: California's Frontier Schoolmaster by Nicholas C. Polos.

Editor's Note: *The use of original, primary sources is the bedrock of good history. The CCCHS History Center is the largest archive of such sources in the County.*

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Please consider CCCHS in your estate planning. It is simple, and any gift is tax deductible. We have a Schwab account that makes it easier for members and others to donate shares of stock to the Society, a good way to make a year-end or other contribution.

Want to get more involved?

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is looking for a few good men or women to join our Board of Directors, or to join our band of dedicated volunteers. We are particularly in need of someone with technical computer skills to help us out with our computer network and website. Other than the monthly board meeting, the time you donate is pretty much up to you. So if you love local history and want to be a creative member of the largest historical archive in the County, give us a call, at 925-229-1042, or email our Executive Director, Michael McCarron, at: [<director@cocohistory.org>](mailto:director@cocohistory.org)

Steve Weir Honored



Contra Costa County recently named their new Clerk-Recorder-Elections building in honor of Stephen L. Weir. Steve was the Clerk-Recorder-Elections Officer for 23 years until his retirement 8 years ago. His prior community leadership included 9 years on the Concord City Council, preceded as a Director of Contra Costa Water District.

Eleven years ago Steve was appointed a member of the Advisory Board of the County Historical Society, where he continues to serve.

Thanks to 2nd vice-president and former board president, John Burgh, for passing along this information regarding an important and well-known member of our local community.
Editor



724 Escobar Street, Martinez, Ca 94553

Place
Stamp
Here

Ballot 2021

Contra Costa County Historical Society Board of Directors

The following candidates are offered for re-election to the Board of Directors. Elected candidates will serve a 3 year term beginning January 1, 2022.

(Vote for up to three)

Write-ins

_____ John Mercurio (incumbent)

_____ Lisa Gorrell (incumbent)

_____ Tara Weber (incumbent)

Your Signature

Printed Name

Please fold this ballot in thirds with the mailing address of the History Center showing.

Tape seam, affix stamp, and mail before November 30, 2021.

*If you receive your Bulletin electronically, please print out ballot and follow the instructions above.
Thank You!*



From the President

A Blessing is a curse then a blessing again.

More than a year ago, we heard that the county library system was divesting itself of some special books and other material such as clipping files. These books were kept in the vault for reference use only and are rare and/or very old. All covered some aspect of California history and culture. Our former executive director, Priscilla Couden worked patiently with the library staff and after many months, the books were delivered to the History Center along with shelving. We considered this a blessing until they arrived and filled up just about every available space in the History Center. Then it seemed like a curse as our dedicated volunteers went through them carefully and realized that hundreds of them are “out of field.” That is, their subjects are not directly related to Contra Costa County history. We don’t have the luxury to keep them, since we are struggling to accommodate our growing collection of material related to the history of our county.

Part of the arrangement with the county is that we are allowed to divest ourselves of any volumes that we feel we cannot use. Some of them found new homes with our volunteers and other local non-profit groups. In August, we participated in a street fair in downtown Martinez to sell these surplus books. We had cloth bags printed with our logo, sold them for five dollars and the purchasers were allowed to fill them with as many books as they could cram in. One young teacher from a local school bought and filled several bags to help him in a big way to develop lesson plans for his new fourth grade California History class.

Meanwhile, I had an idea that many of the books to be sold were actually quite valuable. So, I picked out a dozen or so and brought them to an old acquaintance in Concord, Lynn Kuehl, owner of Berkshire Books. He found that initial batch intriguing and offered to buy most of them for the going rate he pays anyone dropping in to sell books. With a little guidance from him as to what sells, I made several more trips picking out for him collectible books in good condition.

Some of them have typical retail prices of fifty to one hundred dollars! When all was tallied, the sixty to eighty books that he purchased netted the Contra Costa County Historical Society nearly one thousand dollars. And our books will be offered for resale to potential on-line buyers from all over.

Berkshire Books is located at 3480 Clayton Road. Drop in and visit his shop which sells much more than California History books. And allow some time to chat with him. You will be pleased that you did!

Stay tuned as we work to arrange for new opportunities for our members and the general public to purchase the special books that remain.

John Mercurio

From the Executive Director



Claudine Wong, weekend news anchor, general assignment reporter, and host of the

podcast “Bay Area People” for KTVU will be the keynote speaker for the Contra Costa County Historical Society’s Annual General Membership Meeting scheduled for Saturday, January 29, 2022 at the Orinda Masonic Center.



A Bay Area native and Contra Costa County resident, Claudine is an Emmy award-winning journalist who has covered major stories from the terrorist attacks on 9/11 to the wildfires of northern California to the impact of COVID-19 on Bay Area communities.

Claudine will share some of her experiences as a reporter covering the major stories of our times and using the context of the area’s history to create a comprehensive view of the impact both world and local events have in our daily lives.

Michael McCarron

Editor’s Note: *Mark your calendar for this very special event scheduled for this coming January. Stay tuned for more details in the months to come.*



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Mark Your Calendar

- Saturday, November 6** – History Center open 10-2
- Saturday, November 20** – History Center open 10-2
- Saturday, December 4** – History Center open 10-2
- Saturday, December 18** – History Center open 10-2
- History Center closed last 2 weeks of December
- Saturday, January 18** – History Center open 10-2
- Saturday, January 29** – General Membership Event,
Claudine Wong, Speaker, Masonic Lodge, Orinda

Mission Statement

Our Mission is to Preserve, Protect and Provide public access to the records and heritage of Contra Costa County, California.

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