

ELLIOTT RANCH HISTORY

The history of the Elliott Ranch begins with the emigration of John and Eliza Jane Elliott from Ireland, about 1880. John had been raised in a large family that was engaged in raising and grazing cattle in somewhat rocky, hilly country in County Fermanagh, in what is now known as Northern Ireland. The Elliotts came to the Sacramento area because there were Elliott cousins living there.

Some family members remember hearing that John Elliott sold some sheep and thereby made some money, but little is known of the family until they were in Franklin and operating a butcher shop in 1890. According to Walter Castello, who provided much of the Elliott family information, his grandmother was capable of butchering an animal, but it was likely that she did not have much time to help in the shop. Their first child was born in 1881 and their sixth and last child was born in 1890.

Blanche Elliott, John and Eliza's daughter who was born in 1887, was married to Walter Castello. They were the parents of Elliott and John Castello. She remembered growing up in Franklin, and that they had the first bathtub in Franklin. She also told how she cried and cried over losing her playmates when the family moved two and a half miles north on Franklin Boulevard to their new house on the Elliott Ranch. It is this house that was known for many years as the "ranchhouse" of the Elliott Ranch. Blanche did have a new friend, Bess Ehrhardt, from the Henry Ehrhardt family across the road at the place known today as Valley Hi Country Club.

It is not known how much land was owned by the Elliotts at the time they moved to the ranch "headquarters", as a survey map of the whole ranch called it in 1929. The group of buildings was in the far northeast corner of the 5,000-acre, block of land that had been acquired prior to John Elliott's death in 1925. From the profits of buying, fattening, and selling cattle, adjacent land was purchased as it became available. The ranch was cross-fenced into different fields, and some of them were referred to by their former names (e.g., Jacob's Ranch).

The whole cluster of buildings included, in addition to the ranchhouse, two barns (one primarily for hay for horses, saddles and bridles and saddle pads, buggies, then trucks, a line of mangers for tethering several horses at once and another barn for hay storage), a shed with a tool bench, chicken house, slaughterhouse with hoist for hauling up a carcass to butcher it. There were corrals with scales, a pen for weighing several cattle at once and including chutes leading to a "squeezer" that held cattle for branding or spraying or for loading them up a ramp to truck-loading level. Near the main house was a tank house for water supply and a bunkhouse for "hired help" and a car garage and gas pump.

The original ranchhouse was of turn-of-the-century style, two-storied, high-ceilinged, wooden construction, and white. It faced the road, with about 150 feet of lawn running down to the road that had earlier been alfalfa. The house was flanked by large oak trees, and the other buildings that stretched off in a westerly direction, were also guarded by the large oaks. The whole scene was one that was repeated on ranches up and down the Central Valley – though they disappeared when urban expansion came near.

The Elliott ranchhouse was set afire by an electrical short on a dry, windy day in October of 1929. The house was completely destroyed, but the nearby buildings were saved. A World War I style stucco house that had been built for Albert Elliott, who had died of the flu in 1920, was moved a half mile to replace the ranchhouse.

During at least its last quarter-century the Elliott Ranch was primarily engaged in buying so-called "long-yearlings" (steers over one year old) in the fall and pasturing them for about nine months and then selling them, fattened near the beginning of summer. Essentially, they marketed the cattle's growth and the gain from nutrients of the natural pasturage. About 160 acres of land at the far west of the ranch was under irrigation, using water from the canal at the western border of the ranch. These acres were planted with a mixture of clover, rye grass, and other grasses, but most of the ranch was dependent upon the growth

from the annual weather cycle. In one disastrous drought year in the 1930s, the family had to buy cottonseed cake as additional food for the cattle, a necessity that was financially disastrous.

Until around World War II, cattle fattened on the grass of the Elliott Ranch yielded such high-quality meat that they could be sent directly to packinghouses and then to supermarket retail stores. But as the tastes of the consumers changed, and people wanted more tender beef, cattle were sent from the ranch to feed-lots. There they were fed special diets for 30 days or more to “finish” them off and render the meat fatter and more tender.

The departure of the Elliott family from the ownership of the ranch was the result of the expansion of Sacramento’s population and the increase in land values that followed. Sacramento County appraised all land anew and brought it up to modern values. At the values talked of in the late 1950’s, the land taxes would have increased so greatly that the annual tax on the Elliott Ranch would have been more than the gross profit from the cattle operation. The County had outgrown that kind of agriculture. The remaining family members had neither the capital nor the knowledge nor the desire to try to use the land in other ways. In 1961 the ranch was sold to people who were in the real estate business and engaged in subdividing and home building. They were able to support, through their other operations, holding the land for more than 30 years until it could be developed.

Addendum:

Berkeley, California, March 2, 2000

I have had conversations with brother Jack (“John” outside the family) and cousin Bea (Beatrice Elliott Foulks, daughter of Albert Elliott, who was the youngest child of Eliza Jane and John Elliott. Together we three, mean age 80 next month, are the total grandchildren from that marriage.) I think we all wish we had spent more time discussing early family history with our elders when we had the opportunity. From what we recalled and from my own experiences at the ranch, I hope this is enough material for the purposes of the Elk Grove Unified School District.

Personal, pedagogical note:

When I first heard of the idea of naming schools for ranches I was not enthusiastic about the idea. But I have come around to thinking that it is a useful idea. In thinking about all the schools I have known, almost all named for presidents, explorers, authors, scientists, distinguished local citizens, I have never known or heard about special memorial assemblies or ceremonies honoring or explaining their lives. But I now think that the dramatic changes in the very land and neighborhood in which a new school is situated provide a very useful topic from which to launch the study of everything from geology, anthropology and paleontology to science topics such as the flowers and fauna, and on to the history of human habitation from indigenous peoples to the great migration to the West and now the close urban settlement going on in the vicinity. The style of life has changed in not much more than 100 years from self-sufficiency of growing one’s own food to complete dependency upon retail merchandising.

Life styles have changed completely. The automobile brought mobility, etc., and meanwhile, fortunately, on this one piece of land, the far western part of the Elliott Ranch, land has been preserved for wildlife. I think that some of that land has never been plowed or tilled. So it sits as a sort of museum piece, for a contrast with what man has done with much of California. I think good teachers can base a lot of study on this history.

From Mary Etta Hamzawi, cousin to Elliott Castello:

Elliott earned a BA from UC Berkeley in Public Administration. He later got a teaching credential from San Francisco State, with the encouragement of his wife DoraLee who was a teacher and taught middle school in San Francisco for several years. Elliott went back to school at Berkeley and completed a

Master's in Curriculum and Instruction and an administrative credential. He taught for a couple of years in Oakland and was heading for a Ph.D. when family duties called him back to Sacramento to help his father manage the Elliott ranch. His father, Walter Castello, was my grandfather's younger brother, and he graduated from Elk Grove High School with the class of 1906. There were only four graduates that year, all boys, according to Elliott. Guy Foulks was one and Percy Gibson another, Elliott can't remember the other one.... Uncle Walter had to attend another year of high school in Sacramento to gain admittance to UC Berkeley because Elk Grove High was not accredited at the time. Irvy Johnson managed the cattle operation on the Elliott ranch after the death of Andy Elliott in 1935, until the ranch was sold. He helped my father with purchase of feeder cattle to run in our brush land. Elliott remembers helping to get the cattle to high land during a big flood in the 1950s. There were four of them: Irvy Johnson, Uncle Walter, Elliott and Al Buscher (the only "real cowboy" of the group). They drove the cattle through the town of Franklin, up Franklin Boulevard to the ranch headquarters.

Source: Information provided by Elliott Castello and Mary Etta Castello Hamzawi; edited by Elizabeth Pinkerton for the Elk Grove Unified School District School Names Committee, March 2000