

restore restory

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE CACHE CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OF



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AUDIO TOUR INTERVIEW WITH

Ann Brice

STOP 5:

Memorial Grove



Stop 5: Memorial Grove

Do you hear the owl?

Uh huh.

Can you say where we are and what this place means to you?

We're in the Jan T. Lowry Memorial Grove is named for Jan Lowry who was the executive director of the conservancy after I was and he was really the person who made this nature preserve happen because he was a farmer and he knew how to use heavy equipment and how to supervise people. He really did a lot of the early development work of the nature preserve. He personally oversaw the development of the wetlands into the wonderful place it is today. He was a fabulous person.

I think in a larger view, the Memorial Grove also kind of memorializes everybody who put a lot of effort into making the nature preserve what it is today. I mean you could start with memorializing the early farmers who lived on this property and worked in the barn and moving on through to the gravel miners who worked the creek up to the local farmers today and especially the Native community. The whole emphasis on the Tending and Gathering Garden really makes this place unique and it provides a wonderful place for Native peoples to become involved and for the rest of us to learn about their history and culture.

Thanks. So you were around during the gravel wars that led to the creation of the preserve. What were the gravel wars?

I came to Cache Creek Conservancy, well the creation of Cache Creek Conservancy sort of represented the end of the quote "gravel wars" end quote. So in a sense, I wasn't – I don't know a lot.

Listen to the king fisher in the background. I wonder if we picked that up.

I wasn't there in the early days of that. When I came in the mid-90s, the – I'm having to remember back.

People use the term "the gravel wars." What were the gravel wars? What were they and who were on the different sides?

The gravel wars refers to a period of time in dealing with Cache Creek. Really I wasn't there for the beginning of it. Once the gravel miners had decided to put money into forming a conservancy was when I first came on the scene, but I can tell you what I know from talking to people.

And it was still – things were still pretty heated when I took over as executive director and some people criticized me for being willing to be involved with it.

But basically the people, long-term residents of Yolo County who either lived along the creek or spent a lot of time along the creek, felt strongly that gravel mining had really ruined the creek and that nothing the gravel miners could do made any sense except, as I understand it, completely quitting any mining.

Memorial Grove, continued (p.2 of 4)

And the two sides met, there was a lot of negotiations, the county was very involved in it. They were trying to finish up – develop and finish up the Cache Creek Resource Management Plan and the formation of the conservancy was part of that.

And but some of the early people to this day still feel very bitter about the agreement that was worked out with the county which, in short, just speaking broadly, it forced the mining to – forced the miners out of the creek and they're now allowed to mine in deep pits next to the creek.

But it imposed much more regulation and it imposed much more regulation in the sense of when they're through mining in an area of what they have to do to clean up the area, or reclaim the area or restore the area, whatever word you want to use, and it also required the miners to pay into a fund, both to fund the conservancy and also a fund just to have on hand for projects on the creek that may in some way have been related to work that needed to be done that, as a result of the earlier gravel mining.

So people were pretty entrenched in their positions when I got here. There was a ballot initiative about trying to limit the gravel mining and I don't even remember all the details of what happened with that except that it was just starting work and I was sort of horrified at what was going on, but the Cache Creek Management Plan was finished and the conservancy was started and you know, better things started happening for the creek and that's continued to this day.

Let me break that down a little bit. Can you give me two sentences saying what the gravel wars were?

What people have come to call the “gravel wars” along Cache Creek had to do with folks on one side who were local and wanted to protect the creek and didn't want any more mining in the creek and on the other side was the aggregate industry, the mining industry and the county because the mining brought in a lot of revenue into the county.

What made it such a political firestorm? It went on for a really long time. Why do you think it was such a bitter, hard struggle? What made it so tough?

I wasn't involved with Cache Creek during most of the time that the people were very unhappy with each other, but from what I sort of pieced together is that in the early days when the local citizens wanted the attention of the aggregate companies and the county, that maybe those people weren't paying enough attention to the local folks and they got angrier and angrier and more and more frustrated.

And then in the next stage I understand that there were meetings and concessions were made. And I think that the people that were opposed to mining in the creek played a big role in getting a lot of concessions from the gravel mining companies in terms of protecting the creek.

Memorial Grove, continued (p.3 of 4)

This is a typical environmental battle. How is this battle similar to other battles around the environment in California?

Watching and coming in on the gravel wars, the battle was sort of classic in a sense and you see it in many environmental projects and areas that where the local people want to protect or enhance the resource that they have.

And the gravel miners are certainly not evil, but they're businessmen and they have to make money. That's what it's all about and people need gravel to live if we want highways and driveways and houses and all of those things.

So somewhere there probably has to be some compromise, but especially in these environmental struggles. You need people who are just there purely to protect the environment and they're not going to look at the details of why it's important to have some – it may be important to have gravel mining in the county for, you know, a multitude of reasons including revenue for the county, but environmentalists are fighting for a cause. They're sort of pure in that sense. It may not be the most realistic thing, but they force the issue and it's worthwhile.

Putting it in the larger Californian environmental context, how did the gravel wars battle end differently than other battles in California over the environment?

The battle involving the gravel miners and the local environmental people reached a solution of sorts, and maybe it's not unlike other battles around California because it certainly didn't leave some of the old hardcore environmental warriors completely happy. If you talk to them today you'll see they're still unhappy.

On the other hand, the aggregate companies certainly gave up some of their profits by having a lot more restrictions placed on them and having to do a lot more restoration than they had historically and just having to get out of the creek where the mining – getting the gravel was simple. So they certainly made concessions too.

And I think the local community, those who weren't on either of those sides, it was interesting to see how alliances formed and how it all played out which is basically, now that the Cache Creek Conservancy has started and is what, 15 years old, the conservancy has done a lot of good work on behalf of the creek and will continue to because they have a guaranteed source of funding from the gravel companies, which I can tell you from me working for another environmental non-profit that has no steady funding, is a real godsend to know that you're going to have money every year to do certain things.

And I think the community loves the nature preserve. That wasn't in the initial agreement but that Tiechert, one of the aggregate companies, chose to donate. It's developing into a wonderful community resource which wouldn't have happened earlier.

So there are a lot of good things that have come out of it. You know, would the creek be better off if there were no gravel mining at all? Probably. Is that realistic? Probably not.

Memorial Grove, continued (p.4 of 4)

Is there a downside? You mentioned some of the upsides and I love the “probably/probably not,” but I’m just wondering from an ecological point of view, is there a downside to the result?

I think there’s not so much – I don’t see so much of a downside to the outcome of the gravel wars. We have the Cache Creek Resource Management Plan now. We have a lot of safeguards. Because the damage was already done. If there had been no mining ever, it would have been a lot better. It’s going to take hundreds of years to bring this – the creek itself, to bring it up to the level of gravel that it once had. It’s going to be several lifetimes from here before that happens, but I think that what has happened in the last 15 years has all been pretty positive.

What was the hardest part for you about being involved in the gravel wars?

The most difficult thing for me about coming into the role of executive director of Cache Creek Conservancy right at the end of the gravel wars where people were still feeling pretty tender and annoyed and frustrated was that I’ve always considered myself an ardent environmentalist and I think probably for the first time in my career I was criticized for some people for being willing to get involved with this new conservancy.

I was so excited once I made the decision to take the job at the thought that I was going to have funding and be able to do wonderful things for the creek and then there were people who were saying that I was a sellout for being willing to take on the job.

So I spent a lot of time my first year at Cache Creek Conservancy just going around and talking to people and soliciting ideas from other environmental groups and from farmers and from everyone who lived near the creek just trying to learn how they really felt about things and how we could turn this into something positive and I think that’s continued on through the years gradually until the conservancy and what they’re trying to do is well accepted in the community.

I’m just thinking about what it would be like to spend your whole life working on behalf of the environment and have people call you a sellout.

It was difficult for me to, you know, find myself with some, and they were few, people, but on the opposite side of an environmental issue that I might have been traditionally, but I also came to realize, and maybe it was a stage in my life, when I came to realize that if you really want to accomplish something, it’s going to have to involve some compromise and the peer approach of no compromise, at the end of the day, you still don’t have the creek protected. In all reality it just wasn’t going to happen given the high stakes of the gravel mining industry and the county’s needs. So I feel glad that I’m in a – I was in at the ground level in trying to get something going and I also feel like relatively quickly I had the support of at least the mainstream environmental groups in the area.