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# restore restory

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE CACHE CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

AUDIO TOUR INTERVIEW WITH

*Lynnel Pollock*

STOP 4:

*Oak Savannah*





## Stop 4: Oak Savannah

**So can you tell me where we are now and maybe give some descriptive details about what you see and hear and feel?**

We are at a site on the nature preserve overlooking what we call Gordon Slough which is a waterway that comes down from the west and eventually goes back into Cache Creek, but it picks up water along the way from farm fields and irrigation water or rainwater. So we hear the rushing sound of the water spilling down over a spillway and as we look out further we see a beautiful grove of live valley oak trees dark green in color, many of them probably at least 100 years old. But this is what we call our Woodland Savannah area and it's wide open to the east, a lot of grasslands with oak trees bordering the waterway.

**Can you describe the breeze and what it's doing to the different plants and maybe some of the different plants around?**

In front of us we see the plants waving in the wind. We have cottonwood trees with their big green leaves and other native plants that are closer in front of us. A variety of plants in our hedgerow along the edge of Gordon Slough and they're moving around in the wind and making a rustling noise.

**What's particularly unique about this area?**

This area is unique to the nature preserve in that Gordon Slough flows through it and it's providing water first of all for the plants along it, but it's also recharging the groundwater in the area and it flows back into Cache Creek and provides water throughout the Cache Creek system then on downstream.

**What is recharging groundwater and why is that important?**

Recharging groundwater is important because many of us, both for our residences and for agriculture, pump groundwater to water our crops, to provide water for our drinking needs and our household needs so we pump water out of the ground and recharging and replenishing this groundwater is very important so that we continue to have a source of water.

**Has Gordon Slough recharged the groundwater?**

As the water flows down Gordon Slough or even along Cache Creek, some of it seeps into the ground and so that seeps on down into the underground aquifers which are big banks of water underground and provide water for our use when we pump it out.

**Great. I've seen you get smiley when you talk about trees particularly these big old trees. Can you talk about why you love these old trees so much out here?**

The valley oaks, which are often times 100 years old, are a very important tree here in the Sacramento Valley. First of all, they're probably one of the largest trees we see in the landscape so they provide a certain amount of beauty anyway, but they also provide habitats for a lot of the birds and other small species that live in trees.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.2 of 5)*

**Are these trees on this property particularly old?**

The trees on this property on the nature preserve site vary in age. Some of the oldest trees are probably at least 100 years old and many valley oaks will live to be 200 or 300 years old. We also, which is a good sign, see regeneration of oaks. So we have everything from little seedlings to five year old, ten year old, 50 year old oaks on site which is good because it means there's a constant regeneration of that species.

**So how was this area used back when it was in agriculture?**

When this area was in agriculture, this particular site was probably used for grazing more so than actual production because there isn't a big space for a field, but there would be fencing and there would be livestock grazing around. It's not particularly level here so it's not as conducive to farming row crops, but the livestock can walk around. There's a lot of native grasses growing here. So I would think that most of this was used for cattle and sheep way back probably for horses and mules also.

**Have you heard any old stories or folklore or read up on anything about farming in this particular area that you could share?**

There are some stories that have gone around from the old days in this area. One of them is that there was a brickyard on the northeastern site of the nature preserve where bricks were made to be used in buildings around the area and of course they had a water source to make the mud and then flat areas to dry the bricks so I assume that could be true and also that there was a sulfur well on this site somewhere, but I don't know exactly where it was and how it was used, but I've heard that there was a well that produced sulfur water.

**Can you point out where that brick building would have been from where we're sitting and describe it?**

Well the brickyard was probably off to the north and east from where we are sitting which is right where you turn to come down our road to the nature preserve itself.

One of the other stories that I've heard about out here on this site is that prior to the county road being built here, which brings people to the nature preserve, was what was called the Gordon Trail that went right through this site and further on to the west then, but it makes sense because Mr. Gordon was one of the first owners of this land so they called it Gordon Trail.

**Do you know where the Gordon Trail came or went to or what was important about it?**

I think the Gordon Trail was important because it served as a means of getting from the area of Woodland, which was beginning to be developed, to the town of Yolo, which was a thriving community in the mid-1800s. And people would traverse it to go to the west of here and access the Capay Valley area.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.3 of 5)*

**Right, that makes sense. This would be an opportunity to also say a little bit about Moore's Ditch. I realize it's not exactly on this property and so we may not want to talk about it, but being a farmer and in agriculture, I believe it was an important historical moment. So could you tell me what you know about Moore's Ditch, where it is in relation to where we are sitting now and why it's important?**

Moore's Ditch and Moore's Dam was an important segment of the irrigation history of this area which of course provided water for the agriculture in the surrounding areas. But Mr. Moore was one of the early settlers in this area and owned land on the creek also just upstream of where we are here and many, many years ago in about the mid-1800s, he put a small dam across the creek. It was actually made of brush and it washed out every year, but he could dam up enough water and divert water from the creek into a ditch that was called Moore's Ditch and this took water on south of here to farms in the area and provided irrigation water for their crops. That was the beginning of the irrigation systems on Cache Creek.

**And was it the beginning of irrigation systems in California?**

I don't know if that was the first irrigation system in California, but it certainly was one of the very earliest because that was just in the mid-1850s when he started doing that here on Cache Creek and it certainly was the forerunner of all of the irrigation systems here on the creek which ultimately consolidated and became the Yolo County Flood Control District.

**Nice. I think you had wanted to mention to me something about a pump and the development of a pump.**

Yes, the irrigation of course is very, very important to the development of agriculture and the increased production and productivity of the land here in Yolo County and particularly this area and we've talked about diverting water out of Cache Creek to use for irrigation and that's called surface water because it comes from the creek and so that's called surface water.

But another development that was crucial to increasing agricultural production in other areas, particularly if there was not water in the creek or in areas further away from the creek, was pumping groundwater and a man named Byron Jackson who lived in Woodland developed a centrifugal pump which was used to pump groundwater and that revolutionized the irrigation systems for agriculture also and is now universally used.

**Okay, so let's try that one more time. Could you tell me what relationship that pump had to the preserve and what kind of change it impacted in terms of agriculture here?**

Agriculture here on this site was probably enhanced also by using groundwater. A well is at the east end of our property. Probably was developed after this pump was perfected and the people here were able to use groundwater to water crops. So I assume that the eastern end of the preserve area where it's open and flat was used for crop production and water was provided through that well also.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.4 of 5)*

**That makes sense. How did the gold rush impact agriculture in this area?**

The gold rush played a very important part in the development of agriculture in this whole area. Of course the gold rush brought a lot of people to California who were seeking gold, but those people needed to eat. So some of the wiser people who weren't finding gold started farming and they made their fortune producing food for the gold miners. So it created the need for the food production that came in the 1850s.

**Yeah, that's kind of my impression as well. They've kind of depopulated the area and then repopulated the area.**

Well there really wasn't even much of a population here prior to the gold rush. There were a few settlers, a few large ranchos and people, but people really came in with the gold rush and if they weren't making it or couldn't make it in the mountains, they came here and established little farms and they started dairies, they started more orchard production in addition to livestock. So it broadened the types of things that were produced because they had a market for the fresh produce that they could produce now and the fruits and vegetables that could be sold fresh to the mining communities.

**Yeah and I bet they could turn it around like that.**

Yes and there was a great demand for that food.

**So besides growing crops and raising livestock, how else would this area around us right here have been used?**

Well this area right here was also the homestead for the farm family that lived here and Mr. Combs, who was a tenant here in the 1920s, built a home here for his family about 1930 and that home was situated just about right where we are and they had a water tower at the house, I believe a garage and of course the associated barns that went along with the farmstead, but this area was kind of the residential industrial area of the farming operation.

**How has it changed?**

This has changed dramatically of course since those early days of farming in the '30s and '40s. The home is no more. It was very deteriorated prior to the Cache Creek Conservancy taking over the nature preserve and it had been burned down because it was a hazard. The barn still is standing and we're very proud of the barn. It has been restored. It's a little different than it was many years ago. It had a second floor at one time which collapsed under the weight of the hay that was being stored on it so it was not rebuilt with a second floor but the barn itself is still standing and serves a different function now.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.5 of 5)*

**Can you describe where the barn is in relation to where we're sitting and maybe describe the barn a little bit as it is today?**

The barn is just to the west of us where we're sitting. It's in what we call the urban area of the nature preserve itself, close to our office buildings and the parking and amphitheater area. But the barn itself is a beautiful redwood barn, large, originally was roofed with shingles, but now has a metal roof and we believe it is dated to about 1910. There's been various dates put forward as to when it was built, but the most recent examination probably shows that it was built about 1910.

And the barns of course served a very important purpose on the farm. It housed livestock and it served as a storage area for food. So it was very important for farms to have a good barn.

**I know you have been reading up and studying up on all the people and families. Do you want to go through and just name the different families that you know of that have lived on this parcel, the different farm families?**

Sure. There have been several farm families I think that have lived on this parcel but it starts again with William Gordon and the Gordon grant from the Mexican government and he resided in this area. I'm not sure if his home was exactly on the site of the nature preserve or just a little bit downstream, but it was certainly in this area and he of course was the first settler here.

At some point the Stephens Family owned this land and there are still descendants of that family in the area and probably can tell stories of the Stephens Family here. But Kate Stephens was one of the owners and she married Mr. Salisbury and Salisbury Spill, which is the water gushing over the spill right by the bridge that we hear in the background, Salisbury Spill is named for him. And so the Stephens Family owned this land for a period of time.

Mr. Jack Combs was a tenant farmer here and he farmed this land for decades and he was the one who built a home here and his family resided here up until it became a mining site for gravel mining, but he was here for a number of years and farmed and then it became a mining site and now it's a nature preserve.

So I guess in fact there really were not that many different families here, but the families that lived here obviously loved the land, took good care of it and lived here for many, many years.

**Can you tell me the name of the bridge over there and point out where it is?**

Yes and of course the names in the area certainly reflect the families that lived here. We talked about Gordon Slough named for Mr. Gordon and the bridge that is just at the east end of the nature preserve, the bridge over Cache Creek is Stephens Bridge named for the Stephens Family and of course we talked about Salisbury Spill named for Mr. Salisbury who was married to Kate Stephens.

**It all fits together. Great. Okay, thanks. I'm going to stop here.**