

Rancho Oro Grande

HISTORY

The construction of “Rancho Oro Grande” began in 1939 and was completed in 1940. Mr. Wells of the Layne-Wells Corp. in Los Angeles built the ranch. Mr. Wells used the finest of materials in the ranch’s construction. The buildings and fences were constructed from timbers and rail-ties secured from the old Tonopah and Nevada Narrow Gauge Railroad, which Mr. Wells purchased for this purpose.

During Mr. Wells' tenure the ranch was used as a Thoroughbred Stud farm, which included two stallions and about thirty brood mares. There were also nearly 400 head of beef cattle on the ranch as well. Shortly after the outbreak of World War II, Mr. Wells sold the ranch to Gilbert Adrian, the clothes designer from MGM, and his wife Janet Gaynor, the actress from 20th Century Fox.

Mr. Adrian and Ms. Gaynor continued to use the ranch for horses and called it “Rancho Oro Grande”. The ranch at this time was about 800 acres in size. Robin Lynn Duke, one of Mr. Adrian’s writer friends, owned the cabin behind the ranch located near the beginning of Bull Creek at the base of Mission Peak. Mr. Adrian sold the ranch to James Cagney in 1953.

William Cagney negotiated the purchase of the ranch from the Adrian's for his brother. They purchased 450 acres and later purchased a 90 acre orange grove that fronted old Balboa Blvd. The orange grove purchase gave the Cagney’s easier access to the ranch because the original entrance on old Shoshone Ave was a very narrow winding road. During the Cagney’s tenure the ranch was called “Bull Canyon Meadows”. It was located at 17801 Bull Canyon Road. The main entrance to the ranch, off of old Shoshone, was about 300 yards to the east of the main house. The Cagney's used the ranch strictly for raising horses. Among some of the horses boarded there were trotters, pacers, and some of the purest bred Morgans in the country. Captain Henry, named after the Cagney’s grandfather, was a prized yearling trotter. Also boarded at the ranch was an Arabian stallion named “Bahir”, with whom Mr. Cagney tried to fine down his Morgans’ large but honest head. Although the Cagneys loved the ranch, they did not like the encroachment of housing developers; therefore they decided to sell it. The Cagneys sold the ranch around 1964. The new owner was James Roache and he named the ranch the Triple –A Ranch. It was at about 500 acres at the time. It is unknown when Mr. Roache

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sold the ranch. Mr. Roache and the ranch are featured in the January 1966 issue of Ebony magazine.

Don and Helen Troy leased the ranch during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the Troy's tenure the ranch was used exclusively for horseback riding. Raizy Goffman (now of Camelot Riding Club in Newhall) was the English trainer.

During the mid 1970s Dr. Richard Mazurek purchased the ranch. When I last visited the ranch in the summer of 1987 the ranch buildings were in pretty good condition. They had been freshly painted and there was even grass inside the arena of the main stable rather than the typical soft dirt. The ranch stayed at about 150 acres until it was sold to developers in the late 1980s. The main stable and foal barn were torn down during the summer of 1988 when the land was developed for houses. The main house is all that is left of the ranch.

I first saw the ranch on July 4th of either 1963 or 1964. There was a small brush fire to the west of our house so my father and I hiked up the hills across the street to see where the fire was. When we got to the top of the hills I saw the main stable of the ranch in the distance and as a little kid it made quite an impression on me. I asked my father who lived there and he said a movie star. I visited the ranch many a time during the late 1960s and early 1970s mainly just passing through to hike to Mission Peak. In 1972 I became friends with the Troys and Raizy Goffman and spent all of my free time there. It was at this point that I became interested in the history of the ranch and wanted to know more about it and what it looked like in its prime. I wrote to James Cagney looking for photos and he responded that he did not have any photos of the ranch. In the mid 1980s my uncle gave me an old photo of Mr. Cagney on a ranch that he found at a bookstore in Hollywood. My eyes just about popped out of my head. The photo of Mr. Cagney was at Bull Canyon Meadows, and it was an original print with facts pasted on the backside. Needless to say, I immediately went to the bookstore and bought all the remaining ranch related photos. I later learned that the photos were probably from one of Mr. Cagney's old press books.

The information contained herein is a compilation of information received from the following individuals in addition to my own memory of spending the summers and weekends at the ranch during my teens:

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Mr. William Cagney (brother to James Cagney)

Mrs. Raizy Goffman (English trainer at the ranch during the 1970s)

Dr. Jack Baker (veterinarian to the ranch)

Mr. Paul Gregory (producer, 3rd husband of Janet Gaynor)

Mr. A.C. Lyles (producer for Paramount Pictures)

Mr. Jack Thomas (son in-law to James Cagney)

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MISC. FACTS

1. Main stable - 26 stalls, single story barn with a large hayloft. The hayloft had trap doors between the stalls so that hay could be dropped directly into the feed bins below. There was a 3 room walk-in refrigerator/freezer that was used when cattle were kept at the ranch. Also included in the main stable was a small living quarters, an office with access to the loft and 2 small storage rooms.
2. Main house – 4 bedrooms, located at the top of the terraced hill (once a 5-acre fig orchard), surrounded by eucalyptus trees just to the north of where Bull Canyon Road, Highwater Road and Mahony Place intersect.
3. Foal barn - located at the base of the fig orchard just to the northwest of the main house and about 200 yards to the west of the main stable. It had 6 enlarged stall for foals and 2 rooms for storage.
4. Stud barn - located about 300 yards west of the main stable along the south side of Bull Creek with its own pasture. There was also an entrance to the ranch from Mission Peak at this location. This is where Mr. Cagney kept “Bahir”, an Arabian stud. This barn fell in disrepair and during the 1970s was torn down because it was a fire hazard.
5. Dairy barn - located about 200 yards northwest of the main stable on the north side of Bull Creek. This barn was also torn down during the 1970s because it was a fire hazard.
6. There were several “bunk” houses and other ranch buildings on the property as seen in the aerial and older photos but they were torn down before I could see them.