



Before “the Oaks”

Early History and the Natural Ingredients

Before the Oaks, there were simply the oaks. The single most evident physical characteristics of the neighborhood are the trees for which it is named.

The California Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) is one of the hardiest, and consequently most widely distributed, of Southern California’s native oak species. They are able to find niches in which to thrive from nearly the ocean’s edge to hillsides and mountains, up to five thousand feet in altitude. The acorns of these trees nourished the native people of California, and their unusual but picturesque twisting and tumbling forms surprised and inspired European settlers. It seems everyone has found something to appreciate in these ancient, majestic trees.

Or nearly so. Today we revere and protect these trees, but not long ago, California Live Oak trees were viewed as little better than an inconvenience. They grew on some of the most fertile bottomlands, and because of their contorted trunks, were useless as a source of milled lumber.

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The Harrison Crumrine house, circa 1895. The house is now sandwiched between tract homes on Cadway Street; this view of the house is almost entirely hidden today. (Santa Paula Historical Society)

The alluvial plain of Santa Paula Canyon, which grows broader as it spreads toward the Santa Clara River, would in ancient times have featured an impressive oak woodland, extending from Sulphur Mountain and the hills above Santa Paula on the west to the bluffs on the eastern side of Santa Paula Creek. Beginning in the late 19th century, acre upon acre of these trees were dragged from the ground, to make way for tillable soil.

That any oaks in the lower reaches of Santa Paula Canyon survived the rapid, and in a sense, ruthless conver-

sion of canyon land to agriculture is itself remarkable. Much of the canyon’s oak woodland that did pass through this period relatively intact becomes a tribute to one of the canyon’s earliest settlers, Harrison Crumrine.

It is tempting to think of Harrison Crumrine as a person who appreciated native oak trees. Perhaps he did, although there is no known record of him having said as much. He was in fact an agriculturist, and one of Santa Paula’s citrus pioneers, only the second person in the area to set out orange trees after Nathan Blanchard’s efforts during the early 1880s, and the first to plant them in Santa Paula Canyon. No doubt many of the canyon’s oaks fell before his plow, but one key parcel did not. It would be known to the entire town as Crumrine’s Grove.

An educated man, teacher and Civil War veteran, Harrison Crumrine was born in Pennsylvania in 1840. After mustering out of the Union Army, he enrolled at Ohio Wesleyan University and, upon graduation, took a teaching position in Illinois. He moved to Ventura County in 1872, where he continued teaching school in the Sespe area. In 1877 he bought his first property in Santa Paula



Canyon, a single acre. In 1880 Crumrine returned briefly to Illinois to wed Mary Trotter, whom we can imagine he met during his years of teaching in Illinois. A few years later, in 1888, he retired from teaching and began his second career as a citrus rancher in Santa Paula Canyon. Over the next few years, their landholdings in Santa Paula Canyon grew substantially beyond the initial acre.

Harrison and Mary Crumrine made their home on their ranch, building a house on the west side of Ojai Road. The two-story Crumrine House can still be seen today, on Cadway Street, now on a small parcel crammed into the midst of a 1950s subdivision. They also built a private fruit packing house on the ranch. The couple raised five children: Charles Leroy, William Roscoe, Harvey Lawrence, Olive Elzora, and Catherine; the boys were all known by their middle names.

We will perhaps never know precisely why so many acres of Crumrine's land holdings were never developed as citrus orchards. All we can know for certain is that a significant parcel of oak woodland in his ownership, nearly forty acres bounded on the south by today's Say Road, on

the east by the Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy grant line, and on the west by Ojai Road, remained, more or less, as he had found it. On this parcel the greater portion of the Oaks neighborhood, the Fern Oaks Subdivision, would be developed over fifty years later. But long before these events, this land would have another life in the history of the Santa Paula community, as Crumrine's Grove.

The earliest known written reference to Crumrine's Grove comes in the form of a brief notice printed in the *Santa Paula Chronicle* in late June of 1888.

—The band boys have swung a sign to the breeze on Mill St. announcing a picnic at Crumrine's grove on July 4. An invitation to attend is extended to all.

The casual, almost in-passing reference to Crumrine's Grove suggests that by this time it was already an established location for community gatherings.

Mentions of events held in Crumrine's Grove appeared frequently in the *Chronicle* in the decades that followed, providing colorful insights into the life of the community, and the unusual way this private land was used to express

The Crumrine Family of Santa Paula Canyon

The oldest of the boys Harrison and Mary Crumrine raised in their home in Santa Paula Canyon was Charles Leroy "Roy" Crumrine. He was born in 1881, possibly before his parents moved to Santa Paula, when his father was still teaching in the Sespe district. He married Lillian May Brookhouser in 1903, and they had at least one daughter, Pauline. During the 1910s they moved to La Habra, in Orange County, where he was a citrus rancher. He died there in 1946.

William Roscoe Crumrine was born in Santa Paula in 1884. He married Myrtle Wilhelmina Warring. They had one son, Robert. Roscoe retained a portion of the Crumrine family ranch, where he raised

cattle and sheep. He died in Santa Paula in 1955, and Myrtle in 1980.

Harvey Lawrence Crumrine was born in Santa Paula in 1886. During the 1910s he moved to Downey, probably around 1912 when he was married to Georgia Haskell. They were citrus ranchers and had two daughters, Eugenia and Mary Alice. He died in Downey in 1941.

Catherine "Kate" Crumrine was born in Santa Paula in 1891, the last of the Crumrine children. She married Walter Jensen in 1918, but only months afterwards he died in the great influenza epidemic of that winter. In 1919 she married Earl T. Crawford of San Francisco. He was in the canned foods business. Later, they

would move to Santa Monica. They apparently had no children.

Olive Elzora Crumrine remains a bit of a mystery. We know she was born in Illinois in 1876, which according to records, is four years before her parents were married. The most likely explanation is that she was the product of an earlier marriage for one of them, probably of Mary Crumrine, and as was so often the case in such situations, was adopted by her new father. She remained a life-long resident of Santa Paula, marrying William B. McKinley around 1902. They lived for a time in Long Beach before returning to Santa Paula, where he worked as a tailor. He died in 1924 and she in 1952. They had no children.

it. In April 1908, residents were informed, the “ladies of the Current Events club” picnicked in the grove, spending “the greater part of the afternoon ... sewing, reading, and otherwise enjoying a social time.”

In July 1910 the grove hosted a gathering of fifty youthful members of the Christian Endeavor Society of the Presbyterian congregation for an evening of games and “tales told as the participants gathered about a bonfire. Roast steak was served with other refreshments and a general good time passed quickly.” The grove had clearly become a fixture in Santa Paula’s social life, we must assume with at least the tacit approval of Harrison and Mary Crumrine.

The era of Crumrine’s Grove lasted throughout the years of the Crumrine ownership, into the early 1920s, but would not survive the passing of the land to their children after their deaths. The decade of the 1920s was producing a very different world than the one the Crumrines would have known, but their stewardship of this particular plot of forested earth set the stage for the events to come.

Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy

Most of what came to be known as the Oaks is located on the far eastern edge of Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy, granted to Manuel Jimeno Casarín by the government of Mexico in 1843. The 17,773 acre rancho, which covered most of the valley bottomlands from Santa Paula Creek west to Saticoy, was awarded to Casarín for his services to the Mexican government as Secretary of State under Governor Micheltorena. Although Casarín, who died in Mexico in 1853, probably never lived on the rancho, it was operated as a cattle ranch and vineyard by his *major-domo*, who lived in an adobe home located in the vicinity of present-day 4th and Ventura streets.

One of the most immediate difficulties facing holders of granted lands in Alta California in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo, which ended the war with Mexico in 1848, was the lengthy process of proving land ownership under the American legal system. In theory, the treaty guaranteed the rights of prior landholders, and in 1851 the U.S. Congress created the Board of Land

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Commissioners with the specific charge of settling the matter of these prior private land claims.

In practice, the complex, lengthy and expensive legal process faced by *Californio* landholders frequently proved ruinous to their claims. They faced the virtually insurmountable problem of their grants originally having been described in little more than the vaguest detail in *diseños*, the often crude and ambiguous maps produced by the claimants during the original granting process. In these documents, boundaries were frequently described by moveable or impermanent landmarks, such as trees or

creeks. Because of these inherent problems, the average length of time required to prove a grant through the Land Commission, a process known as patenting, was seventeen years. For some, the legal wrangling dragged on for many decades.

Time was certainly not on the side of the *Californios*. The longer their lands took to patent, the more difficulties were likely to arise, particularly with the opening of public lands to homesteading during the 1860s. With new settlers came boundary disputes, further legal actions, and even armed conflict.

Many of the exhausted and debt-ridden *Californios* were anxious land sellers. Among the influx of Americans to California during the 1850s and 1860s, some bought out numerous claims even before the patenting process was completed, taking on considerable risk, but becoming massive landholders in the process. In the instance of Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy, the heirs to Manuel Jimeno Casarín sold his land grant to one such person, John P. Davidson, and four partners, who secured a patent on the Rancho in 1860.

A portion of the 1861 Davidson survey of Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy illustrates Mupu Creek and the fixing of the eastern boundary of the land grant along the course of the creek at that time. This demarkation persists today as the “grant line,” for which the street was named. (The Bancroft Library)

