

Ranching in Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve and the Johnson-Taylor Adobe

By John Northrop; Published May 1989 in the Friend's newsletter

The Spanish Period

Cordero, a Spanish "Leatherjacket Soldier" from the San Diego Presidio, grazed sheep in what is now Penasquitos Canyon from about 1770 until the Mexican Revolution of 1822. His range ran, roughly, from the San Dieguito River Valley on the North to Sorrento Valley on the South, and from Black Mountain (then called Cordero Mountain) on the East to Torrey Pine Beach (then called Cordro Beach) on the West, encompassed most of what is now Mira Mesa, Del Mar Mesa, Rancho Penasquitos, Carmel Valley, and the lower part of Penasquitos Canyon. The lands were considered to be part of the lands belonging to the San Diego Mission de Alcalá.

He conducted a wool/hide trading business out of an adobe house built beside El Camino Real on the northeast shore of Cordero Slough (now called Penasquitos Lagoon).

The Mexican Period

In 1859, Diego's sister, Estefana, married Captain George Alonzo Johnson, a wealthy Colorado River Boat pilot. Johnson built an adobe ranch house at the upper (east) end of the canyon. It forms part of what we now call the Johnson Taylor Ranch. In 1860, Diego sold a half interest in Penasquitos Rancho, including the part called El Cuervo, to Capt. Johnson. Johnson grazed cattle and planted a commercial orange orchard, among other activities on the Ranch.

After a period of financial difficulties, Johnson lost the Ranch when the bank foreclosed in 1880. The 1880s were a time of land speculation and the Rancho land passed through several hands quickly, being divided in the process. 7,000 acres, including the Ranch buildings, were eventually sold to a New Mexico cattleman, Col. Jacob Shell Taylor. This is the same man who founded Del Mar and built the famous Casa Del Mar Hotel.

Although he grazed cattle and raised thoroughbred horses on the land, Taylor's main interest was development. With several financier partners, he divided the land around the Johnson's old ranch house into ten-acre tracts and attempted to sell them, unsuccessfully. An enlarged and improved Ranch house was touted as a resort hotel, along with his Casa Del Mar Hotel. Taylor soon encountered financial difficulties, sold the Ranch area, and left San Diego in 1890.

The Cattle Barons

Rancho Penasquitos once again passed through several hands, including land speculator Adolf Levi. In 1910 Levi transferred title to the upper ranch to San Diego cattleman Charles F. Mohnike. After a fire destroyed the wooden parts of the ranch building in 1911, Mohnike made repairs and converted the building to a bunk house for his cowboys. He also built a large adobe barn and the third adobe home in Penasquitos, the Mohnike Adobe, still located at Horseman's Park. Other cattlemen who grazed cattle in Penasquitos included the Hastings family and the Brown family, J Chauncy Hayes, F. A. Everett and Writ Bowman, of Tijuana Race Track fame.

In the land boom of the 1920's, another attempt to subdivide Penasquitos, this time as Pompeii Farms, ended in failure. In 1921, two well-known San Diego cattlemen George Sawday and Oliver Sexon, gained control of the ranch and stocked it with cattle. Sawday and Sexon, Inc., operated the ranch until 1962, when they transferred the property, which had grown to 14,000 acres, to developer Irving Kahn, reportedly for more than \$10,000,000.

Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve

Irving Kahn's grandiose development plans for a shopping center and golf course in Penasquitos Canyon were not approved and the ranch was sold to Penasquitos Inc., which later became Genstar Properties (now American Newlands, Inc.). In 1976, Genstar donated the floodplain of the canyon to the City of San Diego as an open-space park in exchange for building rights on the adjacent mesa tops.

During this period, Mr. and Mrs. Orville Cummings and Mr. and later, Mrs. Russel Peavy continued to operate a private ranch in Penasquitos until 1972 when it was opened to the public for horseback riding. (Up until then, riders from the old Black Mt. Stable were not allowed in Penasquitos Canyon). In 1973, Norwood Brown, a La Jolla rancher, obtained a lease with the City of San Diego for grazing rights in Penasquitos Canyon for \$6 per head per month. Brown grazed his herd of range cattle there until 1984 when he sold it to one of the big ranches near Julian. When he retired, the lease was taken over by his partner, Mr. Ray Witwer, who introduced his herd of Black Angus cattle that now can be seen grazing in the western part of the Preserve that Capt. Ruiz called El Cuervo.

Horse Farms

When the Black Mt. Stable closed, Horseman's Park was the first public riding stable to be opened in Penasquitos Canyon. It is located at the Mohnike adobe on the east side of Black Mt. Road. Later, the Penasquitos Ranch Stable was opened at the Johnson-Taylor Ranch by Jerri Donnelly, a county volunteer. She operated it until 1988. The Johnson Taylor Ranch House is now a Park Headquarters for the San Diego County Parks and Recreation Dept.

Future Plans

Long range plans for the Johnson-Taylor Ranch include a visitor center as well as construction of nature walkways and establishment of small pasture for grazing a limited number of horses and livestock. The historic buildings are being restored to reflect the periods they were built in. There are even plans to replant Johnson's orchards. In that way, the historical ambience of the old adobe will be preserved for all persons to enjoy.

Additional Reading

For a more detailed history of the early history of the Johnson-Taylor Adobe and Penasquitos Canyon, the following books are recommended:

- Ewing, Nancy H. (1988) *Del Mar Looking Back*, Del Mar History Foundation, P.O. Box 926, Del Mar, CA 92014
- Northrup, John, (1987), *Riding 'Round Penasquitos: A Trail Guide to Riding and Hiking Trails in Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve*, San Diego, CA and (1988) *A Short History of Carmel Valley and McGonigle Canyon*, Del Mar, CA, Windsor Associates, P.O. Box 90282, San Diego, CA 92109
- Ward, Mary (1984) *Rancho de Los Penasquitos: On the Road to Yuma*, County of San Diego, Dept of Parks and Recreation

Days of the Great Yankee Cattle Barons: Growing up on the Penasquitos

Part One of a Special Three-part Series by Eve Ewing

Originally printed in the January 1988 Newsletter (shown here in its entirety - complete with spelling and grammatical errors)

{Editor's note: -- Mike Kelly. You'll notice the term "wet back" used in Eve Ewing's article. This was a commonly used derogative term for an illegal alien or undocumented worker as we might say today. After her teenage years on "the Peñasquitos" one of Ewing's accomplishments was to embed herself with cowboys in Baja California, living and working on cattle and bull drives. She documented their lives in print and pictures that she used to populate the little museum she founded in Baja Los Angeles. I've visited this museum in this Sea of Cortez fishing village.}

My childhood days on the Penasquitos Ranch ride the coattails of an important and colorful era of our region's history, an era that is little known or talked about, because in a much-diminished sense, it is still going on. It is too soon to be called history, and when that time comes it will be over and we'll be sorting through the letters in old attics to try to make sense of it all. But I guess that is how History works. This era is the little mentioned time of not the Spanish, but the Great Yankee Cattle Barons of California. When I first came west as a young girl in 1945, it was an era still in its prime, though soon to vanish quickly after the post World War II migration began.

There was a time in the forties when the largest cattle ranch in California was here in San Diego County. The Penasquitos Land Grant Ranch was just one of many owned or leased ranches by the Circle S (The Sawday and Saxon Corporation), founded by George Sawday and later joined by under sherrif, Oliver Sexon and later by Russell and Florance Peavey. Some of the ranches owned by this corporation besides the Penasquitos were the Santa Ysabel land grant, the Santa Maria land grant known to all as Ramona, the Cuyamaca Rancho in the mountains, the San Felipe Rancho in the San Felipe Valley above sizzer's crossing in the desert below the Banner Grade, and the Richardson Ranch now better known as University City.

The Circle S also at that time leased the enormous Warner Hot Spring's Ranch, the Fenita (my childhood memory does not include how to spell this) near the Mexican border, the Scripps Ranch east of Mira Mesa, the Navy (a name given to the navy test site grounds south east of the Scripps Ranch), Mira Mesa, the Fairbanks Ranch, and the Guejita land grant outside Lake Wolford near Escondidi, and I'm still forgetting some I'm sure. In other words, with the exception of the Daileys who owned Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Jamul and the Lucky Five, the Circle S quite simply either owned or leased much if not most of the prime grazing lands in San Diego County between Camp Pendleton and the Mexican Border and between the ocean and the desert.

My lifelong friendship with Russell and Florance Peavey, who became major owners of the Penasquitos in the late forties or early fifties, began in 1946 after we bought two horses, one from Oliver Sexon at the Lemon Grove Rodeo and another from Russell Peavey when he and his family still owned the San Clemente Canyon Ranch which included the Clairemont Mesa. I think Russell told me his dad bought the land for some 40 cents and acre sometime after a flood in the Tujauana River Valley had swept his dairy out to sea early in this century. We lived west of Mount Soledad in La Jolla's then sparsely settle Muirlands area at that time. Whenever possible, we helped the Peaveys gather the Soledad Mountain Ranch cattle, or rode over to help gather the cattle off Clairmont or the neighboring Richarson Ranch, and sometime helped load them onto railroad cars from the old corals that used to be below what is now University City. Our English saddles and eastern ways amused Russell who tried one of our saddles for curiosity. Afterward, he asked my dad: "How do you keep from sliding off one of them pancakes?"

As a child it was especially great to wake up and find cattle had gotten out and were seen in our vegetable garden, though it was my mother's favorite site. I thought it was great because it meant we didn't have to go to school that day, but instead got to saddle up and help roundup the escapees and head them back to there the fence was down on Mount Soledad.

One day when we were riding the ridge of the Soledad Ranch, where it overlooks Rose Canyon and what is now I-5 below, Russel Reavey pointed to the cliffs across the canyon south of the junction of San Clement Canyon and Rose Canyon, and said: "Not too many years back we was running down some wild horses up on the mesa (known today as Clairmont Mesa), but they got to the cliffs before we could them em or get a rope on em. They slid like kids on a playground slide all the way down the cliffs, loped easy across Rose Canyon and old 101 (it was just dirt then) and ran clean up the south shoulder oof Mount Solidad just about to where we's standing right now. We knowed we couldn't catch em once they reached the cliffs so we sat and pondered their ese and speed Them wild horses was real atheletes."

After the Peaveys sold the SanClemente Canyon Ranch, and the Circle S Ranch sold the Richardson Ranch (University City), the bought into the Sawday and Sexon Corporation and moved to the Penasquitos where Russell became part owner and manager. In those days the headquarters were in the section now called Horsemen's Park. The area of the Johnson-Taylor Ranch across a little used dirt track called Black Mountain Road, was long over. The Johnson-Taylor ranch was merely the bunk house for the ranch. Little money was ever spent on keeping it up; its old cracked walls were left as is. But for many years it was the home of one of Penasquitos Ranch's longest occupants name of Hank Romero. Hank was of Mexican/Spanish Californio stock and live his life as an ordinary cowhand. In a sense he and the then dusty desheveled state of the Johnson-Taylor ranch house were symbols of what happened to all his ancestors once the Yankee ways and savvy took over the country after the war with Mexico in the 1800s. I guess it's just one of the prices you pay for loosing a war, you get to become the second class citizens.

For as long as I remember, Hank was very old, seems like he and the oak trees must have grown up together hundreds of years ago Well, you know how old old people can look when you were young. There was always a lot of sky between Hank's legs and I think his hands were given to him by a lizard. They were his badge of lifelong labor. I only once saw him without his sweat stained gray felt hat and that was in his house. His mostly bald head was as white as a baby's bottom, and it didn't look like it could possibly belong to the Kentucky fried, brown, leathered face it was attached to. He was old and faithful, and honest and poor and uneducated, and was never more than just average smart all the years I knew him His hard but simple life was like most cowboys who somehow never wanted to or were never able to (for one reason or another) to acquire their own ranch.

Days of the Great Yankee Cattle Barons: Growing up on the Penasquitos

Part Two of a Special Three-part Series by Eve Ewing

Originally printed in the March 1988 Newsletter (shown here in its entirety - complete with spelling and grammatical errors)

I learned a lot of things from Hank, such as new ways of swearing when things went wrong. Hank always figured he was a cut above the wet backs (*see editor's note above*) that were hired on now and then. And when they did something he thought was stupid, most likely and honest mistake, Hank who also spoke Spanish would yell at them in English. That way he got to be insulting without hurting anyone's feelings, a very useful life tool it was. At the top of his dust spouting lungs he would yell great and wonderous things like: "If your brains were rank poison they couldn't fissic a Snow Bird." I've had the pleasure of using that wonderful, near meaningless, unintelligible expression myself when four letter words just wouldn't be acceptable That there was no such thing as a Snow Bird, at least in San Diego County (that term wasn't even used for skiiers in those days and I know Hank never even saw a pair of skis his whole life). So what it really meant was never brought up or discussed. That would have been like questioning an artist's use of colors. It was Hank's creation and none of us really wanted it explained as if that might some how take away some of the magic, and that way it could mean most anything you wanted it to. I just framed it and hung it in the gallery of my memory where it can be seen and used when needed.

There is so much to tell about those exciting years, I hardly know what to try and tell here and what to leave for another day. I think I'll just continue and give a few more details of an era too young for the History books but all but gone forever none the less. Just as the Johnson-Taylor Ranch is all the thing now, as well it should be, someday the old adobie and

barn on Horseman's Park (if still there) will be remembered as a part of the days of San Diego's Great Yankee Cattle Barons.

I remember there was a spell of hard feelings among various relatives after George Sawday and Oliver Sexon died. I was pretty young but I remember that when Russell had to go up to certain of the other ranches he always put his pistol in his truck and mentioned one day that all the men at one of the ranches he had delivered cattle to were all wearing guns. I guess big land holdings don't often get divided up very peacefully and in those days lawyers didn't enter into settling feuds as much as they do now. Fortunately no one was shot and things got settled somehow.

One of the striking things about many of the great cattle barons like George Sawday, Oliver Sexon, and Russell Peavey was their honesty. You see, in those days contracts, with feed lots for example, were often made verbally. For example, if a stock contractor came up to Santa Ysabel to buy cattle, Sawday would arrange to sell so many hundred head at so much at such and such a time and place and not a single pencil or piece of paper ever came out of anybody's pocket. All contracts, many involving thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars were all verbal. Verbal contracts were a spoken but unwritten law, which made honesty as necessary a part of you as hands and fee. An honest man just stood taller, that all. And then I imagine there a number of men who couldn't read well in California's early days. A great deal of pride went with that honesty as well. When Russell Peavey's son was born and named after Oliver Sexon, Sexon sent him a note to be given to him on his fourth birthday that simply said: "Remember, son, if you always tell the truth, you can look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell." Young Carl Oliver Peavey would never forget that. He came out of the same fiber.

Russell Peavey's family came west in a covered wagon and Russell had to help raise his younger brothers and sisters and never had a chance for schooling past the sixth grade. He was a cowboy who married the schoolmarm (her name was Florence George) and through his hard work, sense of integrity, and exceptional intelligence, honesty, some good luck, and a lot of help from his educated, ambitious and intelligent wife, he too became a cattle baron before he died in about 1970.

No doubt many of you are thinking that these cattle barons lived like kings, sort of like a stage set from Dallas. Oddly enough most of them led very simple and modest lives. Their time, their life's purpose and their money were tied up in their land, their cattle and horses. Paying taxes drove most of them to sell in the sixties and seventies, as it partly did for the Penasquitos and Rancho Bernardo next door. Only after the land was sold was their money for many luxuries. Also there were bad years that needed a lot of capital to get them by. Those were the unlucky years when they had to buy cattle at a high price and were forced to sell at a low, or when drought that started in the late forties, lingered on through the sixties. They were sometimes forced to sell their cattle to the feed lots on bad years when little grass grew. Those hard years often as not bankrupt the smaller outfits, but the Penasquitos was big enough to survive and Russell had an uncanny savvy for figuring out ways such as moving cattle to other areas or even other states till things picked up.

Peavey had a great love and respect for the land. He didn't believe in over grazing, which was a temptation during the years it didn't rain, which meant if he didn't want to abuse the land he often had to sell a high percentage of his cattle at a loss or buy feed he could ill afford. But he could see how the resulting erosion could destroy the land. I remember one year in the early fifties when we got only three inches of rain for the whole year and the grass never grew higher than a Weenie Dog's stomach.

Russell shook his head and said: "I remember when the spring grass grew up high as your stirrup when you was riding." I could hardly believe what he said, as I grew up in the country during the Great Drought which began in 1946 and lasted until 1976 with little let up for over twenty years.

Russell could not have survived without his wife's help. She kept the books as Russell was partially illiterate which was something exceptional intelligence could never completely compensate for, she cleaned the house, raised the kids who as soon as they were big enough to straddle a pony were out helping dad, she cooked the meals, did the laundry and ironing, canned peaches and baked pies and made the beds and packed lunches and she herself would ride almost every day with her husband to help work the cattle and save on the overhead of too many hired hands. At night she came

home and cooked a hot meal after 8-12 hours in the saddle She also helped plan barbecues, and vigorously promoted beef through the women's auxiliary to the California Cattleman's Association called the Cowbells and championed causes that might help prolong their loved and useful way of life. And some how she still had time for family and friends like myself I never knew how she could keep it all together.

Days of the Great Yankee Cattle Barons: Growing up on the Penasquitos

Part Three of a Special Three-part Series by Eve Ewing

Originally printed in the May 1988 Newsletter (shown here in its entirety - complete with spelling and grammatical errors)

Russell and Florence Peavey and their two children grew to be a family. Not that we didn't have our differences I was always trying to save coyotes or ban control burning to save birds and animals, an error our whol generation of sentimental city dwellers,, mostly newly arrived from other parts of the country, made Nature burns brush naturally in the form of dry lightening storms and in the past by the help of Indians, and later by ranchers, and by not burning we are now faced with holocausts because we have created unnatural situations where brush that is filled with natural tars and resins and used to burning every ten or fifteen years has reached fifteen and twenty feet high and in some areas has not burned for over seventy years. Unlike trees our brush starts to die out after about sixty years unless burned back and when it then can start anew from the crown. If brush is burned frequently it doesn't burn trees and it is called a ground fire; but when the brush and grasses are tall it catches the trees on fire and we have what we call crown fires and that does kill trees Much of or whole county s a time bomb waiting to go off instead of a natural series of patchworks of some newly burned areas, next to some older burned areas The newly burned patches stop the spread of fire. But if fires have been prevented unnaturally for decades, there are no patches and fires can go unstopped for days and days and burn horses and cattle and houses and thousands of acres much as it did during the wild fires of 1970 when it burned from Cuyamaca to the Mexican border. The brush around Scripps Ranch and Mira Mesa are a case in point. Now the brush is so tall it may be impossible for controlled burning. These are all the things the Peaveys knew long before our National Foresters and Ecologists caught on. But I was bone headed, and sometimes just impossible to shake out of my city boots, so I didn't learn these things any faster than most of the rest of us. Now I know that people who spend there life on the land usually understand it the best.

Russell Peavey's life long goals were straight forward and clear "I just want to raise good food at a price people can afford to pay". It use to make him mad when he saw how much meat cost in the market, and that lots of people couldn't even afford to buy it.

Like most ranchers, the Peaveys were very conservative, mostly because their way of like is always fragile and can only survive if labor is cheap and other things are just so. It survives best in the underpopulated regions of the country far from urban centers or in areas that are too dry for farming and too unappealing for living. The population boom after World War II was the beginning of the end for most of the cattle baron of San Diego County. So the Peaveys, like most ranchers, were against unions, and taxes and liberals and subdivisions, and middle men who drove beef prices up, and lax immigration laws and muddling Government bureaucracies that dictated unwise policies like no control burning, and sheep herders of course. People like the Peaveys and the cowboy drifters who worked for them, were our frontiersmen, our chapter from the Old West, our pages of History.

Once I asked Florence if they ever ate lamb. She was very indignant and quite defensive and said: "Of course we eat lamb. We eat it quite frequently". At that point I had known the Peaveys for over twenty years and had never remembered eating lamb at their ranch except once after they ran over one in the truck on the highway. "How often is frequently?" I asked ... my youthful curiosity leading into dangerous waters. "Well," said Florence in her most serious and pensive manner, "I know we've eaten lamb at least twice since we've been married"; They'd been married for over twenty-five years at that point. Well, I guess that was a cattlegoman's idea of eating lamb frequently.

Russell was known all over the country for his good horsemanship. "You can cowboy around and break a colt and run it around and yank on its mouth and plum terrify and ruin it forever or, you can be patient and gentle on a horse and have it for a working partner for twenty year." I think the saddest I ever saw Russel was when his best cow pony, Missie ... "She's got more cow sense in her than I do", he used to say ... was shot just before she gave birth to her first colt. That, plus higher and higher taxes and all the cut down fences and shot up windmills, rustled cattle, broken beer bottles that ruined more than one horse, and illegal trash dumps, and uncontrolled brush fires, were all signs of San Diego's post war boom. This, coupled with relentless drought, finally drove the Peaveys and the Sawday heirs to sell the Penasquitos in the sixties. Their way of life was over in coastal San Diego, a chapter in history closed and I had had the privilege of having lived with the Peavey family on the Penasquitos during summers and holidays for all those years I grew to love them and respect them as deeply as my own family, and their ways, wisdom and warmth have left an indelible stamp in my heart and mind.

I am going to close by telling you something Russell said over thirty years ago that I have never forgotten. I was twelve years old at the time. From a nearby hill we were overlooking the grading going on for a new highway later to known as I-15. It cut through the heart of the best grazing land on the Penasquitos. There was a lot of housing developments mushrooming all over the county at that time as well. Russell said in his slow country drawl: "Some day we are going to be hungry in America. We can't go on forever putting up houses in the fertile valley bottoms that can grow food We should only be putting houses up there on those rocky hills where you can't grow not food."

I think Russell Peavey would be proud to stand here if he were still alive and could see your struggles to save some of the land he loved so long. Of course he'd want to put the land to work raising food and see cattle grazing, which would help keep the fire hazard down, and he wouldn't let you gallop your horse like a fool or chase his cattle and leave the gates open, but other than that, city folk and ranchers have a lot in common. We are after all, all human beings who need some country, and some peace and some beauty to help us stay human ... and of course some food to put in our bellies ... hopefully at a price we can afford to pay.

Bovine Blues

Printed originally Jan 1986; no author listed

The issue of cattle grazing in the preserve most likely will be on the Jan 22 agenda of the Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve Task Force.

At its last meeting, the task force asked city staff to suggest amendments to cattleman Norwood Brown's grazing permit.

This action followed a request by the Citizens Advisory Committee that the task force terminate Brown's lease and remove the cattle from the preserve. Safety and environmental concerns led to the CAC's stance.

According to Brown there are approximately 100 head grazing in the preserve. He reportedly pays the city \$6 per head per month for the permit.

The cattle are supposed to stay west of the waterfalls, but some steers have wandered onto Sorrento Valley Blvd. and Black Mountain Road, causing injury in at least one case.

Some enjoy seeing the cattle, others cite the ecological damage they do by wallowing in streams.

The task force is trying to reach a compromise. Here's what staff is recommending:

- Limit the location of cattle to the area west of the waterfalls
- Limit the number of cattle in the preserve to 125
- Maintain fences and gates in proper working condition at all times
- Check/inspect fences and gates every other day.

Last Roundup in Penasquitos

By John Northrop, Ph.D.

First printed in the August 1989 Friend's newsletter

Riders in Penasquitos Canyon will no longer see cattle grazing in the meadows along the creek bed. The prolonged drought and encroaching development forced them out.

The problem became acute in early June when the hillsides turned brown. Since the fences around the canyon have fallen into disrepair, the cattle began to forage on the mesa tops surrounding the Preserve. Some went to Del Mar Mesa, some to Lopez Ridge, and some followed the old Lopez Road up to what is now the Pacific Corporate Center. A few strayed from there onto Mira Mesa Boulevard. The Police then called the owner, Mr. Ray Witwer, on June 12. He chased them back down to Lopez Canyon but the next day they were back up there again. Fearing accidents (when a speeding car hits a 1000-lb steer, the animal is propelled up over the hood and through the windshield). Mr. Witwer organized a roundup on June 24 and shipped the cattle to the stockyards in Bakersfield. About 50 riders participated in the event which was covered by TV Channels 8, 10, and 39.

As if by divine intervention, one cow and her 2 calves eluded the drovers and were seen at the West end of the Preserve, the last remnant of the vast herds that grazed there since the Days of the Dons.