

Una Legua Cuadrada: Exploring the History of Swanton Pacific Ranch and Environs



Abstract

Swanton Pacific Ranch is an educational and research facility owned by the Cal Poly Corporation and managed by the Cal Poly State University (Cal Poly) College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. The rancho’s original inhabitants included Native Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, as well as various European immigrants and their descendants; currently, the staff, faculty, and students of Cal Poly occupy the land. Each of these groups used the land’s rich environment for a variety of purposes from subsistence to financial and intellectual pursuits. Over time, researchers and local historians have discussed specific aspects of the Swanton Pacific Ranch and its environs, particularly concerning its occupants, land use (e.g. businesses, farming, research), and land features (e.g. geology, botany). *Una Legua Cuadrada: Exploring the History of Swanton Pacific Ranch and Environs* by Jeanine Scaramozzino (available online at <https://doi.org/10.15368/theses.2015.170> 2015) offers a cohesive, descriptive narrative of the land and its people organized chronologically from prehistory to the present. This document provides a summary of the information presented in Scaramozzino’s manuscript.

Introduction

- Una Legua Cuadrada refers to the traditional Spanish unit of area equal to one square (legua) league, 4,340.28 acres. Agua Puerca y las Trancas was a one square league rancho that changed in ownership over time, but eventually 3,200 acres of the original rancho became Swanton Pacific Ranch.
- The people and the environment of Swanton have only found their place in recorded history as part of larger historical discussions of California, Santa Cruz County, Santa Cruz City, and adjacent towns (e.g. Davenport).
- Swanton has often been defined as the place that Fred Swanton, businessman and mayor of Santa Cruz for six years, first dammed a river and built an electric power plant to light the city.
- This work specifically explores the history of Swanton Pacific Ranch and environs by telling the complex story of the people who lived, used, and prospered there through their interactions with the landscape.
- The relationships among the people and the land can be seen through many lenses, observable through production, access and use of food, profits of industry and results of intellectual pursuits, and the connections between people.

References

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Acknowledgements

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Pre-Discovered California, The Spanish, and Mexican Land Grants

Native Americans

- Archaeologists determined that Native Americans settled the area now known as Santa Cruz, California sometime between 1200 to 5000 years ago.¹
- The Native Americans that lived from Monterey to San Francisco were first referred to as Costanoan (which is missionization Spanish for “coastal peoples”) and later as the Ohlone (possibly in reference to the Olijan Rancho near San Francisco). Researchers continued to use Ohlone to refer to the peoples of the area but recognize that this group consisted of approximately 50 nation groups and language groups.
- The Indigenous Peoples of the Santa Cruz Mountain range had hunting-gathering-fire subsistence strategies that allowed for co-harvesting, long-term storage, and food exchange systems based on their access to the region’s ecological diversity: “marine, sandy beach, rocky shore, tidal and freshwater marsh, grassland prairie, oak grassland savanna, riparian, chaparral, mixed hardwood, and evergreen forest habitats.”²
- They built and lived in settlements and were not seasonally migratory, in part because the resources they needed for subsistence were abundant throughout the seasons in the same location.³
- The descendants of the Indigenous Peoples that inhabited the area now referred to as Swanton identify as Amah Mutsun.⁴

The Spanish/Mexican Land Grants

- Imperial Spain’s colonization of California began in 1697. Mexico gained independence from Spain on September 27, 1821.
- In 1839, Hilario Buelna received the property rights to Agua Puerca y las Trancas, translated as “hog water and the bars,” originally known as Rancho el Jarro. Hilario Buelna’s claim and subsequent claims by Thomas W. Russell and José de la Cruz Rodriguez were not recognized by the United States Government.⁵
- On November 2, 1843, the Rancho Agua Puerca y las Trancas land grant was made to brothers-in-law Ramón Rodríguez and Francisco Alviso by Mexican Governor Manuel Micheltorena. After both the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 and California’s establishment as a state in 1850, land grant ownership required validation.⁶
- In 1856, Ramón Rodríguez and Francisco Alviso had to prove their claim, which was ultimately successful.



Swanton (1800-1950)

- The historical documentation of Swanton covering 1800-1950 varies in specificity and accessibility as many documents are held in personal and family archives.
- This manuscript does not provide a comprehensive history of this period. Instead, it focuses on examples of historical narratives during this time period, how they can be deconstructed and studied using alternative narratives, and tools to provide additional context.
- Three examples of tools are reviewed: first, Al Smith’s 1990 interview providing a historical narrative of the area discussing the transition from the Rancho era to the Swanton era; second, the historical maps that refer to Scott Creek and the different name variants which provide an example of how maps can act as another tool in tracking history; third, aerial imagery that offers an example for studying history using the example of land use.
- Santa Cruz has a tradition of local histories which have covered aspects of the Swanton Valley, Davenport, and adjacent areas. Significant papers and books cover industries as well as famous residents. These works discuss Davenport, the Ocean Shore Railroad, the lime industry, the lumber industry (San Vicente Lumber and Big Creek Lumber), dairies (Coast Dairies), the Seaside School District, and Big Creek Electric Power and Light Company.
- The string of Swanton owners transformed the natural world around them into capital. James Archibald and Ambrogio Gianone turned grass into milk and cheese, some owners leased their land or water, Fred Swanton used water to create electricity, and the Railroad capitalized on logging companies’ need to transport lumber out of the Valley.⁷
- Early homesteaders, ranchers, and agricultural producers included W.H. Purdy, Alfred and Lucy Miller, J. Shaw, Harold Gianone, A.T. Brownfield, H.H. and Charles West, and the Staub Family. At the same time, John D. Davenport settled at El Jarro Point, later known as Davenport Landing, at the mouth of the Arroyo del Agua Puerca about half a mile from today’s town, which was a center for whaling, lumber, and lime shipping.⁸

Al Smith’s 1990 Interview - Rancho Era to Swanton Era (1800-1940s)

- The purpose of Smith’s interview and identity of the interviewer are unknown. No citations are given to support this account of Swanton history. How Smith came to learn of these events/people and why he (or the interviewer) chose to focus on them is unclear. The interview does provide a short, comprehensive narrative specific to Swanton Pacific Ranch on which to fuel a larger discussion.



The Artichoke Pioneers, Siberia, Swanton 1924. Conrado, Venturini, Pini, and Lombardi family members. Courtesy of Marie (Pini) Stoner.

Albert B. Smith

- Smith was born April 6, 1921 in San Jose, California. He grew up on his father’s ranch at Vasona Junction (now in Los Gatos), purchased in 1911. The whistles of the Mayfield branch steam locomotives that joined the Southern Pacific line to Santa Cruz at Vasona told him when to get up, when to go to school, when to go to bed; and thus his lifelong interest in railroading began.⁹ Smith first came to Swanton/Little Creek area as part of family camping trips. Later, he visited Camp Totocano (a.k.a. Camp Swanton) as part of the Boy Scouts of America, Scout Troop #39 (later #539), with Troop Master Kenny Robinson.¹⁰ In the 1940s, after attending San Jose State University for a year, Smith transferred to Cal Poly. The opportunity to work on the Southern Pacific Railroad was instrumental in bringing him to study at Cal Poly.¹¹

- While working on the Southern Pacific Railroad, he lost part of a leg.¹² Pre-dawn on a morning in February 1943, Smith was walking along the tops of the railroad cars near Pismo Beach when he fell onto the tracks.¹³ The freight train on which he was the head brakeman severed his left leg below the knee, and he used his belt as a tourniquet to stop the blood flow so he did not bleed to death.¹⁴

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Al Smith, Strawberry Shack, Swanton Pacific Ranch circa 1980. Courtesy Cal Poly Corporation, Swanton Pacific Railroad Society Collection.

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1868 General Land Office Records Rancho Agua Puerca y Las Trancas Plat Map. This image provides a detailed version of the area. United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, DM ID 380771, Lauren Upson (Surveyor General), 1868.

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*A 36" x 56" version of this poster was created for display during Al Smith Day at Swanton Pacific Ranch, 24 April 2016 and is still on display in one of the SPR meeting rooms. Cal Poly faculty, staff, and students conducting research at the ranch have requested that the content be made available electronically. The poster provides a condensed ranch history and the level of background they need to give context to their work.