

A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

BITE-SIZE BITS FROM THE RICH HISTORY OF SUGARLOAF RIDGE STATE PARK

CAMP BUTLER

During the 1930's, while most of the U.S. was mired in a deep Depression, the sounds of youthful laughter mingled with the rustle of leaves and the chirping of birds on the most scenic section of Hillside Trail. They were the sounds of Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls at play in Camp Butler.

Beginning in 1931 until WWII, the camp was the site of weekend and two-week summer activities for "inmates" of the Sonoma State Home in Eldridge and the children of staff members.¹ The camp was named for Dr. Frederick Otis Butler who served for 38 years as Superintendent of the Home.



The Boy Scouts were responsible for building the camp, which included a 28 by 18-foot cookhouse (shown here on the left). The scouts slept outside in tents. The scouts also helped to build a shale-lined swimming pond that was fed by a nearby stream. Across from the pond, a rock-bordered area served as the parade ground for scout ceremonies.

The fireplace and the outside patio of the cookhouse remain, but the pond (now filled with reeds) and a portion of the parade ground with a hole for the flagpole can be seen on Hillside Trail about 100 yards below the cookhouse ruins.

With the start of WWII the scouting activities at Camp Butler ceased as fuel supplies were rationed and many of the scouts and their leaders were drafted or enlisted in the war effort. As well, the patient profile at the Sonoma State Home began to change to care for more severely disabled persons. Other wards of the State who had been previously housed at the institution were sent to other facilities.

So, why was the Sonoma State Home in what is now Sugarloaf Ridge State Park? In 1920, the old 1,040-acre Reynolds Ranch (owned at that time by John and Hetty Warboys) was purchased by the State of California. The State was interested in the watershed of Sonoma Creek, which they hoped to divert to the growing and water-shorted Home in Eldridge near Glen Ellen.

As early as February 1920, work had begun on the water diversion project with most of the labor performed by inmates of the hospital. Efforts to build a dam were underway when a legal dispute arose with nearby property owners who also depended upon the Sonoma Creek waters. The neighboring property owners won that battle and the project to divert water was cancelled.

The hospital eventually constructed Suttonfield Dam on property in Eldridge thus ending their chronic water shortage. The photo on the right shows how Suttonfield Lake appears today. It is interesting to speculate that a significant portion of what is now Sugarloaf Ridge State Park might have looked like this if the Sonoma State Home's plans had been realized! There is little chance that it ever would have become a state park.



After the Sonoma State Home scrapped their plans to divert the waters of Sonoma Creek, they continued to use the old Reynolds Ranch property to pasture animals. After the end of WWII and the closure of Camp Butler, the State property was leased for five-year terms for cattle grazing and hunting.

IN 1959 the Reynolds Ranch was declared as surplus property. Its immediate public sale was prevented by the review of state lands for the placement of a North Bay Area state college. This allowed time for public and political forces to martial efforts to make the property a state park.

On September 24, 1964 the Reynolds Ranch property was transferred to the California Division of Beaches and Parks and designated "Sugarloaf Ridge State Park". The park was opened to the public on Memorial Day weekend 1969 under the direction of its first resident ranger, Milo Shepard.

Note: If you have not already seen it, please check out the video of Camp Butler in the Visitor Center.

¹ The Sonoma State Home was founded in Vallejo in 1883 as the California Home for the Care and Training of the Feeble-Minded. Following its moves to Santa Clara and then to Eldridge in the Valley of the Moon, the name of the institution was changed several times to the Sonoma State Home (1909), the Sonoma State Hospital (1953) and the Sonoma Developmental Center (1986).

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