

A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

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

Homesteads and Homesteaders in Sugarloaf Ridge SP: Part I

In the first issue of *Spoonful* we introduced the Wappos, the first known inhabitants of what is now Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. Following the decimation of the Wappos from infectious diseases and forced removal during the 1850's, there were no known inhabitants of Sugarloaf until the arrival of homesteaders. To tell their story we need to look back to the birth of our nation.

When we won our independence from England, the fledgling United States of America received over 270 million acres of land east of the Mississippi, not including the original 13 colonies. These lands were initially used as payment to soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War. Later, the nation's store of land was vastly increased as a result of the Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican War, the Oregon Treaty, the purchase of Alaska and the annexation of Hawaii. Over time, public lands were sold at auctions to the highest bidder at or above a minimum price set by Congress. Public land sales boomed.



Public land sales during the late 18th and early 19th century were strong, but there was an awful lot of public land to be settled. So, Congress in 1862 passed the Homestead Act which was signed into law by President Lincoln on the first day of 1863 “to lift artificial burdens from all shoulders and to give everyone an unfettered start and fair chance in the race of life.” The Homestead Act was the most significant and enduring event in the westward expansion of the nation.

In a nutshell, the Homestead Act allowed settlement of up to 160 acres of public land and required only proof of residence with improvement and cultivation of the land. Any citizen who was at least 21 years of age and the head of household and who had not taken up arms against the U.S. government or given aid or comfort to its enemies could apply. (Later revisions of the act after the Civil War did, however, open eligibility to former members of the Confederacy.)

There were approximately 4,000 homestead declarations filed in Sonoma County between the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 and its termination in 1921. The archives of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) identify no fewer than 68 homesteads in and around the area that is now Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. John D. Bowen is reputed to be the first homesteader in the area of the park. His 160-acre homestead, which was patented in 1867, was located just outside the south boundary of the park above the campground and is now covered by a vineyard owned by the Thatcher family. Other homesteads of historic interest include the Luttrell, McCormick, Fitzsimmons, and Hamilton homesteads, whose properties have expanded the original boundaries of the park.

The homestead that is of greatest significance to the history of the park is, no doubt, the Hurd family homestead also known as the Bear Creek Ranch (1914-1930). The site of the Hurd's homestead is accessible to hikers in the park who walk the various routes to Bald Mountain and then descend the High Ridge Trail approximately one mile to the remains of the Hurd family's home, pictured on the right, and the intact and picturesque Red Barn, pictured below.



There is much to tell about the Hurd family and their homestead along Bear Creek, high up in the Mayacamas Ridge. But we are out of space; so, the next issue of *Spoonful* will be devoted to their story, as told by two of the Hurd children who grew up on the ranch. It's a fascinating part of the park's history and maybe we'll discover if hippies really did burn down the Hurd house.

Prepared by:
Larry Maniscalco
Sugarloaf Ridge SP History Docent
September 2016