

A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

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

The Hurd Family Homestead

In part I of this two-part series on homesteads, we learned that there were no fewer than 68 homesteads in the area in and around what is now Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. Of these small family farms, the homestead that is of most historical interest is the Hurd family homestead, also known as the Bear Creek Ranch. Here is their story...

In 1914, Ray and Bertha Hurd loaded their household goods and the first six of their 10 surviving children onto a horse-drawn wagon and began the short but arduous journey from Napa Valley to their permanent home on a rugged 160-acre parcel of public land on the far side of Mayacamas ridge near Bear Creek. Their first task was to construct a home. It was only a 12x12-foot wooden cabin with a dirt floor (photo at right), but it would be followed later by a larger and more permanent house and a large red barn. These structures, as well as improvements to the land, met the provisions of the Homestead Act and by 1920 the Hurd's were granted ownership of the ranch.



The Hurds were typical of many of the Midwestern homesteaders in Sonoma County. Ray Hurd was born in Iowa on September 28, 1878 and died in 1975 in Napa at age 96. He was one of seven children. His father, Thomas Hurd, was born in Olean, N.Y. and his mother, Anna Augustus Wilhemina Menge, was born in Germany. Bertha Alice Hurd (nee Saunders) was born in Bridgewater, South Dakota on June 28, 1883 and died near Blue Lake, California on July 12, 1956. Her father and mother were born in South Dakota. Bertha had six sisters, one of whom, Myrtle Cookson, lived on the nearby Cookson homestead. A second sister, with the surname Harrison, lived on the Vertosa ranch on the north side of Bald Mountain.

Bertha and Ray married in 1901 and gave birth to eleven children, one of whom, Edwin, died at age 11. The Hurd progeny included Raymond, the eldest, born in 1903 and his siblings Ralph (1905), Fern Hurd Williams (1906), Hazel Hurd Harding (1908), Edwin (1909), James (1910), Grace Hurd Williams (1912), Pearl Hurd Mora (1915), Francis (1922), Alvin (1926) and Irma Hurd Mitchell (1928). Ray and Bertha had 24 grandchildren and 25 great-grandchildren. The size of the extended Hurd clan was estimated in 1981 to be 682 persons and family reunions held at the Bear Creek ranch attracted as many as 200 persons.

Senior State Archeologist Breck Parkman has described life at the Bear Creek Ranch from its beginning in 1914 to when it was sold in 1930: "The family was almost completely self-sufficient, due in part to their

geographic isolation. They raised a few cows and had chickens and turkeys, and they grew vegetables in a small garden. A small orchard, including walnuts and apricots, was planted near the house and a fruit cellar was dug nearby. The family did a lot of canning and they put away dried apples and sweet corn as well. Bertha cooked on a big wood range, which also heated the house. During deer hunting season, when hunters roamed the local hills, she would often cook for the hunters, feeding them at the family's dining table."

Ray, in 1916, constructed a small schoolhouse at the homestead and then hired a teacher who lived with the family. From then on, the kids and some of the neighboring children went to their own school until they were in high school.



You would think that with all of those children running carefree in the meadows and forests of the Mayacamas ridge, accidents would occur and they did. One of the children, Alvin, almost cut off his foot on a broken bottle and another, Francis, almost bit his tongue in two. A third child, Grace, was bitten by a rattlesnake. In all of these cases, enterprising and resilient Bertha took immediate action. For Alvin's cut foot, she stopped the bleeding by pouring sugar into the wound, which allowed her the necessary time to get him to the doctor. She alone treated little Grace's snakebite, with no trip needed for further care. In 1917, another of Ray and Bertha's children, Raymond (photo on the left), lost his leg in an accident at the naval shipyard on Mare Island. He came back to the

homestead and secluded himself there for the next three years, self-conscious of his missing limb.

In the early 1920s, the family with the help of a neighbor constructed a road that would allow them access to the Sonoma Valley via Adobe Canyon. About that time, the area around the old Bear Creek Lodge was thought to have been used as a nudist retreat. As the road passed near this unseen camp, it was the cause of great speculation among the Hurd kids, according to an interview conducted with Hazel, Francis and Alvin in 1983 by Ranger Linda Gresham.

Ray and Bertha sold their ranch in 1930 to a businessman who used the property as a deer hunting club. The new owner added a structure or two of his own, including a deer-dressing shed, the ruins of which can be seen at the homestead site. In time, the property changed hands once again and was later leased out to several different tenants. In 1967, more than 30 hippies were said to have been living on the ranch and it was estimated by a neighbor that as many as 90 people spent the weekends there. During a weekend in 1967, the old house burned to the ground, apparently the result of an untended candle.

Today, hikers in the park can visit the Hurd homestead by walking to the top of Bald Mountain and down the High Ridge Trail for about a mile to the red barn and the remains of the family's permanent house.

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October 2016