



Wilder Ranch State Park

Historic Dairy Preserve

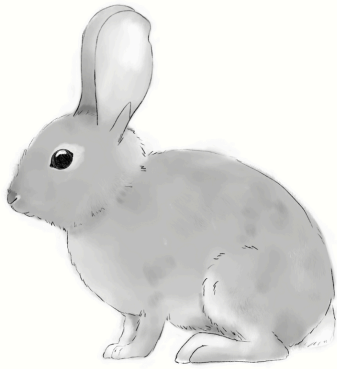


History • Innovation • Legacy

1401 Old Coast Rd. Santa Cruz CA 95060, (831) 423-9703

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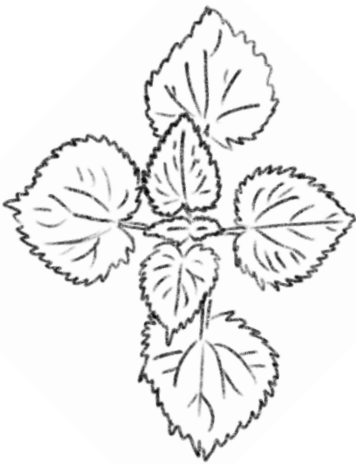
Welcome to Wilder Ranch State Park's Historic Dairy Preserve



On your visit today:

Allow yourself to step back in time as you enjoy the historic buildings and lush gardens. Be on the lookout as you walk! You might spot a bobcat, brush rabbit, hawk or some friendly farm animals!

These plants are best avoided:



Stinging Nettle:

Jagged-edged, dark green leaves. Tiny, visible stinging "hairs" on leaves and stem. Sometimes mistaken for mint



Poison Oak:

Oils from this plant's leaves or stems cause a rash. Bright green or red, waxy leaves on smooth stems. "Leaves of 3, leave it be." If the stem has thorns, it is not poison oak



Poison Hemlock:

This tall-growing invasive plant has long stems marked with purple blotches. Leaves look fern or carrot-like. White flowers. Only poisonous to ingest

Please observe the following:

- Do not feed the farm animals!
- Hike only during open hours
- All park features are protected by law. Do not disturb in any way
- No pets allowed. Their predator smell frightens wildlife and farm animals
- Observe closed signs

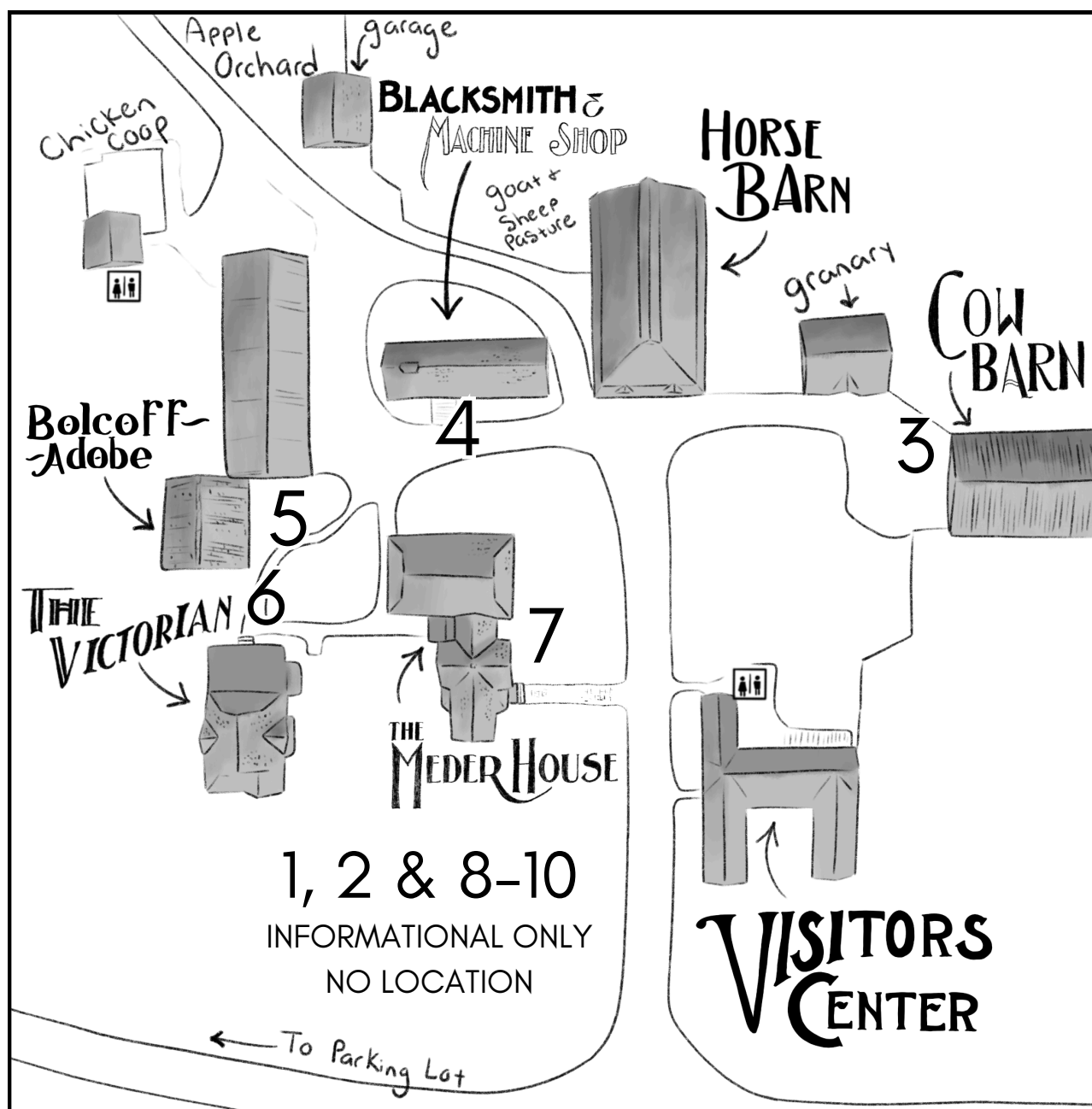


Scan here for the
park's webpage &
accessibility
features

Enjoy this walk around the Historic Dairy Preserve as you dive into the rich history of Wilder Ranch. Feel free to enter buildings that are open, and look through windows of ones that aren't.

If any friendly farm animals come say "hello", please give them lots of love, but *do not feed them anything* (including grass)!

Sections 1, 2, and 8-10 are informational only, not location-based.
3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 represent physical locations or buildings to look inside.



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1. This is Indigenous Land

Wilder Ranch State Park lies within the unceded territory of the Awaswas-speaking people known as the Uypi, who stewarded the lands and waters in this region since time immemorial.

Prior to European colonization, the central coast of California was home to some of the most densely-populated Indigenous societies in the world. Linguistic diversity in Native California is greater than anywhere else in North America, with over 100 languages and dialects. This linguistic diversity underscores the degree of social complexity, political relations, economic ties, sophistication of resource management practices, and intricate relationships with the land enacted by Native Californians.

The earliest archaeological sites in the park date to over 7000 years old, though this timeline is limited because of issues with preservation. Lower sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age mean any earlier coastal sites would have been submerged or destroyed from sea level rise. Many Native groups affirm that they have been here since time immemorial.

The wealth of flora and fauna in this region coupled with human innovation and sophisticated natural resource management practices enabled them to accumulate surplus resources and, in some cases, population densities commonly associated with agriculture. Far from “living off the land”, Native people in this region lived *with* the land, relating to the natural resources here as their own kin.

Despite the impacts of colonialism, Native people are still here today and are represented by several groups throughout the Monterey Bay Area, including the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, Indian Canyon Mutsun Band of Costanoan-Ohlone Peoples, Pajaro Valley Indian Council, Costanoan Rumsen Carmel Tribe, and the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, among others.

2. A Long, Rich History

The history of what is now Wilder Ranch State Park goes back thousands of years. As you explore the Historic Dairy Complex, you will find yourself among structures from many time periods. The timeline below shows some of the major events and people who lived here to help you keep your bearings while metaphorically jumping around the timeline of this land.

Since time immemorial, Awaswas-speaking Uypi people stewarded this land

1769: Portola Expedition explores SF bay, mission San Diego founded and mission system begins

1791: Santa Cruz Mission founded by Spaniards

1800

1815: This land was part of the Santa Crus Mission, and known as Rancho del Matadero (Slaughterhouse Ranch)

1821: Mexican independence, CA becomes part of Mexico

1833: The Secularization Decree, mission system disbanded

1834: Santa Cruz Mission disbanded

1839: Rancho Refugio (this land) granted to Maria Candida

Castro, wife of Jose Antonio Bolcoff

1850: CA becomes US state

1854: Moses Meder forecloses on the ranch land

1859: Original Meder house and cow barn built

1871: Deloss Wilder and Levi Baldwin purchase the ranch land

1885: Ranch land split in half and Wilder Ranch is created

1897: Victorian home built for Melvin Wilder

1900

1937: Wilders stopped dairying and switched to raising beef cattle

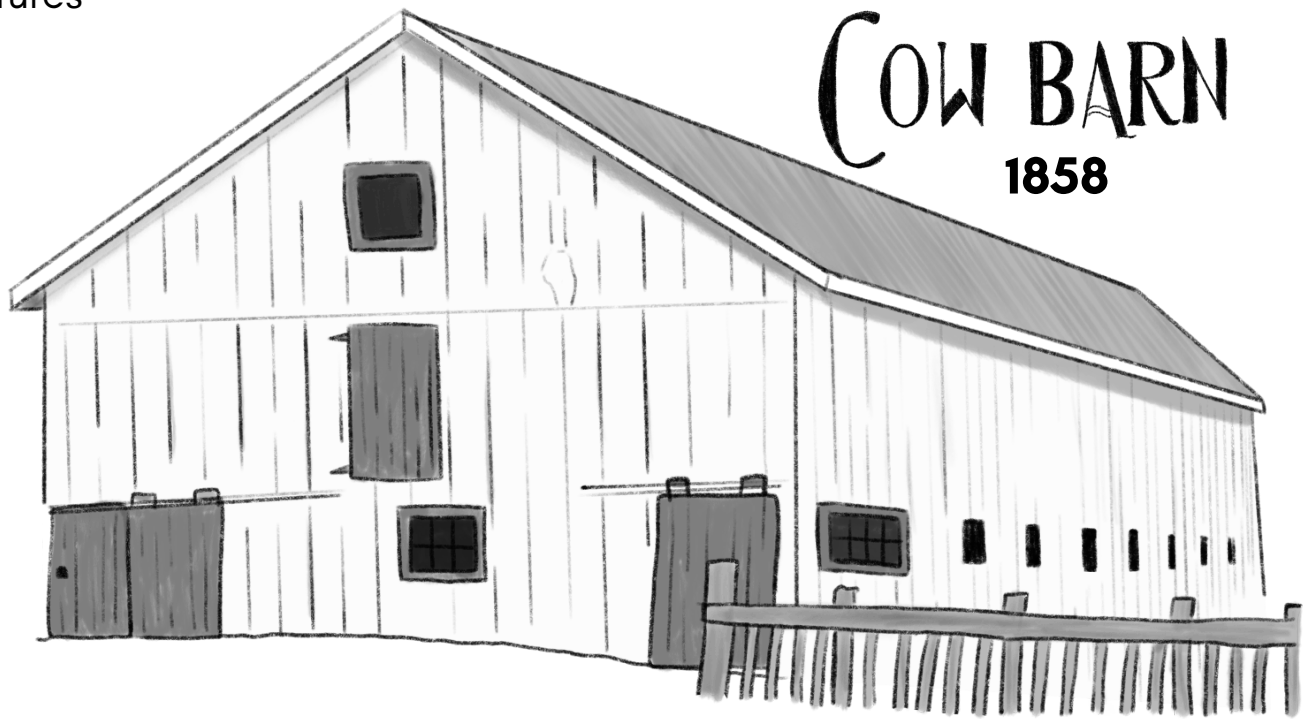
1964: Wilder family no longer ranching

1969: Wilder Ranch sold to developers

1974: Wilder Ranch sold to state of CA to be turned into a State Park

3. Yellow Gold

The large Cow Barn you are seeing was originally built by Moses Meder in 1859, and was later doubled in length by the Wilders in the 1870s. The expanded half is no longer present, and the current portion was restored in 2019 to maintain its structural integrity, though a majority of the original beams still stand. Look through a window or over the outer fence, and you may notice some interesting features



This barn is where the cows were milked twice daily. The Wilders had 300 head of dairy cattle (and another 200 of beef cattle) during the peak of the Wilder Dairy operation, though not all of them would be producing milk at once. These cows were milked by hand, by ranch hands who lived and worked here. Notice the lawn adjacent to the barn. This is where the creamery once stood before it burned down in 1959.

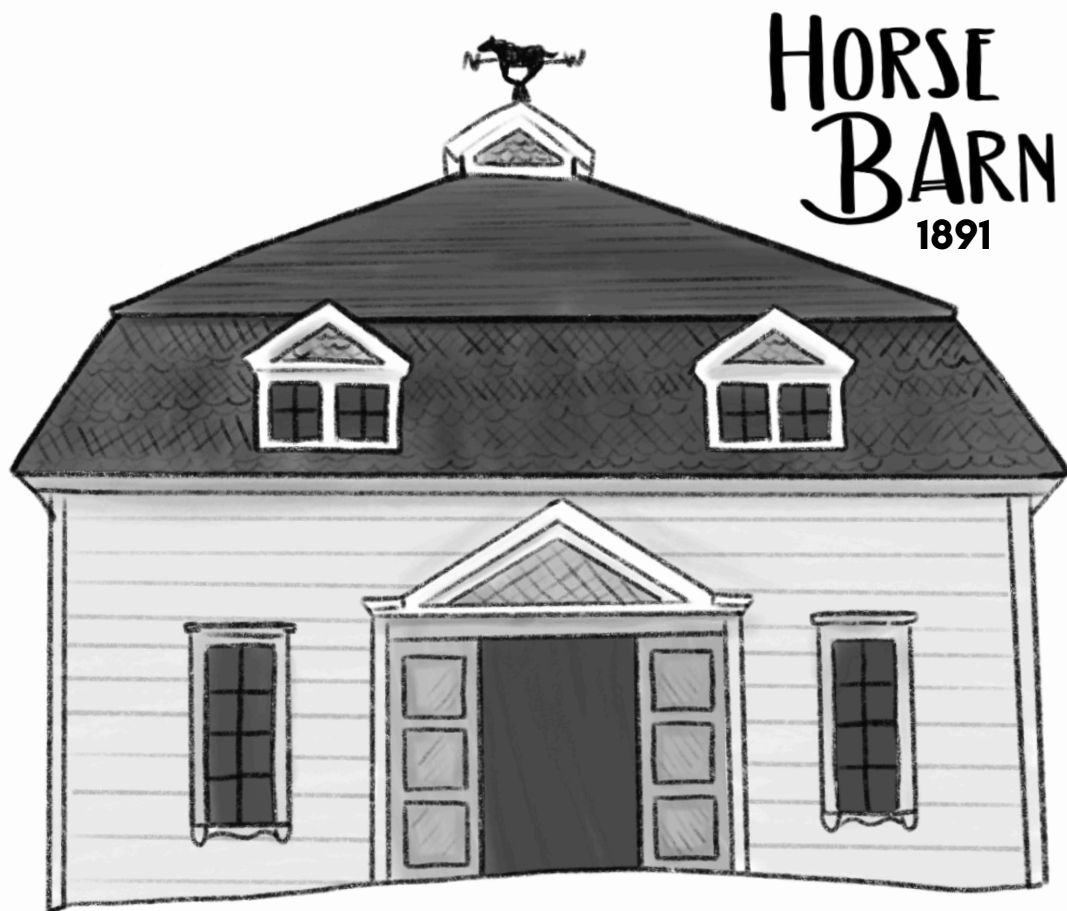
Once the cows were milked, the milk was taken to the creamery where the cream was removed and churned into butter, the Wilder family's yellow gold. This butter was sold to restaurants in San Francisco for \$1 per pound, which is equivalent to over \$30 per pound in 2024.

The Cow Barn was built using traditional timber framing techniques predating the use of nails in construction. Beams are carved to slot together, and a wooden dowel is pushed through both interlocking pieces, creating a strong but flexible mortise and tenon joints.

Look over the fence to the left of the Cow Barn's entrance and you will find Wilder Creek. This building was deliberately built to bridge over this stream for two reasons:

The first is a form of natural air conditioning. With the barn propped above the ground and the creek's water flowing beneath, air is drawn through the barn, keeping it cool on warm days.

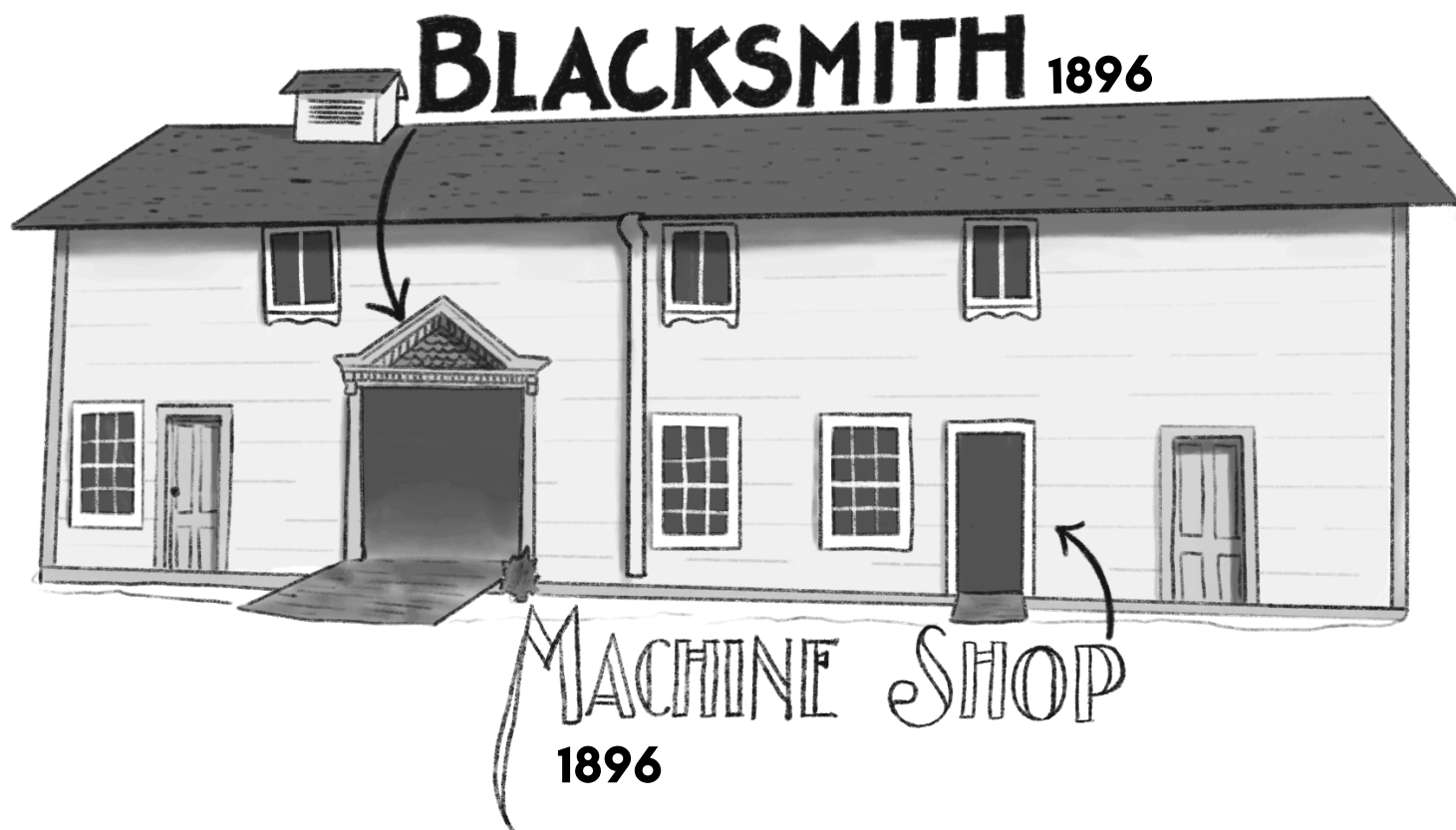
The second is waste disposal. If you look into the barn, you may see a large black line in the concrete floor. This line was originally a trough. Cows lined up with their heads in the stanchions toward the center of the barn to be milked, leaving their rears directly over the trough. Any mess could be swept from the trough directly into the creek below: a simple waste disposal system. Today, we balk at the idea of deliberately sweeping contaminants into our natural ecosystem, of course, but for its time, this was an innovative way to keep a clean barn and happy cows.



On your way to the Machine Shop and Blacksmith Shop, take a look at the iconic Horse Barn. This ornate structure formerly held the carriages and horses of Wilder Family. Note the intricate shingle pattern, filigree and unique weathervane.

4. Ahead of Their Time

There are two sections of this building: the blacksmith shop behind the red double doors on the left and the machine shop behind the blue door on the right. Enter both or look through the windows on the back end of the building to get a glimpse inside.



In the machine shop lies one piece of equipment that changed the Wilder Dairy forever: the Pelton Wheel. Pelton wheels are double-cupped water wheels that efficiently make use of water power.

The water for this Pelton Wheel comes from a man-made reservoir in the backcountry. The reservoir starts with trashcan-width pipes that slowly shrink in diameter as the water flows down from 200ft in elevation and emerges here, in the shop, to run the Pelton Wheel.

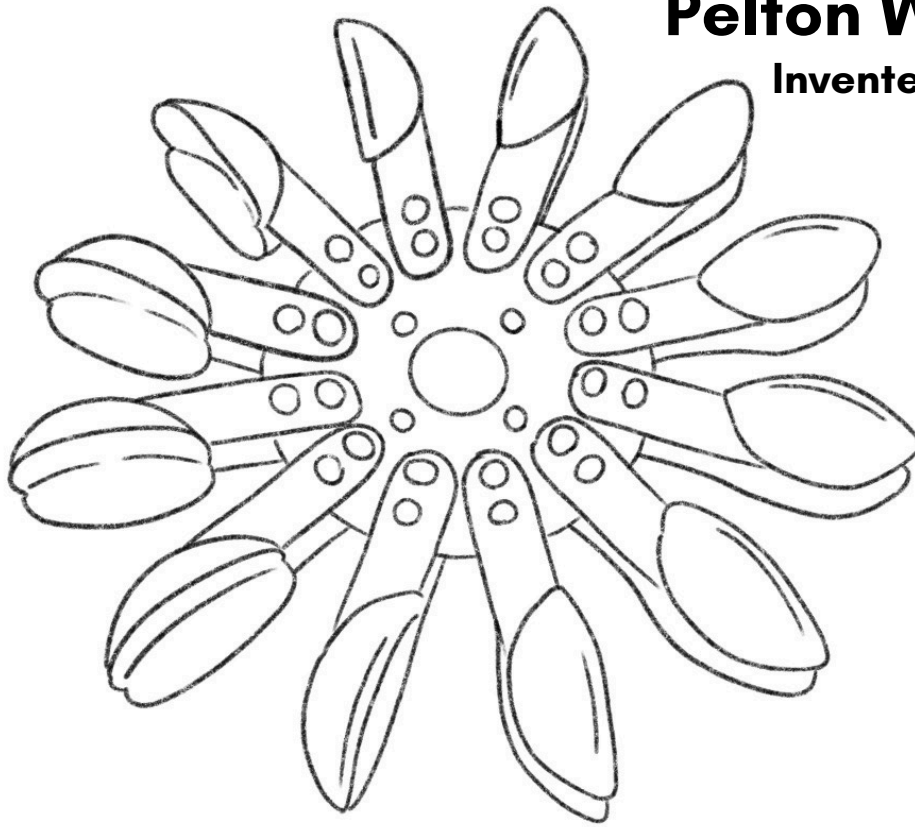
As the Pelton Wheel spins, it turns a large leather belt (visible along the back wall) which turns the central drive shaft in the middle of the room. Each piece of equipment has its own belt attached to and driven by that central drive shaft.

Every device in this room could function from the Pelton Wheel's power, but none were more important than an electric Dynamo generator (not the one you see in the center of the room). This generator powered the whole ranch including lights and appliances in the homes, and lights inside and outside of the barn.

The Wilders had electricity in the homes and barn here in 1889, only 4 years after the city of Santa Cruz installed the first electric street lamps in 1885.

Pelton Wheel

Invented 1880

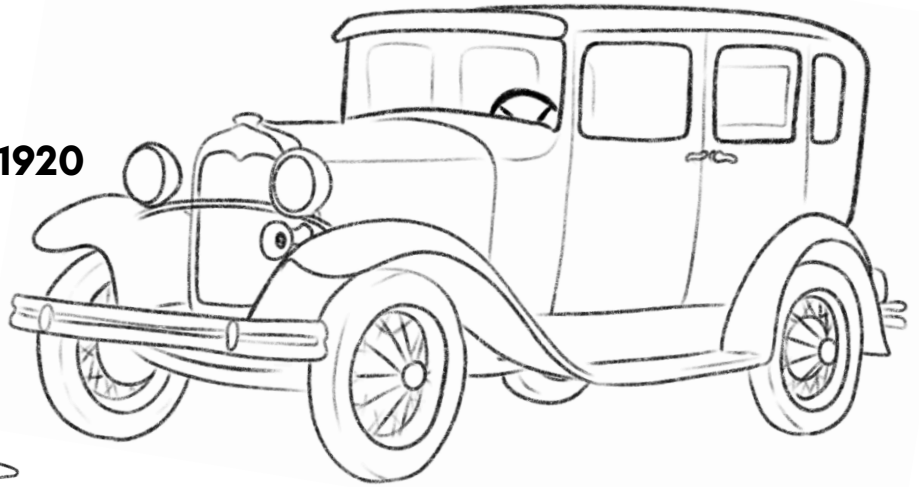


In the Blacksmith Shop next door, you'll find all the tools and equipment necessary to mend and shape metal items like gate hooks, storage hooks, simple nails, and much more!

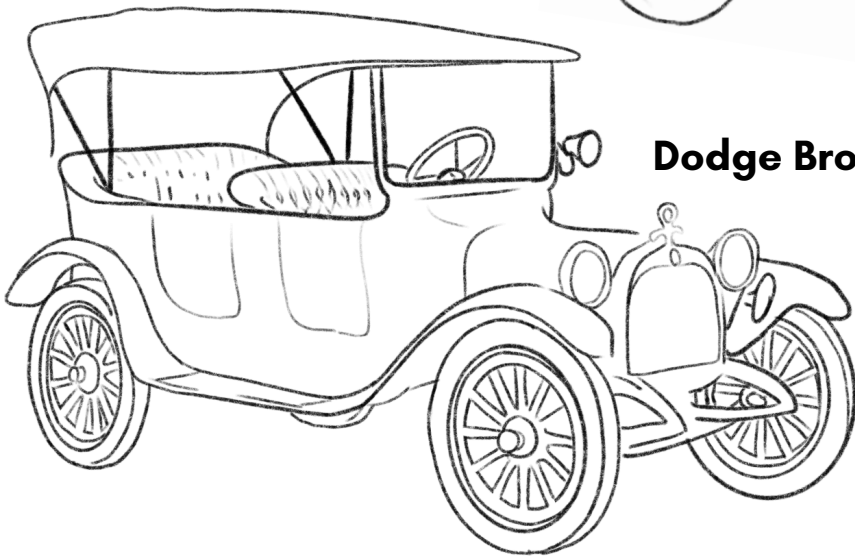
Blacksmiths use coal to stoke a 3,000 degree fire. This heat allows the blacksmiths to soften steel, and use hammers to pound the metal into new shapes. The bellows for this forge are also powered by a Pelton Wheel, allowing blacksmiths to focus less on keeping the fire hot, and more on shaping their metal. This forge is fully functional and you can see blacksmithing demonstrations during special events hosted here.

Feel free to stop by the garage (built in 1903) before heading to the next stop. This Knox Garage showcases two cars: A 1920 Ford Model A and a 1915 Dodge Brothers model 30-35. The Wilders owned the first car in Santa Cruz County, a 1903 Knox. Because the technology was still new and unreliable, this garage was built far from the rest of the buildings in case a fire broke out.

Ford, Model A, 1920



Dodge Brothers, 1915



5. The Bolcoff Adobe

Before secularization, this land was part of Mission Santa Cruz. This area was known as Rancho del Matadero or “Slaughterhouse Ranch”. During this period, native people inhabited these lands and built several (no longer remaining) adobe buildings.

José Antonio Bolcoff was a Russian sailor, born under the name Osip Volkov, who became a naturalized Mexican citizen around 1815. Because of his literacy, he was a valuable asset to the local Mexican government and was involved in dismantling Mission Santa Cruz. He eventually married Maria Candida Castro, of the famed Castro family.

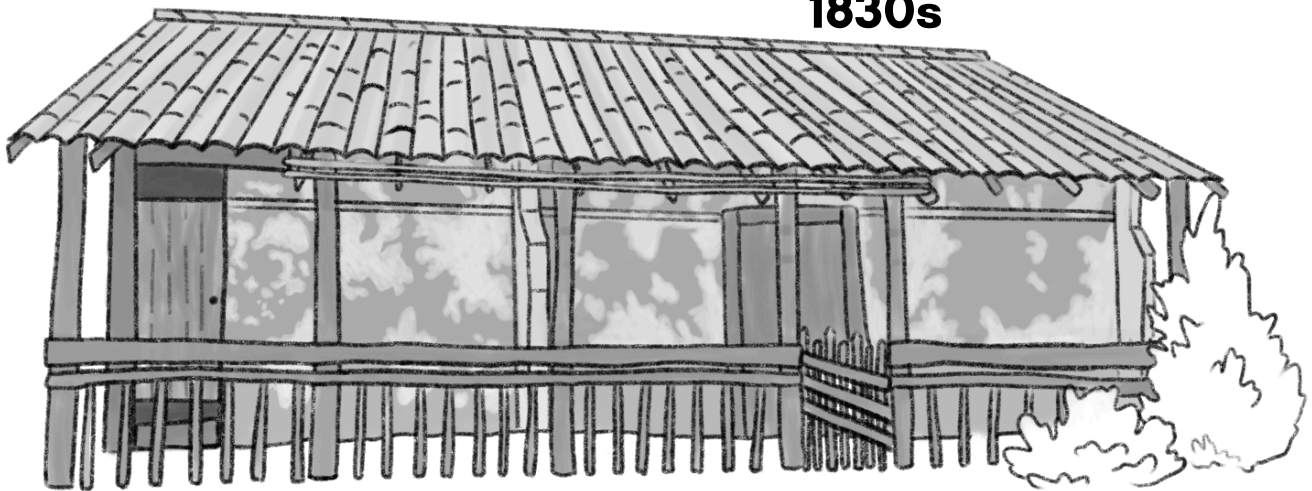
When Mission Santa Cruz was disbanded, 12,000 acres of land called Rancho Refugio, was granted to Maria Candida Castro and her two sisters. José Antonio Bolcoff was named on the land's deed. Part of Rancho Refugio eventually became Wilder Ranch.

When California became a state, land deeds were closely inspected by the courts to determine who had legitimate claim to the land. Deeds that were determined 'illegitimate' were turned over to settlers from the eastern states, perpetuating American manifest destiny.

Rancho Refugio was among the properties closely inspected.

As legal fees compounded, Bolcoff borrowed money from a man named Moses Meder. Bolcoff's case went all the way to the supreme court where it was determined that his claim was legitimate, however the debt was too deep and Meder foreclosed on the property in 1854.

-Bolcoff Adobe- 1830s



This solely remaining structure was built in the 1830s by native laborers, and was once part of a complex of adobe buildings. Remnants of foundations have been found as far as the main parking lot.

Note the terracotta tiles on this building. These tiles were formed for, or in the same method as, the Santa Cruz Mission. You may also see large concrete buttresses supporting the adobe's walls. These supports were put in by the Wilder family in 1946 in order to preserve the building. You are welcome to walk to the side of and behind this building to look into windows to view the interior through its windows.

The historic gardens are not an official stop on this self-guided tour, since they encompass the entire ranch. However, please feel free to wander and enjoy their seasonal beauty. No matter what time of year you visit, you will surely find something blooming. This garden is meticulously curated by our volunteers, so please help keep the flowers blooming by staying on the paths and not picking flowers.

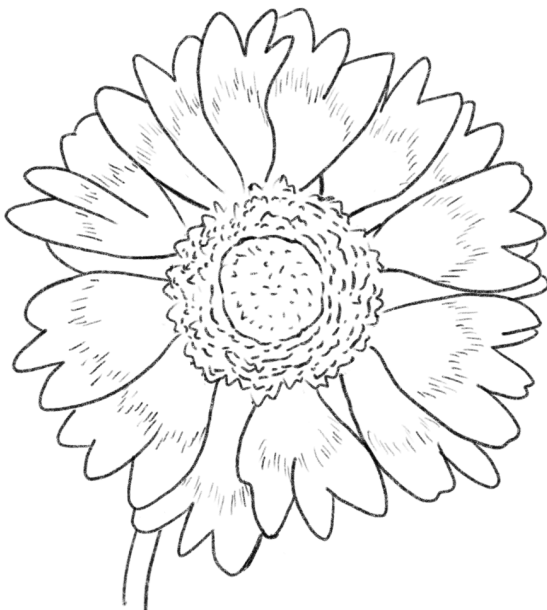
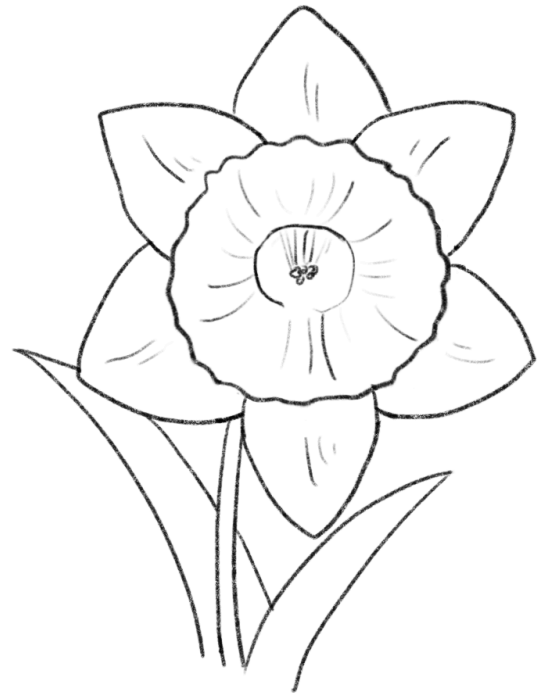


Native CA Rose

These delicate blossoms are a California native! During the spring, they have small pink blooms, and during the fall, their red rose hips are a source of vitamin C for local birds.

Daffodil

These sunny yellow flowers are some of the earliest blooms we see in our garden. The Wilders likely had Daffodils and other related bulbs planted throughout the property.



Mexican Blanket

Wide, brightly-colored flowers make a perfect nectar source for local pollinators. These striking red and yellow flowers keep our gardens colorful through the summer months.

6. The Victorian

This home is known as The Victorian. It was built in 1897 for Melvin Wilder, one of the Wilder sons, as a wedding present. Melvin Wilder was technologically inclined and was one of the first people to ever obtain a degree in electrical engineering from Stanford University. His family saw his potential and wanted his innovation to enhance the family business. Melvin Wilder used the Pelton Wheel to power the electric Dynamo generator in the machine shop, which brought electricity to the ranch. Melvin and his wife, Lettie, lived in The Victorian and he took over the family business from his father.



Melvin and Lettie had two children, Ethel Wilder and Deloss R (D.R.) Wilder. Ethel was the first female truck driver in Santa Cruz, and delivered milk into town during World War I alongside the men. D.R. eventually took over the dairy and continued the family business.

7. The Meder House

The majority of the Meder House was built in 1859 by Moses Meder, however there is a large boxy bunk-house addition that expanded the house in 1912. This house was truly the center of the ranch during the Wilder's time. Many ranch hands lived in the bedrooms in the top floor of this building, as well as some of the Wilder family. This building also features a large kitchen with a custom double-ranged woodburning oven, and a group dining room in which the cowboys and Wilder family would eat together every day.

Song Si Lee was a Chinese immigrant who cooked for the Wilders and their ranch hands for 20 years. He kept everyone fed 6.5 days a week, and only returned to his family in Santa Cruz's last China Town on Sunday evenings. His decedents remain in the area.

The interior of this house also features some of the Wilder Family's hobbies, including photography and music. In the parlor, you'll find a Victrola record player, and a player piano. The Wilders, particularly Melvin, were fond of trick photos, so this home features several images of the family dog playing a violin and writing letters, as well as a spliced photo of D.D. Wilder mowing the lawn next to himself.



8. Operation Wilder

In 1969, the Wilder family sold this land to developers. The Santa Cruz City Council approved the land for a development plan that would add up to 10,000 new homes to the area, effectively doubling the city of Santa Cruz. A group of Santa Cruz residents, dubbed “Operation Wilder”, advocated that the land be made into an open space natural preserve. After several years of protests and advocating, California State Parks purchased the land in 1974. State Parks proceeded with much-needed maintenance and repairs, and the park was first opened to the public in May of 1989.

VISITOR'S CENTER

Built 1943, Renovated 2001,
Flooded January 2024



9. Changing Futures

In January of 2024, a long rainy winter caused Wilder Creek (the small creek that flows under the Cow Barn) to flood. With a season's worth of debris in the creek, even a small amount of rain was enough to cause the creek to rise much higher than it normally would, flooding the Cow Barn, goat pastures and Visitor's Center.

Luckily, the Cow Barn and goat pastures sustained minimal damage, but the Visitor's Center was flooded in as deep as 6 inches of water in all of its rooms. California State Parks is in the process of remediating, remodeling and reopening the old Visitor's Center. The Meder House is currently serving as our short-term Visitor's Center, which is intermittently open when staffing allows it.

10. More Than History

While the history of Wilder Ranch is an important feature of the park, it is not the sole attraction. Wilder Ranch has 35 miles of trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding, including coastal views along the Old Cove Landing and Ohlone Bluff Trails, serene redwood forests along the Enchanted Loop, vibrant coastal oak forests along the Englesman Loop, and scenic grasslands along the Long Meadow Trail.

Stop at the Kiosk or Visitor's Center to get a paper map, or visit our official California State Parks webpage to download a digital map.

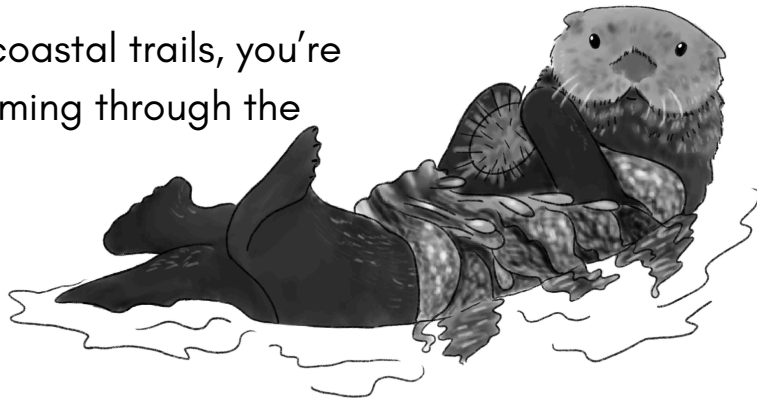


Bobcat

Bobcats are commonly seen at Wilder Ranch, hunting squirrels, mice and rabbits. If you don't see them, you can still find evidence that they were here by looking for their paw prints and fur-filled scat along the trail.

Southern Sea Otters

If you're exploring any of the coastal trails, you're likely to see a Sea Otter swimming through the kelp forests. Once hunted to near extinction, Sea Otters now find safety in the Monterey Bay.



White-Crowned Sparrow

Listen for the White-Crowned Sparrow, which is known for singing its crisp melody.

White-Crowned Sparrows are easy to identify by the black and white stripes on their heads.



Thank You for Visiting Wilder Ranch State Park