

A history of Carpinteria Creek

By Jill Komoto, Chair, Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition

Today as you walk on the bike path along Carpinteria Creek you may spot a red-tailed hawk or on a rare occasion, a green heron. Along the way you'll pass over a concrete bridge covering a broken culvert and may wonder if fish can get through. Then you'll see Cape Ivy or Giant Reed strangling California native plants. Since it's been a dry winter, flow in the creek is stagnant and you may see algae in the water. Was it always like this?

Research into the past of Carpinteria Creek suggests otherwise. Several studies have been done of the Pleistocene material in the Tar Pits area just east of the mouth of Carpinteria Creek. David Banks Rogers in 1927 found artifacts of three distinct Native American cultures living along the creek and named them the Hunting People, Oak Grove People and the Canalino/Chumash. Researchers have found evidence that the area was once a great forest, not unlike the Monterey area, with an abundance of pine and conifer species such as the Bishop Pine, Monterey Pine and Douglas Fir. Birds found at the Tar Pits site corroborates this conclusion, as species such as Steller's Jay and Pygmy Nuthatch, which are only associated with pine trees or other conifers, are not present today. The remains of shrews, also strongly associated with coniferous trees were also found in the asphalt deposits. Other extinct animals such as the Imperial Elephant and Tusked Mastodon once roamed the Carpinteria Valley. A few bird specimens, such as the Red Breasted Nuthatch and the Fox Sparrow were identified in the Tar Pits, and are now seen on the rare occasion in Carpinteria Creek.

Much has changed since the Pleistocene era. When Gaspar de Portola arrived in Carpinteria in 1769, he found four Native American villages: Xuco, Bix, Sopono (Mishopshnow), Alloc (Kolok). Only two villages (Mishopshnow, Kolok) remained by the time Bautista de Anza arrived in 1776. Missions were established along the coast, and Carpinteria was intended to be used as one of the sites, but was dismissed because of the lack of water. Carpinteria was an area of "Some pasture land, plentiful live oaks, but little water". (Blick, J 1950 thesis). By the turn of the 20th century, population in Carpinteria was estimated at 500, 2,864 in 1950 and the 2000 census reported 14,194.

With the arrival of Europeans came the utilization of the land for farming, homes and transportation. After the Spanish arrived, cattle were raised for hide and tallow. It was not until the Gold Rush era that there was a demand for fresh beef. In 1855, Henry Dalley opened the first commercial establishment in the area, a country store and restaurant. A town was established in 1863 to serve as a trading center and shipping point for agriculture in the area.

The period from 1858-1900 was an era of thirty-two varieties of crops, with the chief source of income from lima beans and walnuts. Lemons were first planted in 1883, and were the primary crop by the 1950's. Avocados were re-introduced in the late 1930's and have replaced lemons as the chief crop in Carpinteria. During the 1880's when Presidential candidate James G. Blaine ran for office, Carpinteria was a big supplier of

Pampas grass. The dried plumes were the style of the day as decorations, but when the dried grass caused a number of fires, the demand for the plant lessened. In 1888 an ostrich farm was started on the property along Lillingston canyon, as its plumes were very popular. But in 1910, the owners found that the environment was not suitable for raising ostriches and sold the property to Curtis Cate.

The flood of 1914 brought extensive damage to the valley, where six inches of rain fell in the mountains within 20 hours. From west of Carpinteria Creek to the polo grounds, the land was covered with water. In 1928, the Cerca del Mar, Beach and Social Club opened up where the campground exists today. It went bankrupt shortly thereafter and was used as a rehabilitation center during World War II and later as a residence for park rangers. El Niño struck in 1969, and the resulting flood event caused extensive bank erosion along Gobernador, Lillingston and Carpinteria Creeks.

So today as you walk along Carpinteria Avenue, close your eyes and imagine a vast forest of oaks, sycamores and perhaps a few pine trees. Perhaps one day you won't have to imagine hundreds of steelhead in Carpinteria Creek.

Photo caption: Historic view of the oak forest along Casitas Pass Road.