



# California State Parks

## Video Transcript



### ***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

Hello, everybody. We're going to do the logging history walk here today.

Before we start on the logging history, I wanted to tell a little bit about the Van Damme State Park. The park was created by Charles Van Damme, who in 1930 passed away and left forty acres here to the State. Unfortunately, he died at the age of 49, which was a little young for anybody. He was born in a house, which is over on the other side of the bluff here, which is this house in this picture right here. His dad worked in the woods—he grew up here. He went to San Francisco to a business college—went a few years, didn't like it; chased gold in Alaska; hit it rich. Multimillionaire in gold. Came back to the Bay Area, started a small trucking company in the Bay Area, and, this was in the early 1900s, discovered he couldn't get his trucks across the bay. So he started the San Rafael-Richmond ferry business, which developed into one of the richest ferry systems in the Bay Area. Came up here to be back near his childhood. Bought forty acres here so he could have a campground out here, and then passed away. Donated it to the State, of course, as you see it now it's Van Damme State Park.

Now to get back to the logging history, I'll start with the Coombs family. In 1856 Silas Coombs, who is this man right here, and Ruel Stickney, who is this man—Ruel Stickney married Silas Coombs' sister so they were brothers-in-law—and they came out to California in 1856 to chase gold. Well, they didn't do well chasing gold. They went up in the Tuolumne area, didn't find nothing. So they decided they needed a day job. Being that they were loggers, they came in to the coast because they heard about a sawmill in Albion that needed employees. They went to work in the woods, worked there about six years as logging contractors, and heard about this canyon here—was full of timber.

So they came up and bought and preempted all the timber that was in this canyon. In 1863 they came up and started making ties up here and decided they needed a sawmill. So they got another partner, Tapping Reeves, who is quite a man. He was an inventor, invented an edger and a few other things. They came up, built the first sawmill, which was right around the corner here near the visitor center. You'll notice a post in the ground, it says No. 4 on it as you're driving in the road. That's where the first sawmill was. This is the first sawmill here. 1864 they hired Charles Pullen to build the mill for \$20,000. That was big money in 1864.

1864 is when General Sherman of the Union forces started his march to the sea through the Shenandoah Valley, so it'd give you a kind of an idea of what was going on at the same time. It was also the same month that the *CSS Shenandoah* was commissioned. That was a

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

Confederate raider that worked our coast out here and sunk Federal boats out here. So that was going on at the same time.

They started the sawmill in 1864. It cut 20,000 feet. When you see a lumber truck going down the road, that's just about how much lumber they made a day, about what's on a lumber truck. In 1871 the sawmill burned. They decided the location of the mill wasn't good, so then they built another sawmill right across the creek, which was over in this area and started producing with it. That's a picture of the mill here.

To ship the lumber out, they built a wharf. The wharf came off about where the green mat is and went out into the bay out there. It was 300 feet long, and that's how they shipped their lumber was off of it. You'll notice on this picture, too, in the background over here you'll see lumber all stacked up out there. It's kind of hard to imagine that that had solid lumber stacked up out there.

To store the logs they needed some way to hold the logs back, so they decided to build a dam here. Silas and Ruel Stickney and Tapping, one day, were standing out here deciding, "Well, what are we going to do to build a dam here to hold our logs?" They were talking about how much it costs and how long it was going to take, and some old gentleman just happened to be standing here, and he overheard them. He told them, he said, "I can put a dam in for you guys at half the cost that you're talking about. All I need is forty men and a team of bulls and a plow." And they said, "Okay, do it."

So he got the team of bulls and he started right here in this corner where the road goes in near the bank right here. He dug a trough four feet high, four feet deep—dug it all the way up this hill, across the golf course, and clear to the airport. Came back down here. Then he built a wooden barrier starting right about where the yellow car is right here, over in that area over there. Came clear across and met the bank over near where the flowers are over there.

Waited till the first rains came, then he sent the guys back up by the airport and told them, "Try to fill this ditch full of dirt as the water's rushing down it." They started doing dirt down. It would wash the dirt down the hill, and this guy would direct it against this wooden wall they built. It built a six- to eight-foot dam all the way across here. When this creek is low, you can see remnants of the wooden wall still in the creek. If you look right over on the other side of the parking lot here, you'll see a kind of a raised area that goes across between the parking lot and the road. That's part of the dam. This is a picture of the dam here. You can see the dam running across here, and you can see the wooden wall right here.

There was also a tramway, which was four wheels and a little wooden cart. They'd roll a log on it and bring it down from about the airport down into here, roll it in the water right into this area. If you look right directly across, you can see just a little of the tramway that goes up the hill. Now the roads we see here. We see depressions in the hill. We see two here. The center one, of course, was the old highway. The old highway came down, went in, it crossed the bridge, and up the hill over there. The next one up we see is also a tramway. You'll see a little depression in the hill, and that's where they brought logs in. You'll see the original road that's right here. The next shelf that you see was the original county road that ran across. Further up you'll see another shelf, a third shelf. That was another part of the original tramway that brought logs down to the millpond.

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

Where you see the green mat located is where the original wharf came from the bank, went out into the bay 300 feet. Ships would come in through the opening that you see out here and sail up to the wharf and would load lumber on each side of the wharf. The wharf was connected to the sawmills by tramway. They went up and over the hill. This was here for approximately sixty years.

We're at the top now. We're going to start our descent down the trail. This is the trail that we're going to take. This is the map that Francis Jackson created. Francis Jackson created this walk that we're on a number of years ago. Francis Jackson was born in Little River, his mother was born in Little River, and his grandmother was born in Little River in the Van Damme house. So he had a lot of interest in this. He wrote a book called the *History Walk of Van Damme*. This is the map that he created, and this shows all the logging history of the area. Van Damme is unique. Van Damme, in 1894 when the sawmill closed down, was never logged again. It was never touched, other than maybe a couple of shake guys got in here and cut some of the stumps off. But all the artifacts from the early logging are still here and still can be seen if you've got a trained eye. And he created this map.

There were seven logging camps. This is one of the logging camps here. This represents the logging camp that was actually nearer to the beach than up here. This was called Prairie Camp. Prairie Camp logging camp was right in this grove of trees right here.

Little River's logging camps were unique in that they had their own garbage disposal. When the guys got done eating, there was a hole in the floor, they would scrape the scraps through the hole and the "in-house garbage disposal" would take care of the scraps. The garbage system, the participants, when they become of age, then they became part of the table and once again were put through the garbage disposal underneath. Can you imagine on a day like this what that must have smelled like under that cookhouse?

They were smart. They kept those loggers out of the cookhouse. Now there were seven, and they were all approximately a mile apart. They wanted the guys to get up in the morning, to eat, and to get right into the woods and start working. So they built camps as close to the logging as they could.

The logging here started in this little canyon right in here. When they reached this point, they started using saws—like a handsaw that we know now. Ruel Stickney had invented the raker tooth. Before that time it didn't have a tooth to pull the sawdust out of the cut, and Ruel Stickney invented it. When they got just about to where the middle dam is, which we will eventually get to, is when they went from chopping the trees down with axes to only chopping one side and then using the saw to cut the back cut. Ruel Stickney gave his idea to the Spalding Saw Company. The Spalding Saw Company then used it in their saws, and Ruel Stickney never got anything from it. Ruel Stickney also invented the jackscrew, as we know it now. The jackscrew was a device, looked like a car jack, and you wind it up and it would roll the log. You could roll it out of its bed where it fell and start it rolling down the hill or to the point where it was going to slide down the hill or to the point where the oxen could get to it and tow it out of here. It was quite a device. C. R. Johnson from Union Lumber Company said that revolutionized the logging industry before the steam donkey.

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

All right, guys, now let's start our walk. Now we're starting into the logging area here. We've come out of the prairie area; we're into the logging area. You notice we're starting to see stumps, big redwood stumps. They're cut high off the ground. The reason that was is usually they tried to get above the taper of a redwood tree. Redwood tree has what they call a bole, and it tapers up and then straightens out. They try to cut at the easiest place to cut and that's, of course, above the bole. You'll notice this one here is cut clean off, so this is when they started using the saws up here. It's not tapered on each side. At the bottom of the stump here you'll notice a short piece, and it was probably cracked or was hollow when they got it on the ground.

But on the bottom end on your left side of this little piece you'll notice it's tapered, and that's where they would chop in what they called an undercut. That's the way they directed the tree to fall—they would cut this undercut in. There would be two guys. They would stand on what they called a springboard. You don't see them as well on this stump—we'll notice them as we progress on—but holes will be in the stump. They had a long two-by-six piece of oak that would sit in this hole, and these guys would stand up on this oak and chop the undercut with axes. The axes were shaped like bows and arrows. There was a left-handed cutter and a right-handed cutter. The reason the ax was shaped like this is so when they swung into the undercut, their knuckles didn't scrap across the bottom, it was above. One guy did it from the left, the other guy did it from the right. They both chopped that way, and that way they didn't scrape up their hands.

We've got right here in front of us, you'll notice it looks a depression, looks like where an old trail has been. This is a skid road right here. They always used oxen up here; they never went to steam donkeys or any of the modern equipment. You'll notice that this one is tapered, goes right straight down and through here. You can see it going down through the trees. They would hook up to a log, a series of logs. They'd have usually eighteen to twenty oxen, and they would pull one of these trees in twenty-foot lengths. Little River Lumber Company never cut anything longer than twenty feet. All their orders went to San Francisco; all the lumber was twenty feet lumber or under. They never needed big dimensions. You'll see that going right down here. We'll go down further and you can see where they rolled the logs with the jackscrew into a chute down here. Come on ahead, and we'll go on down.

The trees that you see around us right now weren't here at this point. These were all brand new babies right here. The oxen would pull the logs right up into this area right here. They would unhook them. You can actually see where another trail that goes off there came into this area. This was called a landing, and this is where they'd unhook the logs. They'd get their jackscrews out, and they would jackscrew the tree over into this chute right here where this tree is. This is a new tree also. As you see, the chute goes down the hill right here. You can see the depression in the ground. Went down and around into the creek here, and it drops 1,000 feet or better. The logs would just fly going down this hill, down and around. It would hit the water at the bottom, and some would even blow up when they hit the water they'd hit it so hard.

As the redwood trees were logged off, the guys would come in and saw them off, get the tree on the ground. This tree looks like it fell up this way. They would buck it up in their twenty-foot pieces. They had to get the bark off of it. You'll notice a redwood tree has a real fibrous bark on it, and it would make it real hard to skid through the woods. So guys would come along and

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

remove the bark. After they were done removing the bark, they would then set it on fire. That's why all the stumps you see in the area here are all blackened. They would burn the debris away from the tree to make it easier to pull away from it.

You have your stump here. This is what we call the mother tree right here. It's burnt, but not dead. It would have a sibling grow off of it, as you can see right here. There might have been a little bit of bark that was left and still alive after they burned it, and it grew into this tree we have right here. We also have trees that are growing around it, such as this one right here, which are part of the root system. The roots would regrow and would become a tree. We have three around this tree that have grown from its roots.

Look at the size of this stump. This was a huge stump they logged off. This stump probably in its day came clear out into here. This tree was probably, across this way, ten feet or better, maybe twelve feet through, probably eight feet this way. This was a big tree. After they got it on the ground they obviously fell it up the hill. If you fell it down the hill it would just blow up when it hit the ground. Redwood is real brittle. Redwood is bug resistant and very fire resistant, but it's also a brittle tree. If you hit it too hard on the ground, it'll just turn into toothpicks. It'll hit the ground and just spread out on the ground. I've seen it happen in my day. It's a waste of timber. This one, they obviously brought it down up the hill up here, bucked it up. They would buck it into their twenty-foot lengths. This tree was a big tree at the first, probably, forty, fifty feet of itself. They'd get their jackscrews, turn it around, and then start it rolling down the hill here.

We've got to remember most all these trees were logged off then. This was probably open right in this area. This is all second growth and regrowth here. They'd start that log rolling down the hill, probably yelling, "Look out! Look out!" And that tree would go crashing down the hill down here. The creek's way down there. It'd probably get hung up behind a stump, and they'd have to put their 150-pound jackscrew on their shoulder and head down the hill, get it up over the stump and get it crashing down the hill again. Then they had to get the 150-pound jackscrew back on their shoulders, walk back up the hill, and start the next section down the hill. Can you imagine turning a tree this size, twenty feet long? That must have been real work.

You heard me talk earlier about the swell or the bole of the stumps and how the guys had to get above it to chop it off. We have a great example of one of the holes they cut in the tree to put a springboard in it to get above the swell of the tree. This right here is a springboard hole. When the tree was alive, the bark and the wood itself would be about this far. They would try to chop a hole in the stump at least the length of their hand so they could put the board in and the board would stay. And this is a perfect example of one here.

During the 1948 strike when all the sawmills went on strike, they hired a bunch of city guys to come up and chop in the woods, try to break the strikers. One of the things the strike-breakers did, they didn't know you chopped that in. They'd take the board and put it up to the tree like this and try to drive the board into the tree like that. So sometimes loggers are not too ingenious, but that was a joke that floated around and my dad talked about.

Okay, guys, you know that they not only cut lumber out of this area, they also cut railroad ties. Railroad ties were cut by hand. The guys would go in and find a tree that had straight grain in

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

it, and then they would go in with axes and split the railroad ties out. They were six to eight feet long and eight-by-eights—eight inches by eight inches. Weighed about 200 pounds each tie. Do you know how they found a tree that had straight grain in it? They looked at the bark. You'll notice these two trees right here, this tree here and the other big tree over there. You notice the bark how it goes straight up the tree like that? You notice that? Look at this tree now behind us over here, the second one over. We have a tree that's right here and the bark spirals. You'll notice the grain of the bark turning as it went up the tree, and that made lumber. They wouldn't turn that into railroad ties because it wouldn't split straight. So they'd leave that tree for the loggers to come in and make lumber out of, and they would take one of these trees over here and made railroad ties out of it.

As you notice right in here you'll see remnants of a stump that's here. You can see the burnt out corners all the way around. This was probably sixteen to eighteen feet through. Sixteen to eighteen feet, this tree. Probably over 300 feet tall in this point. The tree may be gone, but you'll see its babies or siblings coming off of it. You'll see one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine different ones that have grown off of this tree after it was logged. This was one big tree. Probably enough wood was in this tree to build seven houses.

Okay, we're in the area of the middle dam right now. This is Little River. Little River Lumber Company had four dams. They had one at the parking lot, one further up in the parking lot. That was to store logs. They had a dam right here a little further down. As you notice that the ground here kind of benches out on each side, you'll notice a little bench right here at the top—that's the height of the water. We would be underwater right now. Went a little further up here. They would bring the logs down these canyons, float them in this dam. In the wintertime when the water was up, they'd open the dam and this would all drain out and float the logs on down. There was another dam further up. It's not advisable to go up there. It's dangerous. There was also a camp here. It sat up on this hill right here, and it was stacked. The houses were stacked up, up along the hill here. And, of course, they had the famous cookhouse. I'm sure you could smell it down here.

If we want to head on down, we'll go down to where the dam was located. You can see by this stump up here that it's wedged on both sides, and that means they used an ax on it. It was about this area in 1880 when they went from axes to saws. This was when Ruel Stickney got around to inventing the drag on the saws, and they started converting about this time over to saws. From here on down we'll pretty much see stumps that were wedged on both sides.

Right now we're almost to the point of where the dam was at. The dam is a little further down. You'll notice the ground starting to taper steeper here. Good location for a dam. The dam was made of logs—it's a log-configured dam. It was thirty feet high, twenty feet thick, and it was 100 feet wide across the mouth of this. Because so much water would build up behind it, they had a problem with when they'd release the water—the dam would actually move back after the water pressure was relieved. They had to stop this from bulging like that. So they drilled a hole in this stump right here and ran a cable up from the dam and through this stump and bolted it off right here. This would hold the dam so it wouldn't bulge when the pressure of the water was behind it.

We're at the location of the middle dam. The middle dam was a principal source of logs for the sawmill. They would skid the logs down into the headwaters, or the backwaters, of this dam.

**California State Parks Video Transcript**  
***The Logging History of Fern Canyon at Van Damme State Park***

When the water was high enough, they then released the logs, and they would float on down to the mill from this point. You can see remnants of the top of the dam. This flat area right up here, that was the very top of the dam. You can see a depression there. It looks like a trail. That was the top. The dam came down right where we're at and it crossed and up the other side of the bank.

We're at the location of the largest camp that the Little River Lumber Company had. About thirty-five to seventy men lived at the camp here. It flowed from the creek here all the way up the hill up into this. It was all houses and little shacks and tents and whatnot. This whole area here, this was kind of the mid-way point. They could go up this gully up here and log, or go on up and log. It was kind of the end of the trail, so to speak, where they could actually bring stuff up here and leave it to be transported on. So it was kind of a way station and everything, too.

This is a perfect example of an undercut in a tree. The undercut was put in the tree, and that's so that you could direct the tree to fall the way you wanted it to. Someone was going to start one right here on this particular tree. See the chop marks? So you know it's done with an ax—flat spots. When the tree comes down, it will direct it to fall. Probably the boss come along and said, "Uh uh, get above the wedge of it." So then they went up further and chopped it off. This is what an undercut of a tree looked like.

We have another perfect example of a tree chopped down, and other sibling trees growing off of its roots right here. We have a full ring around this stump right here. Looks like actually two sets. We have a smaller tree and larger trees. They do come in at different times. It has to do with the weather. Let's go.

You notice the trees we have here—we'll see this growth that's on them. It's a fungi, and it's called a konk. In the logging days when you were coming through here to log this and you saw a tree with a konk on it, you left it. It meant that the inner tree was rotten. That konk lives off the rot from the inside of the tree. You can make a dye from that konk. The loggers used to take the konk, and you'd break it in half, and you'd take a sharp stick and dip it in that residue that comes from it, and you could write with it. A lot of guys used it as a writing tool.

Thank you folks for coming on our walk. The mill shut down in 1894. It became a state park. It's a wonderful state park. Anyone would like to come; everyone is welcome. On July the 26<sup>th</sup> of every year, or the last weekend of July, we always have a logging history walk. Anyone is welcome. Come one, come all. Thank you very much from Van Damme State Park.

Running Time: 31:08  
© California State Parks, 2004