



California State Parks Video Transcript



Twice-Told Tales of Wilder Ranch

WOMAN SPEAKS IN A POETIC TONE:

These are the twice-told tales of Wilder Ranch.

Listen well, and just perchance
they'll take you back to yesteryear,
to spurs and hooves and folks out here
who worked and loved the land so well,
their story lives for us to tell.

So sit right back and take a chance
to live the past at Wilder Ranch.

CHARLIE KIEFFER, DOCENT: My family goes back to the original land grant owner with one of the three sisters: María de Angeles Castro. It dates back to the 1830s. There were at that time probably about three or four adobes; one was built for the wedding of María de Angeles Castro and Joseph Ladden Majors.

That was for their “fandango,” which was kind of a nice party. And it lasted five, ten, fifteen days, whatever it might be. One of the reasons for that was there were people coming in from all other parts of the country.

And the story that I like to tell is that the Wilders protected it, and most ranches did not. We only have four adobes left in Santa Cruz County.

One of the things I remember my family talking about was how the Castros lived on the land, as far as being quite “showy.” They were wealthy and had palomino horses. They would get dressed up and go to town and kind of show off a bit. You could imagine that if you had twelve-thousand acres at that period of time, you were classified as wealthy.

A bit of the history of the ranch--For the fact that it became a dairy, we have to thank José Bolcoff who was the Russian that married one of María de Angeles’ sisters. He was the one that really started the dairy.

One of the realtors next door, says that María de Angeles Castro was an herb specialist in her home after the ranch days--was actually in Excelen tribe. Her and her husband, Joseph, built a home there and a flour grinding mill all run by water, one of the first ones, if not the first one, in Santa Cruz County. There are stories of people going into her kitchen and her walls in her kitchen were shelves, and on the shelves she had different types of herbs she had grown.

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She tells the story--she told it in 1903--she was riding home from downtown Santa Cruz and had a land grant and a home in Zayante. So we're probably taking about the 1850s. She was on her way home on a very spirited horse, and she was a great horsewoman, and out of the bushes, probably from the San Lorenzo River, a gorge there, came a band of Indians.

At this time, you have to remember, the Indians were basically pretty disturbed about what had happened to them because they lived in our area for thousands of years and nobody bothered them. Then all of a sudden the Spaniards came and, when you get down to it, they were basically slaves. The missions did use the Indians; unfortunately, the Indians were treated very bad.

She was riding home and out of the bushes came four or five Indians after her, actually trying to kill her. They had their bow and arrows. She whipped her horse, I can't imagine a young lady doing this, and she and the horse went off in a tremendous gallop with the Indians behind her. She got a little distance between them, and her horse stumbled and went to her knees. She said she stayed on the horse, which is absolutely tremendous horsemanship, whipped it again, and the horse got back up. The Indians were even closer now, but the horse took off again, and she saw two to three arrows fly by her head.

She started to leave them because she had a very good horse, and she then heard one of the Indians say in Spanish, "Oh, no, no, I know that lady. Stop! Don't shoot! I know her." She turned around and got a good look at that Indian, and she said, "I knew the Indian." She said years ago he was brought to her and he was sick with fever. And she said, "I remember bringing him back from the fever," so, she said, "It was kind of nice that he finally saw me, and they didn't catch me." But she said, "I got home, I rode as hard as I could all the way home to Zayante." And she said, "The family thought I was crazy because when I got off the horse, the horse was exhausted and I just fell to the ground, emotionally and physically exhausted."

Gold, of course, made California instantly very valuable to the United States. Once that happened, then rules and regulations were set by the United States. Unfortunately, the Spanish and Mexican sides of it were similar to what the Indians' were, when the Indians had the land. They would go to court to fight for their land grants but they almost lost every single time. That's basically what happened to the Castros. In the interview with María in 1903, she was very, very bitter about the fact that at one time she could stand on Escondido and look north as far as she could see and that was her property. That was given to her family and it was all gone, and she could not understand how they lost it.

DART KEECH, DOCENT: D.D. Wilder came from Connecticut. It was a place called West Hartland, and when he came out here he stayed in the gold fields for six years. That's a long time for anyone to try that sort of thing. It was very difficult work, and he was used to difficult work. He had been building stone fences back in Connecticut. So, when he went to the gold fields, going from a dollar a day back in Connecticut to five dollars a day out here moving more stones, still was pretty good. So he was able to accumulate a nice little nest egg where he could buy a ranch of his own.

The main product was actually butter. It was a very desirable thing, especially during the Gold Rush days. Because people in those days, they just loved butter. They would have a big plate of butter in the middle of the table and you would take your knife and put it on everything.

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They would have all this milk being produced, and they produced a ton of butter a week, so you can imagine how much milk that was.

Mr. Baldwin, who had been a partner early on with Mr. Wilder, eventually they separated as partners, he established a butter market there in San Francisco at the open air market. And he had a stall there that he had for many, many years that Mr. Wilder took over. And that's where they would market their butter. It was so valuable in those days and people were so wealthy, because of the gold, they could actually charge a dollar a pound for butter.

Mr. Baldwin, it turned out, really wanted to get out of the dairy business. In 1885 the two partners decided to break up their partnership. They went up on a high hill on the ranch where they could see almost the entire property, and they decided by eyeball where the line should be. Then they flipped a coin, as legend has it, and Mr. Wilder won the toss and decided to take the better of the two parcels.

The dairy barn goes back to before the Civil War. The barn was built in a time when there were very few nails, and so they actually built that barn without any nails. Its funny the way animals are, they really like a routine. Each man that milked the cows, he had a certain group of cows he was responsible for because it was very important cows get the same handling every day--they would get used to the milker just as much as vice versa; the man would know the type of cow he was milking. They all had their own idiosyncrasies, some of them would kick, and they can kick hard, or they can throw their tail around so it hits you right across the face.

The horse barn has a fascinating history. You can see where his [Mr. Wilder's] heart laid, with his horses. Back in the days where there were no automobiles, the horse was your salvation in many cases. So you could become quite fond of your horses, and so that's what happened to Mr. Wilder. He was one of these people that just loved horses. Actually he won some money, and it wasn't enough to build a barn--I think the barn cost like thirty-five-hundred dollars, so he won fifteen-hundred. But I thought it was interesting that you think maybe they would build a new addition on the house or something like that, but no. He really went all out for his dream barn.

IRIS FRANK, DOCENT: Moses Meder actually came from New Hampshire originally, and he came around the Horn in a ship with his wife and his daughter, named Angelique, I believe. He originally worked for Isaac Graham. He was a ship's carpenter. Isaac Graham was the Graham of the Graham Hill fame. He was a wealthy lumberman, and it turned out that Moses Meder actually built Isaac Graham's first lumber mill.

Moses Meder loaned money to José Bolcoff. Meder loaned Bolcoff some money when Bolcoff got into financial difficulty trying to defend titles of the land, and then he foreclosed on him.

I think the reason the Meder House is my favorite is because it's sort of like the kitchen is always the warmest room in the house, where all the activity goes on. If you look at all the things that have happened at Wilder Ranch through the years, most of that activity has happened in the Meder House.

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It started back of course when Moses Meder built the house. And then when the Wilder's came, Mr. and Mrs. Wilder and their son, Melvin, lived in this house. We know that Joe Olson the Swedish butter maker lived in the Meder House at some point. Led of course lived here in the Meder House until just a couple of years ago. So it was sort of the heart of the whole place.

I think when you look at the history of the Chinese people here in Santa Cruz, the Chinese cook by the name of Lee was the cook that probably stayed with the Wilders longer than anybody else did. On that beautiful french range in the kitchen he managed to cook for all of the Wilder family and all the hands as well. Just to think about the way that fits into the history of Santa Cruz. And then he had his little room.

We all know his family was in town, in Chinatown, and he'd go into town every Sunday afternoon to see the family. As I think you know, one of his sons is one of the docents out here now. Joe said, "Well, you know, I went home sometimes, because there were seven offspring in our family." So most of the time he was here, but he did go home on occasion.

One of the other stories that I think is really fun is that the Chinese cook always cooked for himself, Chinese food for himself. They said he always had a stewpot going and that Lettie was real nosy about going through the kitchen and looking in all the stewpots to see what was going on. She went through the kitchen one day and there was a pot with the lid dancing on it. So she lifted the lid and looked in and there was a chicken head floating in it, and they said that was the last time that Lettie ever checked the pots on the stove.

We do know that the Wilder women cooked the Sunday dinners, but other than that they had the Chinese do the cooking. I would suppose the ironing, the housework, the cleaning the house, maintaining the clothes, those kinds of things. Of course there are always children around, so to take care of the kids, and keep things in line and keep the house organized; just the mundane things that women through the years have done.

Ethel of course was sort of the maverick as far as the typical female because she was the first female truck driver in the county of Santa Cruz. That happened when all of the men were off to war and she had to deliver the milk. Supposedly, she could shoot and ride with the best of them; she was always off with the guys doing that.

One of my favorite photographs is the picture of the Wilder family in the parlor. They each have little earphones in their ear with these wires out of the top of their heads. They're listening to the broadcast of the phonograph through these earphones, and that was the entertainment for the evening. They all sort of have these transfixed expressions on their faces. It's a wonderful photograph.

You could sort of envision how the Wilder Ranch was the first place in Santa Cruz County, the first residence, to have electricity. You think about the fact that people would leave Santa Cruz at twilight and the city would be lit up, and then coming up the coast all the houses would be dark except for flickering lights in the windows that were either lanterns or candles. Then they got to the Wilder house, and it was lit up like a Christmas tree. Then it was dark all the way up the coast to San Francisco.

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Most of the people that lived on the land lived here, led typical lives for that time period, on the farm area. They were primarily concerned about the day to day activities and getting the chores done that needed to be done that day. And yet, the Wilder's had a lot more foresight to the future, a lot more than other people. They were always aware of the advances being made in the dairy sciences, and one of the first ones to incorporate those. Then of course when they discovered the artesian wells out on the coast, they were probably the primary force in getting this whole coast into agricultural use. They were just real innovative, progressive looking people. And that's what I think made Wilder Ranch so successful and really put it out in the forefront of what was going on in this area.

MIKE JOHNSON, DOCENT: The shop is ordinarily a busy place and it would have been a busy place when the ranch was functioning. There's a lot of old time technical innovations that are in place there. The machinery is run by waterpower which is very quiet and the Pelton wheel was a pretty innovative piece of technology when it was patented in 1880. They had a lot of cattle to feed and they raised their own feed crops, so they had Pelton wheels to run grinders for pumpkin and barley crushers and so forth. The blacksmith was doing his work and people were in there doing woodwork in the woodshop, carpenter shop, and machining things in the center portion of the shop.

And the bunkhouse, being upstairs, it would have been a pretty busy place; people going in and out. I'm sure there were a lot of stories being told upstairs; there were a lot of single men living in the bunkhouse and all different types of people. Ranch hands would have different personal habits I'm sure, but there was no plumbing upstairs in the bunkhouse. The ranch hands were, I'm told, generally told to wash up in the creek before meals--probably did their laundry in the creek. I'm sure there was an outhouse on the property, back before plumbing was installed anywhere. But, in any case, the Wilder boys and young ladies were told to keep an eye out when they walked, especially behind the bunkhouse; if a window upstairs was to fly open, they were told get out of the way, quickly. Because the lack of plumbing facilities up there might have prompted a problem, and maybe something was coming out the window if you saw it flying open.

REBECCA FOSTER, DOCENT AND BLACKSMITH: Blacksmiths were the hardware store. They did everything that had to do with metal. I imagine by the time Wilder started you could buy nails, but there was a time when they had to even make nails. They did all the horse shoeing and the metal tires on the big wooden wheels on the wagons. That was, I'm sure, a very big job. The hinges, door posts, tools of all kinds, picks, farming implements. Then things had to be mended, you make them in the first place and then you had to mend them. I don't know if they kept a blacksmith busy all day long, or if the blacksmith had other jobs. It probably varied from time to time. The forge itself was the place where the fire burned. It's got a fairly deep fire; you want to have a deep fire and air blows into the bottom of it. For centuries it was just a plain old bellows, a big bag between two boards, and you'd have to have somebody, an apprentice or a child or somebody, working the bellows. Here at Wilder they developed a blower that was turned by the water wheel, the Pelton wheel, and I'm sure that made a big difference not having to either pump the bellows or turn a hand crank.

I think the West was a place where anybody could be anything. There are definitely stories about women who spent their lives pretending to be men and they didn't even know they were women until they died, now that's another story. In the situation where everybody knew how to

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do a little of something, I'm sure the women were included. There were often situations where men were either off in a war or there was so much work to be done that women needed to join in, and women certainly had the skills and the capabilities to do so-called men's work and did it when it had to be done.

There were also women who felt like it. I do understand, at Wilder anyway, women were not discouraged. They weren't teased or made fun of if they felt like it, because there was work to be done, and, fine, if that's your inclination, then go ahead. I like blacksmithing, because it's exciting working with the basic elements of fire and metal, and then there's the air and the water; they're all there really. The idea that you're starting with something rigid and unyielding and cold like a piece of iron, and turning it into something graceful and fluid--that's very exciting to me.

LED ENGELSMAN, FORMER RANCH HAND AND FOREMAN: Ever since I can remember, I was interested in horses. That's where I got on my first horse, in San Francisco. I remember even the man's name that put me on the horse. I thought I was in hog heaven when I got to ride the horse about a hundred feet back and forth. I thought it was great. I was just fascinated by horses ever since.

Where it came from I don't know. I was born in Holland; none of my ancestry, as far as I know, ever had anything to do with livestock or horses, and yet that's all I've ever lived for. I must have been somewhere eighteen to twenty years old when I finally realized I see horses with a different eye than most people do. I see things about horses the average individual doesn't see; my eye sees more detail. I just evaluate the look of a horse, the structure of a horse, the horse, the individual. That's the way I feel about horses. I love horses. There's nothing more faithful to a man or more useful to a man. Horses settled the West, horses settled the world, horses fought wars all over in history, but man has mistreated horses, fiercely, over history. I learned something from every horse I ever handled, or ever met, or ever had anything to do with. Each animal teaches you something, because each animal has a personality, different characteristics, different temperament.

Well I went there as a horseman. I mean Mr. Wilder came and asked me. I was working at a rent stable at the corner of Ocean and Soquel. He drove into the yard there and asked me if I wanted a job for the month of December, 1929. And my duties would be to be out on a horse all day long, every day, in the daylight hours, to watch and keep game hunters off of the ranch. They had made a game refuge out of it, and they wanted to keep it closed.

It was because of myself and this other young guy, the other young guy's interest was mostly breaking colts and bucking stock, but I was interested in roping. I was more into that end of it. Mr. Wilder had been a polo player and he had gotten quite a bit of experience about different types of horses and one thing and another. He had learned that the chunkier, heavier built, little squatty horses were much handier. He learned that the more cowboy-type horses were handier, could turn quicker, were not as up-in-the-bridle and wanting to run as bad. So that's the kind of horse he leaned to. And then of course he had suffered a very severe illness, in the meantime, and had gotten away from polo for a good many years. In fact almost died. Then we came along and rekindled his interest.

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So, naturally he got interested in roping. "Well, hell if you're going to get interested in roping, we got to fix a place and practice a little." So we'd get the dairy heifers, year-old heifers, shoo them in the corner and panel them off, and then let them out one at a time, run them down the fence and rope them. We found out the rougher treatment they got from roping gentled them. When they came to the cow barn, they were a lot gentler than they were normally if they just came off the range and you stuck their heads in the stanchion. Mr. Wilder was so pleased with it, he said, "We've got to get better horses."

In the meantime, we were going to Salinas every year; that was big money there--the roping. You got to see the best horses, and you got the full chance to see how outclassed California horses were as compared to the horses from the Southwest--Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. So, next thing you know he wants to raise a few.

Everything is a story connected with that ranch and with me you know. At least, I tell it as a story. The arena, for instance. We found all the pickets and all the old flats and stuff around from the old fences that were dilapidated and half down and stuff. The fields were no longer being used as fields, and we took those fences down. We cached enough stuff to build the outside perimeter fence for the arena. But we didn't have the lumber to build the corrals with.

We had a pretty elaborate plan, had it all down on paper and everything, working on it in the winter-time. We were in the kitchen in the Victorian one day and Melvin, D's father, went by. Now you've got to imagine this is Depression days, and Melvin walked by and said, "What are you guys doing?" We were pouring over these plans--"No, no, this gate ought to be this way and that gate ought to be that way." We had a pretty impressive drawing there, and he looked at it. He said, "Where you going to get the lumber?" "Wish we knew," and nothing more was said. A day or so later, why he said "How much lumber? You ever figure out how much lumber you need for those corrals?" "No, not yet, exactly." "Well," he says "figure it out." So, we made a list, and he took it with him, and we kind of looked at each other and didn't say anything.

The next day here comes a truck from the Santa Cruz Lumber Company with a whole brand new load of lumber. We couldn't believe it. "Where do you want this stuff?" Brand new lumber in the middle of the damn Depression! And you know he'd been, like you say, if you could use a nail over again and over again and over again, you use it--squeezing pennies. I was working for a dollar a day at the time, and my board and room, and he furnished that load of lumber. He had a heart of gold. We had more fun in that arena than anybody is entitled to have in the world. Nobody ever had more fun than we had, up in that place, nobody, ever, anywhere!

Running Time: 30 minutes
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