

There're grounds for a picnic high in the hills



This photograph, taken about 1890, shows a beer wagon driving up in front of the original Long Bridge House, note the gentleman with rifle. Above the left door note the words "BAR" and "Ladies' Parlor" on the right door.

Counting the sawmill workers who ate there, Saratoga Springs in the hills above Saratoga has been in continuous use as a picnic ground for 150 plus years.

First to use it were the workers at the sawmill built in 1847 by William Campbell. He was the father of Benjamin Campbell, who founded the city that bears that name.

Seventeen years later came the teamsters who stopped on their long haul across the Santa Cruz Mountains on a newly completed toll road.

Finally, families from the Santa Clara Valley discovered the delights of the cool, shaded spot where Highway 9 intersects Sanborn Road about two miles west of Saratoga.

The area was originally known as Campbell's Gap and was the site of the first water-powered sawmill in Santa Clara County.

Still standing on the picnic grounds is a portion of one of the mill walls, which bears a plaque placed there by the Saratoga Historical Society.

Demand for redwood outstripped the small mill's capacity, prompting promoters to form the Saratoga and Pescadero Turnpike and Wagon Road Co. to bring finished timber from the deeply forested western slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

A key link in the turnpike was a wooden bridge across a Saratoga Creek canyon. It was the highest and longest span in Santa Clara County and naturally it was named Long Bridge.

The men who drove horse teams and oxen teams over the rough road stopped beneath the bridge to water their animals and to eat lunch as they struggled over the steep mountain road.

In 1876, French immigrants Joseph Rispaud and A. Maurice Garcin bought 400 acres on both sides of the road near Long Bridge.

When they ended the partnership, Garcin operated a picnic ground with hunting lodge, store and bar on the north side; Rispaud planted vineyards and built a winery across the road, the late R.V. Garrod said in his informal history, "Saratoga Stories."

Garcin's saloon, lodge and picnic grounds proved to be an irresistible draw for valley residents wanting to escape the summer heat.

They came in open wagons drawn by four-horse teams. Waiting for

them at the end of the long hot ride were soft drinks and beer - and the promise of a day of fun.

"On such occasions back in the 1890s, I used to get behind the bar and serve soft drinks and beer. It is lots of fun playing barkeep when in your teens," Garrod wrote.

The old wooden bridge was replaced in 1901 by a two-lane stone span that still stands.

When Garcin died without leaving heirs, the property was purchased from the state by Renee Rispaud, the wife of Henry Rispaud, who was the son of Garcin's partner.

She operated Long Bridge for 34 years, then leased the property to Stub Stollery, who had been a San Jose newspaperman and public relations representative.

In 1955, Stollery installed a new swimming pool, volleyball and horseshoe courts and other recreational facilities. He added some cottages and changed the name to Saratoga Springs.

In subsequent years, the picnic grounds were operated by several lessors.

Bill Giannini, great-grandson of Joseph Rispaud, took over operation of Saratoga Springs in 1972 and improved the picnic areas and other facilities.

The original store, which had been rebuilt into a restaurant, burned down in 1978.

Giannini, a former marketing manager for NCR in the San Joaquin Valley, has built up a steady clientele of firms that use Saratoga Springs for company picnics. His three children are now running the business.

Although the grounds have undergone a number of changes over the years, the rustic scenery along the banks of Booker and Saratoga creeks remains much the same as it was in the days when the sawmill workers and teamsters paused to eat lunch.

"We've kept it as an old-fashioned picnic grounds," Giannini said.

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