

Place Names of Mt. Diablo

EMMONS CANYON - WHO IS IT NAMED FOR?

By Rich McDrew
Mt. Diablo Interpretive Association

Emmons Canyon is situated at the western edge of Mount Diablo State Park (see the 5th Edition Trail Map of Mt. Diablo State Park, coordinates F-6). The upper half of this canyon is in the park while the lower half is privately owned and is in the unincorporated area of the city of Alamo. A fire trail/Park maintenance road, appropriately named Emmons Canyon Road, traverses the entire north-south length of the canyon bottom.

The name "Emmons Canyon" reflects the historical Emmons' family farm in the Green Valley area dating back to the 1920s. This farm, with a lovely Victorian home, was situated at the mouth of the canyon in the flatter foothill and valley sections.

George Wellington Emmons (1859-1928), a wealthy entrepreneur, owned and operated a 640-acre farm from approximately 1919 until his death on October 9, 1928. The farm was an avocation for Emmons, as his primary business was Emmons Storage and Drayage Company, in Alameda, California. The main family home for him and wife Harriet A. Emmons (1871-1923) and their three daughters (Gertrude, Gladys, and Marjorie) was also in Alameda. The farm employed a staff of 12 people and raised assorted animals including cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep. George was a native of the Bay Area as were his two sisters, Idella (1855-1949) and Mabel (1866-1936).

It is believed that George acquired his farm, a section or 1/36th of a township, in a bankruptcy settlement in 1919. Several years earlier, George purchased shares in the Mount Diablo park Company (MDPC), a business created by real estate developer Robert Noble Burgess. Burgess' company encompassed more than 15,000 acres on the western slopes of Mount Diablo, and envisioned grandiose plans for an affluent community of 10,000 people. In 1913, the shareholders elected George to be the MDPC general manager of all ranching operations. George's ranch work for MDPC produced several interesting anecdotes. Burgess recounted one such story in his memoirs:

"George was commissioned to purchase 300 mules he knew about. Well, he was a dray man and should know draught animals, and his judgment on mules should be sound, but when the mules came in by train we had just one hell of a time unloading them and getting them into the pasture. . . . They had 4200 acres of pasture set aside for their use. We got them to the pasture but never saw some of them again!"

World War I brought an end to the MDPC venture, so in 1919, Burgess dissolved his company and sold his Diablo house.

Today, some 75 years later, the only historical reminders of the Emmons' decade of farming are shown on street and trail signs, area maps and photographs. One of George's grandsons recently reflected that this farm brought a significant source of pleasure to the Emmons' family in otherwise turbulent times - times that brought World War I (1914-1918), a general coal strike (1922), President Harding's death (1923), stock market panic (1929) and Prohibition (1919-1933).



Top of Emmons Canyon

By Rich McDrew
Mt. Diablo Interpretive Association

"Jackass" is a colloquial word for male donkey. It is also an unflattering nickname occasionally given to a person who is extremely foolish or intractable. Jackass also has another more obscure meaning, that being moonshine.

In 1917, the Eighteenth Amendment [Prohibition of Intoxicating Liquors] of the U. S. Constitution was proposed by a resolution of Congress. It was officially ratified on January 16, 1919 when Nebraska became the 36th State to ratify it (this constituted three fourth of the 48 states). The Amendment became effective nationwide one year later. The Eighteenth Amendment stated in part: ". . . the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States . . . is hereby prohibited." To clarify this Amendment and to provide enforcement laws, Andrew Volstead, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, wrote the National Prohibition Act (NPA), better known as the Volstead Act. The NPA allowed each family to make 200 gallons of wine for their home use.

Consequently, Prohibition became the law of the land on January 16, 1920. This ushered in the moonshining or bootlegging era that lasted 14 years until the Twenty-first Amendment repealed prohibition on December 5, 1933. So, during the period from 1920 to 1933, since people could not legally purchase whiskey, some made their own illegally, or purchased it from bootleggers who made moonshine or "jackass" whiskey. Jackass whiskey allegedly got its name because it had a bite like a mule and a kick like a horse. Some believed that it had a medicinal purpose. Anne Marshall Homan writes in her 2001 book, *The Morning Side of Mount Diablo*: "Local legend had it, according to John Silva, that if you drank 'jackass' whiskey you would not catch the flu, so his family was a regular customer of John Morris [maker of moonshine whiskey in the Morgan Territory]. He affirmed that the Silva family never caught the flu."

Ranches and farms of California became favorite places for moonshiners. Anne Homan accentuates this point: "During Prohibition years, many hardscrabble ranchers in the Black Hills [of Mt. Diablo] - always strapped for ready cash - set up stills and secretly made liquor besides their traditional wine." Eighty years ago, one such spot in Contra Costa County was in a remote canyon that local residents named "Jackass Canyon." Today, this canyon is part



Springbox, built by moonshiners over 80 years ago

of Mount Diablo State Park in an area administered by East Bay Regional Parks District, but was in private ownership during Prohibition. Distilleries or stills were constructed in this canyon bottom because of the abundance of yearlong water from its creek - the west fork of Tassajara Creek. The creek was fed by an active spring that the moonshiners tapped into by means of piping and a springbox. Armed sentries stood guard at strategic locations above the canyon to be on the lookout for Prohibition agents (known as "Prohis") and robbers. The stills had the capability of making several hundred gallons of whisky each day. It is interesting to note that one gallon of jackass whiskey would sell for approximately \$5 in the 1920s.

According to author Clifford James Walker, a scholar on moonshining, in his 1999 book entitled *One Eye Closed, the Other Red: The California Bootlegging Years*:

"the bootlegging years was a test of national character. The nation changed the Constitution in 1919 and changed it again in 1933, changed it peacefully and democratically. We learned about ourselves: that though patient, once we feel wronged we act in our own ways to change what wronged us. Changing sometimes takes a long time. We are now more cautious about legislating morality and legislating aspects of people's private lives. We struggled with deep moral and political issues, such as obeying laws we did not believe in. These lessons from the bootlegging days carried through the crises and horrors of the depression, World War II, Cold War and the rest of the great events of the 20th century."

If someone would like to hike to Jackass Canyon, it is located west of, and perpendicular to, Riggs Canyon, and due north of Oyster Point, on the southern flanks of Mount Diablo State Park. But, don't expect to find remnants of moonshining



In Jackass Canyon, looking southwest

- the bootleggers did a good job of removing evidence of their equipment. "Jackass Canyon" and "Jackass Canyon Trail" are documented on the 5th Edition Trail Map of Mount Diablo State Park at coordinates H-8 and I-8. Happy hiking!

THE J. P. HAUSER TRAILER

By Craig Lyon
Mt. Diablo Interpretive Association

The J. P. Hauser trailer, or better known to everyone as the Mitchell Canyon Interpretive Center, has been a visitor center at the Mitchell Canyon entrance to Mt.



Diablo State Park for almost five years. It will soon be replaced by a larger building of similar style, giving us more space for displays and for handling the increasing visitor traffic. The J. P. Hauser trailer will be moved to a spot adjacent to the women's bathroom at Mitchell Canyon, and will give MDIA much-needed storage space for visitor center supplies, files, outdoor equipment, etc.

Why is it called "The J. P. Hauser Trailer"? Mt. Diablo Interpretive Association purchased the 10 foot by 20 foot trailer in 1989 and had it hauled to the lower summit parking lot. It served as a temporary visitor center from 1989 to 1993 during the time the Summit Museum was being built. Jean Hauser was a long-time active member of MDIA and was president of the Association when the trailer was purchased. Shortly after the purchase, Jean passed away. The Association dedicated the trailer in his name, and a plaque to this effect hangs in the trailer.

After 1993, the trailer sat unused for several years at the lower summit parking lot until it was moved to the Mitchell Canyon parking area. In early 1999 MDIA volunteers began the arduous task of renovating the trailer into a visitor center. The State Park staff began construction of the deck at the front of the building. The last nail was put in the deck on September 25, 1999, just in time that same day for the dedication ceremony of the Mitchell Canyon Interpretive Center, which coincided with MDIA's 25th anniversary celebration.