

Ansel Adams Photographs Rocklin

Gary Day



Ansel Adams would pick a Rocklin scene and observe it from dawn until dusk

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Sunset International Petroleum Corporation bought up the southern 12,000 acres of Joel Parker Whitney's 22,000 acre Spring Valley Ranch and started to develop a self contained metropolis of 100,000 residents called Sunset City. Sunset abandoned the project in the mid 1960s because of slow real estate sales but during the past 40 years, the property has been the site of most of Rocklin's expansion. Stanford Ranch, Clover Valley, Whitney Oaks, and other neighborhoods north and west of the historic downtown Rocklin are astride Sunset's intended city.

In 1962 Sunset's Assistant Vice President Dale Stringfellow hired renowned naturalist and photographer Ansel Adams to produce publicity photos of scenic features of the Whitney Ranch. Stringfellow remembers seeing Adams in action. "He thoroughly loved his work," said Stringfellow. "He would pick a scene and then observe it from dawn to dusk, finding the precise sun angle that suited his eye. I had dinner with him twice during his stint here and he was struck by the beauty of

the property,"

The photos went on display in several downtown Sacramento businesses. Copies of eleven of the photos appear in a widely-distributed Sunset City promotional booklet called *Echo in Spring Valley*.

In 1965, as Sunset gave up their Sunset City dream and started to reorganize and sell off assets. Stringfellow negotiated a gift of the photos to Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum. According to Stringfellow, the agreement was that Sunset would donate 22 photos to Crocker with the proviso that Crocker would put them on permanent display. Sunset delivered the photos in late 1965 or 1966. Crocker received them and, according to Crocker staff, lost track of them in their storage area until the Rocklin Historical Society inquired about them in 2002, almost 40 years later.

Sunset was downsizing their Rocklin presence at the time of the donation and apparently failed to follow up with Crocker to ensure that the photos went on display. Also, Rocklin's population then of about 1,600 people was less than 4 percent of today's population. Photos of the Spring Valley Ranch on Rocklin's western border, but centered 3 miles away and not yet annexed to Rocklin, must have seemed less important to Rocklin residents than they are today..

"There was talk about Adams' work here at the time he was photographing," said historical society co-founder and former mayor Roy Ruhkala, "but the significance of the event was lost over the years".



Oaks and granite outcroppings were Ansel Adams' favorite subjects

Historical society members started to focus attention on the photos as they completed work on the Rocklin History Museum in 2002. Since all of the photos were scenes of today's Rocklin and since they were still, after 40 years, out of sight somewhere in storage at Crocker shouldn't they go on display at the Rocklin museum? Not according to Crocker's Director Lyle Jones who said that Rocklin's museum facilities are insufficient to protect the photos from environmental damage and theft.

Nevertheless the society encouraged its members and Rocklin's grade school children to appeal to Crocker to release the photos for display in Rocklin. One third grader's appeal noted that one of the photos in the *Echoes in Spring Valley* booklet showed a rock outcropping in the back yard of his family's home. Crocker eventually compromised by locating the 22 photos and putting them on display in one of their downtown Sacramento galleries for a few weeks in early 2007. Most of the prints show oaks, rock

outcroppings and other natural features of the Spring Valley Ranch countryside. Nine of the photos show man-made features of the ranch, including Whitney's pyramid tomb located near the Whitney Oaks Golf Course, and two of Whitney's granite bridges, one of which is now the centerpiece of Clover Valley Park.

The society noticed that six photos copied for the *Echo in Spring Valley* booklet were not among the Crocker collection. Possibly there were originally 28 photos and Sunset executives kept six for their private collections. According to a website that markets original Ansel Adams prints these six could be worth as much as \$50,000 each.

The 22 photos are back in Crocker's storage area and staff members there say that there are no plans to put them on display again.

"We would like to see them available for public viewing on an on-going basis and also available for annual viewing in a Rocklin setting as the prints are of Rocklin's Whitney Ranch" said society President Roger Lokey.