

History of the Whitney Ranch

Part Two of Three Parts

The Magnificent Landed Estate of the Honorable J. Parker Whitney

Gary Day



Joel Parker Whitney's Oaks mansion, a three-story, 20-room showplace and monument to his financial success.

In 1857, Boston merchant George Whitney established a 320-acre sheep ranch near a small South Placer County granite quarrying community. That community would later supply stone for construction of the transcontinental railroad and become a passenger stop, which the railroad would name "Rocklin, California" in 1864.

By 1873 one of George's six sons, Joel Parker Whitney, called Parker then, had financed the ranch's expansion to 18,000 acres and become the principal owner.

Parker began to diversify the ranch into a wide variety of agricultural

businesses. But availability of irrigation water was a problem.

A limited amount of water was available from 2 springs in the center of Spring Valley, the large valley that we enter today when we drive west down the steep Park Drive hill from the water tank that overlooks Clover Valley. But that spring water was barely enough for Parker's livestock.

In 1874 Parker hired Chinese laborers to extend gold miners ditches and bring water from the Bear River watershed to 250 acres in the northeast corner of Spring Valley where he planted grapes.

It might have been about this time when Chinese laborers established a permanent Chinese community on the ranch. Catherine Whitney of Santa Cruz, the widow of Vincent Whitney, one of Parker's grandsons, remembered seeing a deserted temple and other remnants of this community when she visited the ranch with her husband in 1936.

In 1877, Parker's vineyard produced the first carload of California raisins to be shipped to eastern markets. However by 1884 Parker had removed his vines because his raisin prices were not competitive with lower cost European raisin producers. He planted orange trees to replace the vines and by 1887, because of early ripening in the special climate of that part of the ranch, he was able to profit nicely by beating Southern California oranges to eastern markets. The terracing connected with Parker's citrus operations is still visible to the north of the steep Park Drive hill. Old timers still refer to that area as The Vineyards.

While traveling in England in the early 1870's Parker met Lucy Chadwick whom he married in Sacramento in 1882. The couple had 3 children: J Parker (1878), Vincent (1880), and Helen Beryl (1884). J Parker was born in England and managed ranch operations in the early 1900's.

By 1882 Parker's investments, mainly in Colorado mines and New Mexico ranches, were bringing him an income of about \$1 million per year. In his mid forties with small children at home Parker cut back on his travels to spend more time with his family. He started to use the Ranch as a winter residence and as the western headquarters for his international business pursuits.

By 1884 Parker had built at least 3 large homes on the ranch, presumably occupied by his family and his top ranch hands. That year he leveled 5 acres at the top of a hill overlooking Spring Valley and started the three-year construction of his "Oaks" mansion, a three-story, 20-room showplace and monument to his financial success.

The Oaks complex included a carriage house, servant's quarters, a saloon, an entertainment center, a cricket field and a nine-hole golf course. About 600 yards to the east he built a stone-walled enclosure called "The Fort" as a play area for his children. Later The Fort would become burial grounds for Whitney family members and some of Parker's servants. Parker was interred there in a pyramid shaped mausoleum in 1913. Today that mausoleum contains the remains of about 20 of Parker's descendents and their family members.

Photographs from 1887 of the Oaks and the surrounding landscape are on display in the Whitney Exhibit at the Rocklin History Museum.

After California outlawed hydraulic gold mining in 1884 eliminating the need for expensive settling ponds for silt removal, Parker and neighboring ranchers subdivided 5000 acres, including 3,100 acres of Whitney Ranch property, along the Loomis/Penryn/Newcastle corridor and formed the Placer County Citrus Colony. The Colony incorporated in 1888 for the purpose of selling small citrus ranches to Europeans, mainly English noblemen.

By 1890 fresh water was giving life to dozens of Citrus Colony ranches. But that water also attracted uninvited visitors that would eventually decimate the Colony.

In Part Three: *Mosquitoes, Malaria and an Empire in Decline*