

Farming in Lamorinda: Will There Still Be Cows?

By Sophie Braccini



Ann Holding selling grass-fed beef at the Orinda farmers market

Photo by Sophie Braccini

From the early 19th century to today's global market place, ranching in Lamorinda has undergone a complete transformation. As housing and commercial development increased, the size of ranches declined. Some say there's no future for farming in Lamorinda. Yet one local ranch has been very successful at selling its product at a local farmers' market. It has been a long time since the heyday of the Lamorinda ranches owned by the Wagners, Carrs, Sanders, Nunes and Domingo's, among many others. Despite years of decline, ranchers continue to rent pastures from East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD), and are working hard to bring sustainability back to our hills.

Our story starts in 1835, fifteen years before California's admission to the Union, when the Mexican government granted large pieces of land to families who had been of service. Joaquin Moraga and his cousin, Juan Bernal, got some 13,000 acres from Mexico; Victor Castro got a 22,000 acre grant in 1841 (where the present day Wagner Ranch School and Nature Area are located). In the late 19th century, these large land grants were subdivided into smaller family ranches. For example, Joseph Domingos, who came from the Azores, bought 495 acres from the original Moraga family. Theodore Wagner received his 241 acres through marriage. In 1913, the Carr and Sanders families came to the Moraga Valley to purchase land for dairy farming. It was the time of family farming, when children would go to their one room school houses on their horses and cows were milked twice a day. When the price of milk fell with the Great Depression, those dairy farmers had no choice but to convert to cattle ranching.

The Depression, stagnation of beef prices, and the occurrence of hoof and mouth disease conspired to hurt ranchers during the 1930s. After the beginning of the century, large farms began to disappear and the People Water Company (EBMUD's predecessor) stepped in to purchase their land. According to Steve Abbors, Operating Principal for EBMUD, "When you own a reservoir, you need to hold the entire

water basin that feeds it." Abbors believes that EBMUD should have purchased the entire town of Orinda.

Today, EBMUD owns about 22,000 thousand acres in the Lamorinda area, of which 10,000 is grass land. Grazing is the most cost effective tool to effectively manage the land and control fire hazard. The use of specific pastures and the scheduled rotation of cattle among these pastures help control pollution from the cows. Cow waste contains pathogens that nobody wants to find in the reservoirs.

Nowadays, twelve ranchers rent their grazing land from EBMUD and some, like the Carrs of Moraga, are direct descendants of the original farming families. As they adapt to ranching in the early 21st century, most ranchers both own and rent land from public agencies. According to Adriana Marya Sulak, a UC Berkeley post-doctoral scholar and expert on public land grazing, public land use is crucial to the maintenance of cows on our hills. "Private land is being threatened by rising taxes and developers. If the ranchers were to lose their public lease," explains Sulak, "56% of Alameda and Contra Costa landowners would likely have to sell at least some of their land to compensate."

Ranchers on our hills each choose different ways of conducting their business. Some of them raise grass-fed beef and sell it to Niman Ranch, one of the better known local brands of traditionally and humanely raised livestock, while others sell their cattle to feed-farms in the Central Valley for quick weight gain. But however farmers manage their operation, it is hard to become rich on farming. According to Sulak, most farmers and ranchers have a second job to sustain their operations. Agriculture is a way of life, a passion that requires a lot of hard work and sacrifice. EBMUD Ranger Supervisor Rodney Tripp, who has been managing land for EBMUD for 20 years, notes that the number of farmers is slowly decreasing. "The cost of living is such around here that's it's very difficult for them to turn a profit," Tripp says. "Most of the ranchers are cash poor and land rich.

" Hunter Holding, a relatively small rancher in Lafayette, explains that ranchers get only a fraction of the money we pay for beef in stores. "Farmers are cut out of their profits," he says. "80% of the cost of the beef you buy does not go to the farmer." That's why Holding and his wife Ann have adopted a vertically integrated business model: they raise about 40 Angus beef on 250 acres mostly leased from EBMUD, and manage the entire operation from raising the cattle to selling their meat at the Orinda Farmers' Market on Saturday mornings.

Finally, for a few among us, cows are low maintenance pets that help with managing the land. With his wife Rhonda, Peter Cacioppo owns Eagle Hill Ranch, a 33 acre property in Bolinger Canyon. The Cacioppo's have 3 to 5 cows at a given time; some Galloways, (nicknamed Oreo cookie cows for their alternate black and white coloring), and a Wagyu, known for the quality of their meat. According to Rhonda, "Cows are very beautiful and tough animals. They spend all their time outside, but consistently come back to the coral when called for a treat."

No one knows what the future of farming will be in our area but one can't help but be concerned. Fortunately, forces are in place to stabilize and maintain our grass lands so we can enjoy the melancholy mooing of the cows across the hills in the evening and see their calm strides as they roam our hills. For now, EBMUD is keeping a strong hold on its watershed and is maintaining grazing on our public lands at a reasonable cost.

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