

Life in LAMORINDA

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 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.

Lafayette, Moraga – Monte Veda??

By Jennifer Wake



Author Jessica Barksdale Inclán

If you pick up one of Jessica Barksdale Inclán's novels, you not only become engrossed in her characters, but recognize the area, whether it is Nation's down from the Orinda Theatre or the Lafayette Cemetery. Initially setting her first novel in the Seattle area – a place she says she knew nothing about – Inclán's agent told her the setting was weak. So in 2001, Inclán, at age 39, published Her Daughter's Eyes, the first of nine novels she has published since – and one of many set in Orinda.

"I gave [the town] the name Monte Veda (a street in Orinda off of Moraga Way)," said Inclán, who lived in Orinda all her life until she graduated from Miramonte in 1980 (and later returned to raise her family in 1999). "I felt like I had to protect the area for some reason, but I realized I didn't need to do that fully. I didn't do it for the reader, but really for the story. I was able to give a lot of texture to the tale because of knowing so much about the area."

Despite the local connection, it is Inclán's ability to develop the complex, often flawed and truly believable characters

that draw you into each of her stories. As her characters face daunting circumstances including overcoming the shame of teenage motherhood, the lies surrounding anorexia, or the complexities of child abandonment, you find yourself immersed in her character's lives.

Building on the success of her novels, Inclán was ready to write more, but her agent told her that publishing houses would only accept one book a year of contemporary fiction.

"He suggested I write a romance, but I hadn't even read a romance since my last Danielle Steel in high school," said Inclán, who teaches composition, creative writing, mythology and women's literature at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. She also teaches online courses for UCLA extension and regularly facilitates workshops at writer's conferences throughout the country.

Not one to refuse a challenge, Inclán began to research the genre, reading one hundred romance novels before beginning one of her own. She decided to write a trilogy of unique romance novels; she included the paranormal in the plot so there could be an alternate world she could write about.

"Just because it's romance doesn't mean it can't be fun," she said. "It's like Harry Potter for adults – with sex." But she says she is not into elaborate sex scenes, adding, "I don't want to write erotica."

Much like her earlier contemporary fiction, Inclán's books continue to focus on the story, the characters and the emotional romance – what people want, what they feel. In her recent novel, Believe in Me, the third in her trilogy about the magical world of the Croyant de Trois – a world of sorcerers, evil and intrigue – Inclán continues to develop characters

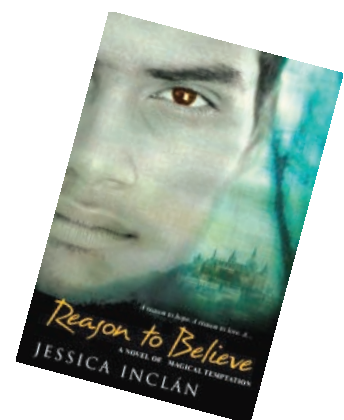
that draw you in.

"I like to pull from life, where it starts as a germ of truth. I pull from emotional truth, and then the characters start doing stuff that takes me somewhere else," she said. "If I get the characters going, they'll pretty much tell the story. With romance, I'm anticipating the tension and I sort of let it happen."

But her success does not go without reproach. After her first romance novel was published, one of Inclán's long-time fans in Georgia wrote her a pleading letter. "She hoped I would hurry up and get back to my 'normal' writing," Inclán said.

"There is a stigma with romance book writers, but genre writing is genre writing," Inclán explained. "The other books I wrote didn't sell as well as the romances are selling. Mystery writing follows a format, same as romance, but there aren't multiple bookshelves dedicated to romance. Yet I see people leaving bookstores, their baskets filled with romance novels."

For now, Inclán is enjoying this new genre and – her Georgia



fan aside – the public is backing her up. She recently created a class entitled, "Writing and Selling a Romance Novel."

"It's already filled," she said.

For information about Inclán, her books, workshops offered or to sign up for her quarterly newsletter, visit her website at www.jessicabarksdaleinclan.com

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