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Pat Adams at Wagner Ranch

By Sophie Braccini



Ida and Theodore Wagner with little George in front of their first Orinda house Photo courtesy of the Adams

For the first time in her life Pat Adams, the great granddaughter of Wagner Ranch founders Ida and Theodore Wagner, set foot on the remaining sixteen acres of preserved lands that once belonged to her family.

The "Friends of Wagner Ranch," the Orinda Union School District, which now owns the land, and the Orinda Historical Society were there on September 16th to greet her. It was a perfect opportunity to recall the history of Orinda and highlight the importance of preserving landmarks for future generations.

Theodore Wagner was a Surveyor General for the State of California. The couple bought the original 241-acre property in the 1880s and built first a small ranch, then an elegant two-story mansion that was the center of Orinda social life at the turn of the century.

Wagner wanted the property he called Oak View Farm to be a show farm and self-sufficient ranch. The property included a forge, a dairy barn, a brick kiln, a carbide gas plant and a winery.

The family lost most of its assets in different business ventures, capped by the failure of the California Nevada railroad and a fire that destroyed the main house. Except for the land that Theodore Wagner had given to Orinda as a school site, the property became part of the holdings of the East Bay Water Company.

The Wagners did not leave California, but moved to Berkeley and later to Glen Ellen. Pat Adams, who was raised in Berkeley, never knew her grand-father George Wagner, who died young, but collected stories from her grand-mother Josephine, George's wife, and still possesses most of her archives.

Adams brought pictures and documents for her visit to Wagner Ranch and proposed to give some of them to the Orinda Historical Society. The Society's President, Lucy Hupp Williams, took the pictures to make copies and plan to return the originals to Adams. "That's where they belong," she said.

Toris Jaeger has been a naturalist with the Orinda School District for thirty years. Wagner Ranch has been the property of the Orinda school district since Theodore Wagner gifted it more than 100 years ago. It is the stage on which Jaeger and Wagner Ranch teachers have taught generations of children about the wonders of nature and living history.

"This place is a unique opportunity for us to teach our children about living history," says Jaeger, "the children can explore native plants and reflect on the life of Native Americans; they study early California and pioneers and imagine their lives on their property; they study biology in the ponds and

creek and botany in the garden."

The Friends of Wagner Ranch say the property contains about 2000 different plants, many of which are natives like the Santa Barbara sedge, the long, fibrous roots of which were used in basket weaving by Native Americans, and some quite rare species like the original black walnut that are hard to find nowadays. The group hopes to transform the property into a non-profit entity in its own right, which would allow them to raise money to preserve it and make sure that the landmark is preserved for the future generations of Orinda children.



Pat Adams (pointing) discovers the foundation of the ranch that her great grand-father established in Orinda in 1884, with husband Rich, Toris Jaeger (left) and a member of the Orinda Historical Society Photo Sophie Braccini

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