

Rancho del Oso

How It Was, 1914 – 1945

By *Hulda Hoover McLean*

A Stanford student in 1898, my father, Theodore Hoover, rode horseback over the mountains to the Waddell on a surveying trip. He camped by the stream and fell in love with the valley, writing in his notebook, “Some day I shall own a hill, a field, and a piece of this stream.”

In 1912, he was a mining engineer with headquarters in London. He wrote to Mr. Cranston (father of Senator Alan Cranston), a real estate agent in Palo Alto, asking him to buy some land along the Waddell. Mr. Cranston arranged the purchase: beach front land from the financially troubled Ocean Shore Railway (whose plans for a San Francisco-to-Santa Cruz line had ended with the 1906 earthquake), most of the upper valley from the heir of William Waddell, and a few small parcels from heirs of original homesteaders, totaling, eventually, almost 3,000 acres – more than my father had envisioned.

The name Waddell comes from William Waddell, a Kentucky lumberman, who clear-cut redwoods from the hillsides. He died in 1875 from injuries inflicted by a bear. The timbering stopped. The hillsides grew green again with ferns and bushes and small trees. Second growth redwoods sprang from the roots of the felled giants. Today, after a long-time program of

forest management and thinning, there is again a forest of towering redwoods along with pine, fir, and oak.

In the spring of 1914, Theodore Hoover and his wife, Mildred, decided to travel from London with their three little girls, Mindy 12, me 7, and Louise 5, to spend the summer on their new ranch in Santa Cruz. Theodore was delayed by unexpected business in Burma, so Mildred and the girls, along with an English maid, Frances, and governess, Miss Pickering, set out without him.

There was one week of crossing the gray Atlantic Ocean, with grown-ups seasick in small cabins and three children enjoying unaccustomed freedom to explore a ship of labyrinths full of friendly sailors. Then more days on a stuffy, sooty train. We arrived in Santa Cruz March 5, 1914, and stayed at the St George Hotel, downtown. The hotel rooms had high ceilings and were furnished with antiques. I was especially delighted by the Garden Dining Room, with palms, a large fountain, and a pool full of goldfish.

Santa Cruz was a small, friendly town. Everyone seemed interested and helpful to the young woman and her entourage from England. She spent a couple of days buying a

houseful of furniture, and plants for the garden. These were piled high on a wagon drawn by four horses. It started out early the next morning along the Coast Road to the ranch. We children, Frances the maid, Pickering the governess explored the town – so different from our home in London. The hotel packed a picnic lunch for us and we walked down sun-hot Pacific Avenue to the beach to wade in the foam and to picnic on the sand. The color of the sand troubled me – it was white, not proper sand yellow like it was on English beaches.

Next day we all boarded the passenger car of the Ocean Shore train which took us twelve miles north to Davenport. There we bought some final supplies at the Davenport Cash Store, which stoked everything from hairpins to butter churns and had a post office in the back.

Davenport is perched on the ocean cliffs, looking far out to sea, where giant gray whales come by on their way from Alaska to Baja, California. It consists of a cluster of houses on each side of the cement plant; and looked then not much different than it does today, except there was the large white frame Ocean View Hotel, owned by exuberant Charlie Bella. My father, later on, patronized the hotel barber. Charlie Bella, much enjoyed telling how once, as my father slid into the chair, friction set on fire kitchen matches in his pants' pocket.

At Davenport, we got into an open-top spring wagon and drove through farmland and fragrant, blooming Buckeyes to Swanton. Swanton, formerly called Laurel, was the end of a

timber spur of the railroad. Here was a post office and Mattei's Inn. A few homes were hidden nearby in deep woods – homes of pioneer settlers, Trumbo, Miller (old Lucy Miller had come across the plains in a covered wagon), and Purdy. The Gianone families lived at the top of the hill.

We passed through Swanton and wound our way up Gianone Hill to a spectacular a view of ocean and beach, curving to Ano Nuevo Point. Then down we went along the corkscrewing road until we came to the land my father had dreamed of for so many years.

The wagon took us up a dusty trace through the center of Waddell valley, over a b ridge, along fields and the, splashing across the creek to the Brown House, built from plans Mother had cabled fro London. It was constructed of heart redwood. Fresh shavings were still on the floor. It smelled new and strange and delicious. Downstairs, there were two bedrooms and a bathroom a large living-dining room, kitchen, pantry, and root cellar. It was surrounded by a wide porch from which an outside stairway led to the upper porch and a huge unfinished room and bath. This was the children's dormitory until it was later divided into four rooms along a hall.

The first day was pure magic. I stood still in the field in front of the new house and absorbed into the spell of the valley – fragrance or earth and flowers, color, and motion of butterflies, clouds, rippling grass and dancing trees. Its music – song of birds, distant surf, wind in the forest – sang itself into my heart.

The only other people living on the ranch were the Rodoni tenant farmers; young Swiss brothers, Tom and Moe, and their older cousin, Gervaso. Our contact with the outside world was the daily stage Santa Cruz to Pescadero which brought us mail, groceries, and sometimes Mother's friends from Stanford or San Francisco.

Very occasionally, we went to Santa Cruz or Pescadero which was an overnight trip because the stage did not return until the next day. Pescadero was a picturesque village of white-painted frame houses (except for one pink stucco house) around a tall flagpole. It was predominantly a settlement of Portuguese farmers. There was a general store, a post office, a lodge hall, a café, a church, and a cemetery on the hill behind the village.

Gervaso Rodoni, whom we called Jarvis, was specially my friend. He was a patient man and probably accepted me as a shadow in order to learn more English – from me with an English accent! I followed him around as he farmed or worked around the Brown House and garden, or walked through the wood and fields. I don't know how Mother would have coped that summer without Jarvis's friendly help. He became almost a member of the family. Later on, my parents helped him bring his wife and children from Switzerland to join him on the ranch. He was the progenitor of the Rodoni family, who later, farmed large acreage along the coast.

Jarvis showed me the fascinating secrets of growing things, farm animals, and the wilderness: how to hold a bay pig, how to sit quietly hardly daring to

breathe while watching the wild world. The wood and fields were full of word; deer browsing in the meadows, little skinks rotting along the side of the road, raccoon pups tumbling under bushes. Snakes slid across the road where beetles had left a delicate lace of prints. Lizards sat almost invisible on the gray fence posts and quail strutted by, calling to laggards. In April, the meadow burst out in a blaze of California poppies, delighting me beyond expression.

Mother was very busy. There was a lot of work to getting settled, running the house, and planting the garden. She and Jarvis and maid Frances worked together. Miss Pickering helped with a will in things that were hardly part of her governess job description. Years later both Frances and Miss Pickering told me that this summer on the ranch was among their most precious memories.

On chilly evenings we were all warmed by the big fireplace. Beside it, Mother read to us *Hiawatha*, *Legends of King Arthur*, *Little Women*. We listened, and played in the light of kerosene lanterns. Our beds were warmed by hot bricks wrapped in singed newspapers. There was no phone, radio had not yet been invented and TV was beyond imagination. We had a tall wind-up Gramophone and stacks of round black records for it. After we children were in bed upstairs, the music of operas and symphonies would float up to us and wind into our dreams.

Our days were full. There were chores so new and strange they felt like games – feeding chickens, ironing with heavy sad-irons heated on the black iron stove, picking fruit, washing sooty lamp

chimneys and helping on laundry day when big copper tubs were set on grates over fires built on the sandy beach by the creek.

After chores, there were the beach, marsh, fields, forests and shaley cliffs to explore. There was no fear in those days of dangerous people on the beach or in the word. As long as several children were together, there was no fear of anything. Of course, we had always been told not to talk to stranger, but if there was an occasional Chinese fisherman in the surf, surely so interesting a character could not be called a stranger!

Father arrived from Burma in July, But, in August, World War One broke out and he had to hurry back to his London business interests. Submarines were active, sinking ships along the Atlantic. It was decided that Miss Pickering would take the children to Palo /alto and wit for further information. There we went to school, and I, with red curls and an English accent, had a miserable time. My knowledge of European history and Latin was no substitute for baseball and George Washington and his cherry tree.

Later one, we went back to London and then home to California – several times, until in 1917, the family settled in California permanently. Father said we should live in America where we belonged and not grow up as English children. He became a professor at Stanford University.

The difference between wartime London and California was tremendous. In London, the servants had all left to work in munitions factories. Mother and

Frances and Miss Pickering struggled to keep up our four-storied house in Kensington. Mother found it difficult To buy the supplies and food we needed. Visiting refugee families came and went in the guest wing. All of the windows were sealed tightly so that no light would show to guide enemy zeppelins. Several times a policeman knocked on the door to report a shining crack. As foreigners were suspect. AT night the sky was criss-crossed with searching lights and there were sometimes distant explosion. Our Uncle Herbert and Aunt Lou and our parents were busy helping American stranded in Europe, who had no access to banks or friends. They found places for them to stay and money for passage home. From this experience, my father and uncle got their firm faith in the integrity of the American public. Of the thousands and thousands of dollars they and their friends loaned, without collateral, to these stranded compatriots, all but two hundred dollars was repaid.

In California, the war was far, far away. There was no TV to bring it into our living room, as current wars are brought. Because America was feeding Europe, there were severe food shortages at home, especially flour, meat, and sugar. There was no compulsory rationing, but there were official meatless and wheatless days. No sugar was available at all. Mother told me to finish eating my spinach, “because of the starving Armenians,” a reason whose logic evaded me.

Then came the flu epidemic of 1918. Statistics tell us that, worldwide, it killed millions of people. More of our soldiers died of flu than were killed I battle. We all wore gauze masks and

stayed away from crowds. Theaters shut down, schools closed.

Finally, both the war and the epidemic were over. We were settled permanently at the ranch in Santa Cruz, with a house in Palo Alto for week nights when school was in session. Palo Alto was a University town with a population of about five thousand. It was a safe and friendly place for children. WE drifted in and out of our friends' homes, went to 15 cent matinees, swam at the "Y," went to piano lessons and ballet classes. During autumn afternoons a friend and I (12 years old) would ride our bicycles into the country beyond Embarcadero Road and struggle to catch the gold and green and shadow purples of oak-studded fields with our watercolor paints.

The ranch was home. We were there every weekend and all vacations. In fact, all my life, no matter where else in the world I might live, home was always Rancho de Oso.

The Waddell valley has had many names. Portola named it *Canada de la Salud* for the miracle of healing here, as men who had been dying recovered their strength.

Settlers in the village of Branciforte called it *Arroyo de los Osos*, because this is where they came to get grizzly bears for the bull and bear fights.

Ships sailing along the coast noted it a Big Gulch or Arroyo Grande, because its steep hills and valley are so conspicuous from the sea – around 1910, it was Frogtown, for a settlement here. But usually it was just The Waddell.

When Theodore and Mildred Hoover and their family came, Mildred took the name back to mission days and registered it as *Rancho del Oso* – Ranch of the Bear. Poachers and my friends said that Father was the bear.

The valley draws people back – children who spent summers here, men and women who worked with us, Stanford students, who had biology project in the valley. Returning to the ranch after years away, they tell us that it hasn't changed – seashore, meadows, redwoods, hills and wilderness are here as they used to be. But when one looks more closely, changes are evident. There are no sand dunes, nor is there a lagoon at the mouth of the creek. Plovers used to nest in the dunes and spotted skunks stalked them. Striped bass and flounders lived in the lagoon. Eagles are gone except for an occasional fly-over. Ground squirrels were poisoned by state trappers and badgers ate the squirrels and died too. Banks of five-finger ferns have been stripped from the roadsides by poachers. Tide pools that teemed with life are almost empty. After winter storms, we sometimes see a few salmon oar steelheads where, once, hundreds fought their way upstream. Roadrunners are gone. Where are the flocks of bluebirds and goldfinches, who, in late summer gorged on thistle seed? Why don't hundreds of robins strip our berry bushes anymore?

Some things are here that we did not have when I was a child. We had no crawfish in the creek, and there were no mockingbirds, nor starlings, crows, or ravens. Pelicans used to come in twos and threes – now flocks rest on the beach between flights. Poison Hemlock came gradually south along as the highway

into the valley, Italian thistles came and so did Spanish broom, pampas grass, and German ivy. There were none of the pretty blue flax flowers that now line our roadways. Lower valley hills, now covered with pipes, were almost bare then. There were no glider floating overhead, nor airplanes reverberating in the hills. The highway – then mostly deserted – is now a stream of noisy vehicles.

As time went by, I grew up, married Chuck McLean, and graduated from Stanford University. We lived in Pasadena for twelve years and had three sons there. It was a pleasant busy life of work and community service, of Junior League, PTA, and League of Women Voters.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, the ranch was a refuge. Several families, my parents' friends battered by lost incomes, came and camped, making small profits from such things as cutting downed trees into firewood, sacking leaf mold, crafting jewelry from Abalone shells. The abundant vegetable garden, orchards, wild game and flock of chickens kept hunger away. We spent our vacations here (Chuck was one of the lucky ones who kept his job - \$250 a month, and I worked very occasional statistical research projects at \$10 a day) and stocked up on food. We canned fruits and took them back to Pasadena with us, along with apples, squash, root vegetables, jerky and eggs.

Then, in 1941, came World War II. By then, Father was Dean Emeritus of the Stanford School of Engineering. Mother had died. Alone in the big house they had built in 1925 across the creek

from the Brown House, he was lost and lonely without her and, suddenly old and tired. There was the dairy to be run and the whole ranch enterprise to be managed. Chuck and I sold our Pasadena house and, with our small boys, came home to operate the ranch for him.

Farming under wartime restrictions was a challenge. Farm labor was sporadic and inexperienced, most able-bodied workers having been drafted. There was rationing – meat, butter, flour, sugar, and gasoline. Gasoline is a farm necessity for tractors, trucks, and other machinery. Our allotted ration gave barely enough for farming and one trip a week into Santa Cruz for supplies and doctor and dentist appointments. There was no gas at all for social trips. When Chuck had to apply to the ration board for special gas stamps to bring a needed bull to the dairy herd, the board, with typical bureaucratic reasoning, granted us enough for a trip one way! As a result of this, there was no gas for the weekly supply trips into town. Supplies were brought to us now and then by sympathetic neighbors. We had a lot of meatless, wheatless days again. Father's flourishing vegetable garden fed us and nourished our hearts. There was surplus for friends.

Again the windows were sealed so there would be no light to guide invaders. No car headlights were permitted, so if one were stranded at night (and needed to get home) the dark drive was hazardous indeed. Once there was the excitement of a Japanese submarine surfacing near Greyhound Rock. It was reported destroyed by depth charges near Ano Nuevo Point. However, no wreckage ever washed

shore. We doubted the report of its demise.

Because of inadequate farm help, all of us, the growing boys included, worked like slaves. Spelling Chuck on the tractor and watching rich earth turned behind me was fun, but it was no fun to weed seedling beds or load cabbages. When those chores loomed I returned to my job in the house, cleaning, cooking, childcare, business reports – responsibilities that were almost overwhelming. Some of our friends were enlisted to help – and some spent their vacations working with us. But there was a limit to what all of us could accomplish – we lost a crop one year because there no one to harvest it.

World War II ended. Young farmers returned home and rationing ceased. Farm life became a bit easier – not that farming is ever easy. We took a vacation and visited friends in Pasadena, Stanford, Idaho, Washington. The boys went fishing at Catalina with cousins.

And then we came home. This was the place we wanted to raise our boys, to work and play and live in the enchantment of its beauty. The Waddell, whose spell had entrapped my father so many years ago took us back into its embrace.
