

From axes to steam donkeys

By Marion Softky | Almanac Staff Writer
Historic photos courtesy Ken Fisher

**Ken Fisher's
fascination
with
redwoods
and steam
power
converge in
telling the
story of
logging
the great
redwoods
of the
Peninsula**

"TO BE NEARBY WHEN A BIG TREE COMES DOWN IS LIKE BEING IN AN EARTHQUAKE," says Ken Fisher of Kings Mountain. "There is a whoosh sound, and then a thump, and then an after-tremor. Then you have absolute quiet, and the absolute quiet is deafening."

Mr. Fisher is leading a group of hikers up Purisima Canyon, west of Kings Mountain, and showing the sites of sawmills that operated from 1854 until as late as 1920. He tells stories of the trees themselves; the people who felled, cut up and moved them; and the advance of technology from water and ox power, to "steam donkeys" that could haul the giant logs with flexible steel cables, and steam-powered mills that sliced them into boards or shingles.

Hikers get firsthand lessons

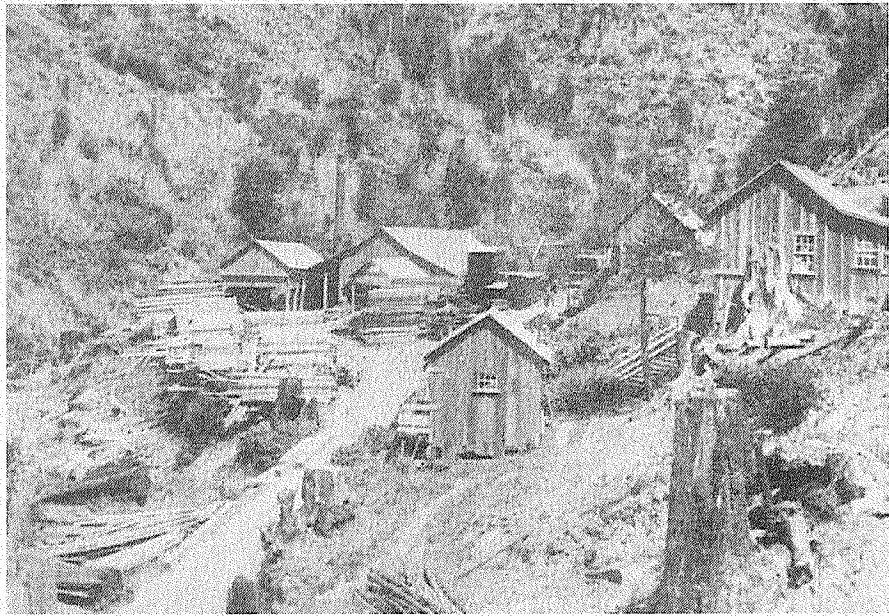
in local archaeology as they pass sites where eight sawmills cut lumber for more than 70 years. From the tangled underbrush above one of the mills run by George Borden and Rufus Hatch in the 1880s, Mr. Fisher pulls out fragments of glass, and a rusty something; he's looking for removable teeth of a circular saw blade. "I've found more than 200 of these," he says, and gestures towards the creek. "There's a smokestack still buried in the sands up there."

"I'm wanting you to see how primitive it was," Mr. Fisher adds. "They're not thinking about decimating the forest. They're thinking about how to cut a tree and make some money."

And cut trees they did. As technology advanced, they went from small trees to big ones. By the time the last mill closed down about 1920, most of the big trees were gone, and the mountains were stripped. With a few exceptions like the Methuselah tree off Skyline Boulevard, which was so knotted that it wasn't worth cutting, today's forest is second growth. Younger trees, which grew from the ever-living roots of old-growth parents, now cover the devastation that old — and even recent — logging created.

Mr. Fisher, who may be better known as the founder and CEO of Fisher Investments, and a regular columnist for Forbes Magazine since 1984, has a life-long love affair with the redwoods and their colorful history. Since his childhood in San Mateo, he has roamed the forests, scavenged the sites where historic entrepreneurs felled trees and sawed them up, and become San Mateo County's premier expert on local logging. Sometimes he dons the clothes and persona of George Harkins, one of the hermits who inhabited the hills, and leads a walking tour

A rare team of 12 oxen drag relatively small logs to the saw mill in the 1880s. The whole area was burnt over early in the year to reduce the brush and fire hazard. Later the steam-powered donkey engine made oxen obsolete.

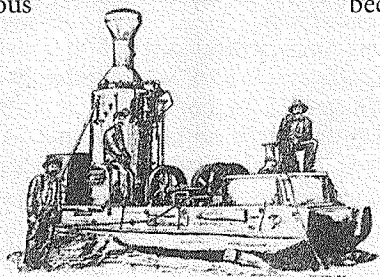


There is still a clearing where Geroage Borden and Rufus Hatch ran this sawmill in Purisima Canyon in the 1880s. It's still possible to find broken glass and scraps of metal in the woods around the site. And the stump on the right remains today. "You can tell by the bullet holes," says Mr. Fisher.

of Kings Mountain as it was in the 1880s.

Mr. Fisher also brings a business perspective to the evolving industry that chewed up the redwoods to build San Francisco and the cities of the Peninsula. Besides having walked and scrambled across every sawmill site, he talks knowledgeably about markets and business cycles and the economics of lumbering more than a century ago.

"I live in two separate worlds. One is the world I work at, and the other is the world I enjoy," he says in an interview at the luxurious offices of Fisher Investments on Skyline, just north of Purisima Canyon. In a room cluttered with stuffed animals, books, old maps, bottles, and artifacts gathered from the woods, he gestures broadly: "My idea of a good time is this stuff."



The powerful steam engine on skids — called the "donkey engine," or "steam donkey" — could drag itself or logs as much as 1,000 feet using cables. It replaced teams of oxen.

Sempervirens: magical redwoods

"Most people don't understand trees," says Mr. Fisher, who studied forestry at Humboldt State College before turning to a career in finance.

Standing in the deep shade of second-growth forest, Mr. Fisher warms to one of his favorite topics: the unique qualities of redwoods.

Thousands of years ago, before the Native Americans came, the old-growth forests that blanketed the Peninsula mountains were not clear of underbrush like Muir Woods or Big Basin today, Mr. Fisher says. They were full of debris dropped from trees that may not have burned for 200 years. "The average old growth tree is 400 to

800 years old," he says.

Later, the Native Americans used fire as a tool; they burned chaparral and grasslands and forests regularly. "San Mateo County forests burned every 25 years," Mr. Fisher says.

But redwoods are resistant to fires; they survive all but the biggest, leaving blackened scars to tell their tales.

"Why doesn't redwood burn?" Mr. Fisher asks. It doesn't produce much pitch or resin to burn, and the tannic acid in the wood protects it from rot and insects, he explains. "So it becomes the construction wood of choice."

The Native Americans who preceded the Spanish didn't use the redwood forests much, Mr. Fisher notes.

Redwood forests do not support much wildlife, mostly newts and salamanders — and an occasional grizzly bear. Redwoods have another magical

property: When an old tree dies or is cut down, new trees sprout from its roots. And on and on for generations. "The roots don't die; they are truly sempervirens (ever-living)," says Mr. Fisher. "The redwood is a pretty happy tree."

Thus the ancient trees that have built San Francisco and Peninsula cities have re-grown into the lush redwood forests that still cloak the hills and canyons of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The local industrial revolution

At first people thought the forests were inexhaustible, Mr. Fisher says.

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Ken Fisher: a passion for local history

Ken Fisher fell in love with the Peninsula wilderness as a kid growing up in San Mateo two blocks from Crystal Springs Canyon. "The world was different then," he says. "You could just hitch-hike up in the hills and get lost."

Ken loved the woods so much he decided to become a forester. Forestry studies at Humboldt State College were OK, but a summer job with the Forest Service convinced him he never wanted to work for the government. "Forestry is a lousy career," he says. "Everything about forestry is either for or against the government."

Following in the footsteps of his father, prominent financier Philip Fisher, Mr. Fisher switched his career to finance, where he has thrived. "Finance is more unfettered," he says, "But I still love the forest."

Mr. Fisher continued to roam the hills, following in the footsteps of county historian Frank Stanger, whose book, "Sawmills in the Redwoods," chronicles the sawmills and their operators "mill by mill and gulch by gulch," from Woodside and Portola Valley as far west and south as Santa Cruz County. Mr. Fisher published a second printing of the book in 1992 and contributed a new introduction.

In 1967, Mr. Fisher found his first deserted trapper's cabin in a remote canyon. Drawn by the romance of the earthy days on Kings Mountain when logging was king, the Fishers moved to the hill in 1972. He and his wife, Sherri, and their three sons explored the most remote canyons for old mills and the artifacts that tell their stories.

"It was like walking into a ghost town, and seeing pieces of buildings, and thinking, 'There was life here!'" he says. "It's like looking through a telescope and seeing something, not a long way away, but a long time ago."

Of the thousands of artifacts Mr. Fisher has collected, special ones adorn his home. There are large saws on the porch, old bot-

tles line a window where they catch the afternoon light, and his history room is crammed with pieces of the puzzle. Under the preserved bobcat, racoon, deer, coyote and rare red fox are double iron shoes from the oxen that hauled the logs, old radio batteries, an ebony-handled dinner knife, pulleys, a corner spool that guided cables in

Purisima Canyon, and hundreds of bottles, including an opium bottle. "The bottles help me date the mill sites," he says.

Always a businessman as well as a history buff, Mr. Fisher is fascinated about the technological advances since the early Spanish days when they cut down small redwoods with axes, and two men sawed the logs in pits, sawing up and down. Then came water-powered saw mills about the time of the Gold Rush, followed by steam powered mills starting about 1852. Circular

saws were introduced in the 1870s, and by the 1880s, donkey engines began to replace oxen for hauling logs up hills and even around corners. "The use of chain saws started in the 1950s," he says.

Mr. Fisher sees the century of logging as a local version of the larger Industrial Revolution that transformed the world. "I've always believed human existence was freed to become innovative by the Industrial Revolution and the power of steam," he reflects. "This area provides evidence of the power of steam engines, in one industry, in one place. Before the steam engine, people lived their lives the way their grandparents did; after the steam engine, that would never be true again."

Meanwhile, Mr. Fisher still gets inspired by the thrill of the hunt. "Just last week I found a whole steam boiler never seen before," he exults. "It will be there until it rusts away."

— Marion Softky

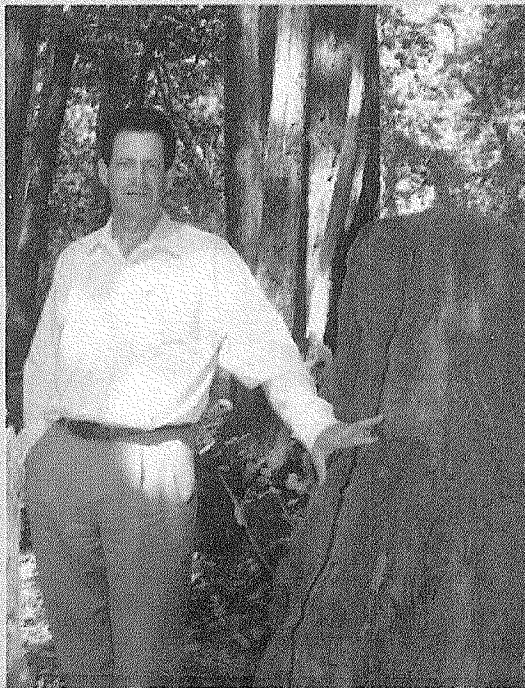


Photo by Carol Iwie

Kings Mountain history buff Ken Fisher points to a notch in an old redwood stump in Purisima Canyon, where loggers, more than a century ago, fastened a "spring board" on which they could stand to chop down the tree.

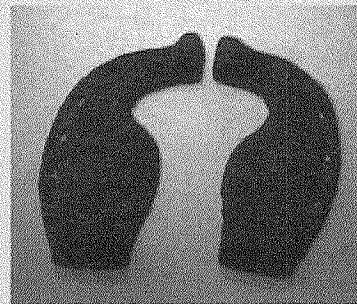


Photo by Carol Iwie

Hundreds of oxen shoes found near old mill sites in the redwoods recall the powerful beasts that used to haul redwood logs, before they were replaced by steam-powered donkey engines. Unlike horses, oxen have cloven hoofs and require two-piece shoes.

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"Shingle King" Purdy Pharis turned out 70,000 shingles a day in the 1880s from this shingle mill in Purisima Canyon. One of the few innovators in Peninsula lumbering, he invented machinery for making shingles.

REDWOODS

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People felled the smaller trees with axes and cut them in saw pits where two men sliced them with a single saw.

It was only after the Gold Rush that the demand for lumber soared and mills sprang up through the mountains; some 35 mill sites have been identified so far from Woodside and Portola Valley as far west and south as Santa Cruz County. Their owners harnessed first water, and then steam, to saw ever-larger logs into boards, which were hauled to the bustling port of Redwood City. At first they were floated to San Francisco using the power of the tides; later schooners took the lumber to build the towns springing up around the Bay.

Most of the lumber taken from the east side of the Peninsula hills went to build San Francisco — several times. "San Francisco burned regularly. No early building remains from San Francisco," Mr. Fisher says.

As demand grew and technology advanced, lumbering operations moved up and over the hill to the coastal canyons where the trees were bigger. Like Purisima Canyon, where eight mill sites have been identified. Most recently logged in the 1970s, the steep, narrow canyon is now preserved in public ownership as the Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve.

Pointing to a wedge-shaped notch in a mossy stump above the swelling base, Mr. Fisher describes the felling of a giant redwood in Purisima Canyon. Into the notch, the fellers wedged a "springboard," on which they could stand and hack at the tree with axe and saw.

"Two men could take down a

big tree in a day — if they were really good," he says. "These were hard guys; they were used to doing this all day long."

Once the tree was down, it was stripped of branches and bark, and cut into lengths of about 16 feet that oxen could haul to the sawmill. This was done by drilling holes in the big logs, stuffing the holes with dynamite, and literally blowing the logs apart. "Even in 1918 they were blowing trees apart," Mr. Fisher says.

There aren't many artifacts left for hopeful collectors to find, Mr. Fisher notes. Some 25,000 bottles — mostly liquor — have already been removed, as well as other portable items such as ox shoes. "The good stuff has all been taken away," he says.

Before the steam donkey engines arrived in the 1880s, loggers relied on teams of oxen to haul the logs to the sawmills over skid roads, made of smaller logs greased to make them slippery.

"Every place they had a mill, they had oxen, and everywhere they had oxen, you find shoes," says Mr. Fisher. In those days, he adds, transportation was more than half the cost of producing lumber.

In technology, the Peninsula logging industry was pretty backward, Mr. Fisher says. "The Silicon Valley of redwood was Humboldt County. New technology filters down from there."

The main exception was one of the area's notable characters, Purdy Pharis, known as the "shingle king." Mr. Fisher led his group past a major mill site where Borden and Hatch had one mill, and Pharis turned out 70,000 shingles a day from another. While the heavy lumber went down the hill to build new cities on the Coast-side; the shingles went up and over the hill for wider distribution.

"Pharis was the only innovator," Mr. Fisher says. He invented machines to make and cut shingles, and even tried to build a tramway to lift the shingles to Star Hill Road. That was a failure.

Between 1870 and 1884, Purdy Pharis produced some 3 million shingles, and became the county's largest landowner, with almost 7,000 acres. Then he committed suicide at 56 — although some still speculate that it was murder.

Crossing a shaded stream, Mr. Fisher says: "A few hundred yards up No Name Creek was a house of ill repute that served the mill people. When I was a kid, there were cabins here."

The lumbermen of that era were tough. They earned a dollar a day, plus food and lodging. "They blew their money readily," Mr. Fisher notes. "Weekends, they headed over the hill to Redwood City to party."

The advent of the steam donkey engine in the 1880s speeded the pace of logging and the devastation it caused. The powerful machines sat on skids and could be moved from tree to tree. They could be rigged by cable to drag logs around corners for a thousand yards. They made oxen obsolete.

Always a boom-or-bust business, local logging petered out toward the end of the 1800s. Alvin Hatch, son of Rufus and a long-time county supervisor into the 1960s, ran a mill in Purisima Canyon from 1906 to 1920. "The last two mills ran for one reason — World War I," Mr. Fisher says.

When he retires from finance, Mr. Fisher plans to write another book on logging the Peninsula hills and the people who did it. "My fascination is with redwood trees and steam engines, and this is where the two come together." ■