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When logging was king



TIMBERRR! Huge redwood near Skyline crashes down like an earthquake more than 100 years ago. It took two men between two and seven days to fall one of the old-growth giants using only saws and axes. Photo courtesy of Ken Fisher.

Ken Fisher has opened a mini-museum on Skyline Boulevard, showing the colorful logging history of the Kings Mountain area in the 19th century



MARION SOFTKY

KEN FISHER of Skyline has collected the colorful history of Kings Mountain.

When Kings Mountain

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BY MARION SOFTKY

Kings Mountain was a different world when loggers were king.

Two men could spend a week, using only saws and axes, to fell just one of the giant redwoods that cloaked the mountains and canyons along Skyline.

"When an old growth redwood goes down, it's like a major earthquake," says mountain resident Ken Fisher.

Mr. Fisher, who runs an investment firm from his Skyline home, has made a lifelong hobby of dredging up the history of the Midpeninsula's mountain backdrop. He delights in bringing to life the old days when the mountain was truly a bit of the wild west.

That colorful history includes the noisy, smelly dusty logging era during the last century when the old growth forest was cut to help build San Francisco.

Lower on the mountain were the dairy farms — more respectable and civilized than the loggers — where families built ranches to run cattle and make cheese.

Binding these together were roads, schools, saloons, and hotels, each with its own cast of characters.

The characters included "Purdy Pharis," the "Shingle King," who died of a revolver wound to the back of the head. The coroner's jury ruled it was suicide, but many people — including Mr. Fisher — still think Pharis was murdered by his neighbor. The neighbor, Hiram Haskins, admitted spending the night with Pharis. He reported hearing only a boot drop, not a revolver blast.

Another character, the hermit Nathan Comstock, left his buried fortune to someone who once helped rescue him. Sixteen years after the hermit's death, woodchopper Steve Perkins received a mysterious, yellowed letter containing a treasure hunter's map. It led him to a rusty tin can filled with \$500 in old gold coins buried three feet underground.

By this century, the forest was mostly cut, and Skyline entered its "summer cabin era." It became a destination for people seeking recreation. The subdividers came, and so did the automobile. Skyline Boulevard was built in the early 1920s.

Residents of some 400 homes tucked in the woods and canyons of "the Mountain" are still a feisty lot. They put up with the long drive to the flatlands for the beauty and independence of rural living.

Now, thanks to Mr. Fisher, anyone who hikes, bikes or drives along Skyline can stop by the Kings Mountain Country Store and dip into local history. On one wall Mr. Fisher mounted a small museum of photographs and artifacts from the wild old days. It is located in the former Alpenrose Restaurant on Skyline Boulevard, 4.5 miles south of its intersection with Highway 92.

Flanking a cheery wood stove, are photographs of the old logging and dairy days. At the right is a rotating exhibit featuring pictures of some of the personalities that added color to life on the mountain.

A case holds old bottles, square nails, rusty chains from a donkey engine, and all four sizes of oxen shoe. There is a handwritten note from Purdy Pharis requesting a payment from Dr. O.R. Tripp, the notable dentist who operated the historic Woodside Store. "It shows Dr. Tripp provided banking services," says Mr. Fisher.

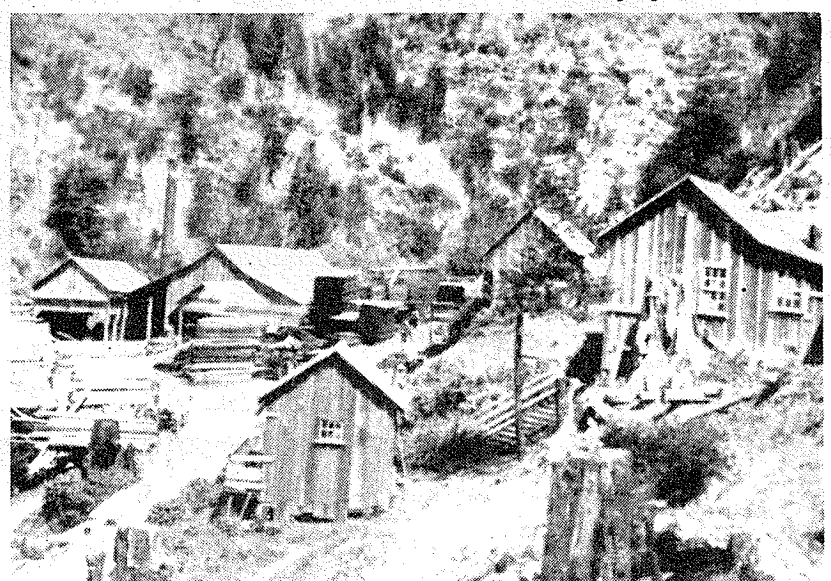


GIANT TREES needed giant augers to drill holes through them so they could be blasted apart with dynamite.

Photos courtesy of Ken Fisher



BULLWHACKER guides his team of oxen dragging giant redwood log to sawmill.



"BUTCHED BALD" is the slope behind the 19th century Borden and Hatch mill site. Today it's a thriving redwood forest.



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*Upscale general store
opens on Kings Mountain.*

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was the local wild west

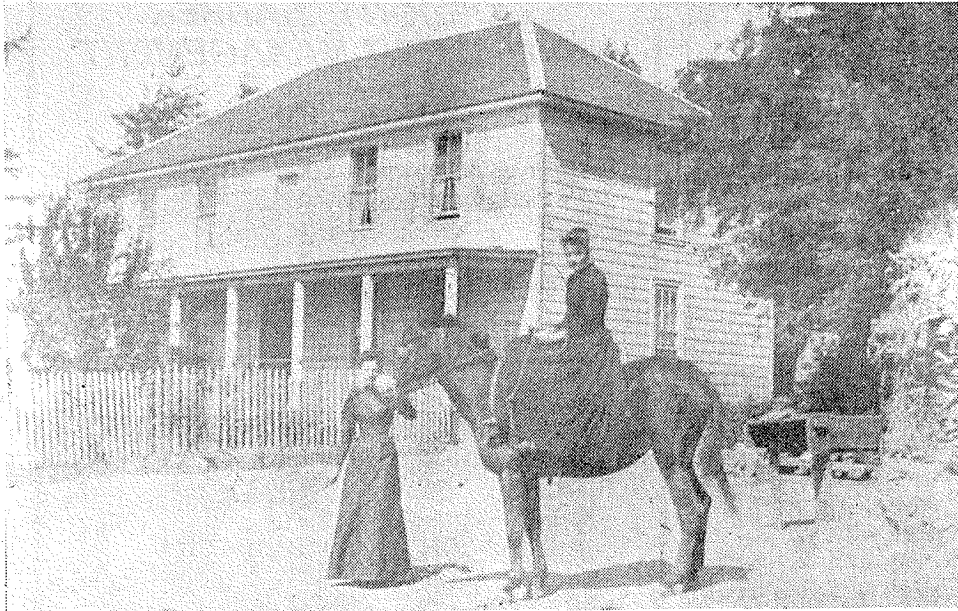
the colorful logging history of the Kings Mountain area in the 19th century



CULTURAL CENTER for 19th century Kings Mountain was the hotel Summit Springs, down hill from the summit near Kings Mountain Road.



THE KING FAMILY posed for this formal portrait. Frank King is in the rear center with Honora in front.



KINGS MOUNTAIN BROW HOUSE hotel gave its name to today's Kings Mountain. In front of the hotel on her horse is Dolly King, daughter of proprietor Frank and Honora King.

In addition to the new museum, Mr. Fisher is president of the Kings Mountain Historical Society. He also wrote "Kings Mountain's Colorful History" for the November issue of La Peninsula, the journal of the San Mateo County Historical Association.

Mr. Fisher came early to his love of Kings Mountain and its history. As a boy growing up in San Mateo, he would hitchhike up the hill every time he got the chance. For the last 19 years he has lived there with his wife, Sherrilynn, and their three sons.

His love of the mountain first converted to an interest in its history when he became fascinated with the spelling of "Purissima Canyon."

Once a prime logging area, the big canyon opposite the top of Kings Mountain Road has been saved by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. It is now the Purissima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve.

By the time he discovered that "Purissima" has one "s" — that is the Spanish

Francisco.

Once felled it took the loggers several more days to cut a log into manageable lengths. They drilled holes in the tree, stuffed them with dynamite, and literally blew the tree apart.

Mr. Fisher tells of the noise and smell and dust of the early logging when the "bullwhacker" urged the ox team down the skid road, made up of greased logs placed crosswise across the trail so that the oxen could step between them.

"The principle of 19th century logging was: put the mill below the trees," he says.

The bullwhacker commanded his team by voice, Mr. Fisher says. He only used the whip to tap their shoulders; he had to get their attention because there was so much noise, he says.

Later the lumber was hauled down the present Kings Mountain Road to Redwood City where it was floated to San Francisco.

In the early days, the loggers didn't have the techniques to ruin the forest, Mr. Fisher notes. Only when the donkey engine came to the hill in the 1880s did technology allow wholesale destruction of the forest. Not long after that, the canyons were "butched bald" — in a vivid phrase of the times. "I mean this mountain was clear-cut. Only about 30 trees remained," he says.

Following the height of the logging were the shingle makers. Most notable was Purdy Pharis, a bachelor and loner who started with an axe and worked up to the title of "Shingle King." By clever development of new machinery, he made some 300 million shingles during a long career. He became the largest landowner in the county and founded a school before he was killed in 1884.

At its height, there were 35 mills in the canyons. Rufus Hatch and his son Alvin owned most of the mills. With the good trees gone, the last mill closed in 1920. Many county residents still remember Alvin Hatch as county supervisor for many years.

Grabtown never made it as a community, but Summit Springs became the cultural center of the mountain. Located downhill from the ridge near Kings Mountain Road, the town provided a stop on the toll road between Redwood City and San Gregorio. At its height it boasted a hotel, store, livery and saloon.

The mountain actually got its name from a family of squatters named King. Frank and Honora (pronounced "On-o-ray") King built a saloon and barbershop that grew to a hotel and boardinghouse on the brow of the hill where Kings Mountain Road meets Skyline Boulevard.

The Kings Mountain Brow House — long since burned down — served as a popular destination for the first tourists who chugged up the hill in their cars.

Presiding over the Brow House was Mrs. King, a forceful lady and fine cook whose daughter married Floyd Granger, the county assessor. Their adopted son, also Floyd Granger, was a longtime councilmember and mayor of Redwood City.

During Prohibition, the mountain was a lively scene. Its speakeasies prospered, it is reported, by stationing lookouts at the bottom of roads leading up the hill. When the cops came, a quick phone call allowed 20 minutes' warning to stash the liquor.

There were no arrests for illegal liquor on the Mountain, Mr. Fisher reports.

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spelling — he was hooked on history. "If you're lucky, a hobby never ends," he says.

"Butched bald"

Downtown Grabtown — west of Skyline where the rough, tough loggers hung out — used to be "Grizzly Bear Central," Mr. Fisher says.

Those were the days when the steep canyons west of Skyline were dense with old growth redwood trees and San Francisco was undergoing a building boom fueled by the Gold Rush.

There was no clear-cutting then. Loggers felled trees with lengths of saw jury-rigged together and axes. Once down, the trees had to be cut into lengths that could be dragged by the teams of oxen to the sawmill. Eventually the lumber was hauled to Redwood City where they were floated to San