

Controversial Bryant Ranch as Yet Remains Untouched

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Separated from the suburban sprawl of Yorba Linda by just a few hills is the Rancho Santa Ana. Owned by the Bryant family for almost 100 years, the ranch as yet is untouched by earthmoving equipment like that currently rearranging the land in other eastern sections of the city.

More commonly known as the Bryant Ranch, the acreage remains much as it has been for the last 10 decades. Ranging from the flat riverbed of the Santa Ana River to some of the highest peaks in the Chino Hills, a small portion of the ranch is devoted to citrus groves, while much of the rest is open grassy areas used for grazing.

A focal point for recent controversy in Yorba Linda, the northern section of the ranch has been selected both for a possible state park and for a proposed major airport. The city's annexation of the property last August resulted in a law suit by Hills for Everyone, a group that feels any development in the Chino Hills would be detrimental to the possibility of a state park in the area.

The 3,500 acre ranch was purchased last year from Ernest A. Bryant III by John Wertin Development Corporation. Construction of a first tract, in the southwest portion of the ranch, may begin this summer, according to John Spiak, vice president at Wertin.

However, further development on the ranch will probably be very gradual, he added.

"Large areas will remain open space because they are too steep to build on and the cost of moving the dirt for grading would be prohibitive," he said.

Spiak hopes to preserve several features of the ranch, including the narrow entry drive, which is lined with pomegranate trees on either side for more than three miles. This could possibly be retained as a bicycle trail.

Higher in the hills lies a large concrete reservoir that can be used for swimming, or drained and used as a skateboard facility, said Spiak.

Meanwhile, the ranch continues to operate much as it has in the past, with the help of 14 resident families. Orange groves take up 360 acres of the property, with 40 additional acres devoted to lemon trees. Much of the remaining land is leased for cattle grazing.

The history of the ranch dates back to 1834, when the land was granted by Mexico to Bernardo Yorba. He was the son of Jose Antonio Yorba, who was a member of the Portola Expedition of 1769 and who at one time owned most of what is now Orange County.

John William Bixby, who came to California from Maine, bought more than 5,000 acres from members of the Yorba family in 1875. Eventually his children, Susanna and Fred, inherited the Rancho Santa Ana.

Susannah married Dr. Everest Albert Bryant in 1904 and lived with him for a number of years in Los Angeles. In 1912 she bought out her brother's interest in the family property and moved to the area where she planted the first citrus grove and took over operation of the ranch.

In addition to this, she devoted much of her time to the establishment of a large botanical garden on the ranch. Her dream was to create a preserve for as many native California plants as possible.

After her death, the garden was moved to Claremont College, where it was felt the display would be more accessible to the public.

Remnants of the botanical garden, which was considered one of the finest of its kind, can still be seen on several acres at the Bryant Ranch.

In other areas, homes are found in small clusters. The largest group of buildings is in the central complex, which includes homes, barns, stables and a few other simple structures. The main office, run since 1967 by Mildred Donley, is full of antique furniture, old photographs, records and other memorabilia.

A picture of the magnificent mission-like home built by Susannah Bryant, and since torn down, hangs on one wall.

Not far from this area is a meeting house, a Spanish-style building with a balcony that offers a panoramic view over a large area of Orange County.

But for the most part, the hills of Rancho Santa Ana seem wild and barely touched by human efforts.