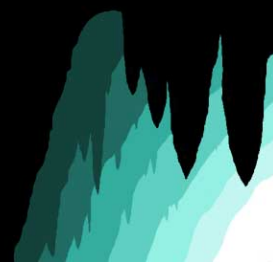


The Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

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WCC Buys Rippled Cave!

A Very Special Letter from the President



Photo: Kip Baumann

Dear Friends:

What wonderful news we have! Rippled Cave finally belongs to the Western Cave Conservancy. What originally appeared to be an easy, straightforward process to acquire a popular cave from a landowner willing to sell turned out to be a roller coaster of delays and uncertainties. Finally, finally...the planets and stars fell into alignment, or maybe we just got lucky, but whatever the reason, it has all come together and on March 21, 2006 the cave became ours!

A tremendous salute of thanks goes to Martin Haye for his tenacious dedication to maintaining contact with the previous owner and always representing our interest with tact and confidence. We also owe a heartfelt gratitude to some individuals who stepped forward on very short notice to make both donations and loans to help us cover the purchase. From these generous members of the caving community we received over \$16,000 in donations and \$45,000 in long-term personal loans.

Additional thanks goes to the National Speleological Society (NSS) for quickly moving to distribute its \$90,000 Pacific Slope Cave Acquisition Fund. In 2001, a western caver donated \$70,000 to seed this fund, with the goal of jump-starting a conservancy in the west. It worked and WCC is living proof!

We are all going to have to dig deep in the days ahead to pay off our loans and ready the WCC for maintaining our new property and planning for future acquisitions.

Now it is time for all of us, members and cavers alike, to "walk the talk." Successfully managing Rippled Cave, with the attendant responsibilities of property ownership, neighbor relations, liability risk, resource conservation, and recreational access, is going to be a huge challenge. The cave belongs to all of us, and so, too, does the responsibility. Our Stewardship Committee, headed up by Joel Despain, has already started work on a management plan that will address all these issues. We plan to consult directly with the neighbors and with the NSS grottos that have traditionally visited Rippled Cave. Of course, we welcome input from all individuals with ideas or concerns.

In order for WCC to succeed in the long run, we absolutely need your support and commitment. It's not just money I'm talking about, either. It can be active participation in the planning stage or being a volunteer when we set up work projects or fund-raisers. Last but definitely not least, by just being someone who follows whatever rules are established and who encourages others to do so also, you will enhance WCC's credibility with the neighbors, owners of other properties we may be interested in and the general public.

I am so grateful to all of you who have supported us and believed in the WCC for over three long years. A new door has been opened. Let's step through together and hold tight to what we value so much.

Yours truly,

Marianne Russo

President, Western Cave Conservancy

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Western Cave Conservancy

213 ELM STREET
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060

TEL 831-421-0485
FAX 831-421-0485

On the web at
www.westerncaves.org
email
mail@westerncaves.org

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WESTERN CAVE CONSERVANCY

Never the Same Again Rippled Cave's Historic Context

by D. Snyder and M. Haye

Stone, not paper, records the earliest claim to the land overlying Rippled Cave. Let us transport ourselves backward in time to some autumn just before 1840. Evidence suggests a family of Mewuk people lived near a spring down the gully from the cave, harvesting pine nuts and acorns from late summer until the rains set in.

On the low marble outcrops overlying Rippled Cave, the women pounded the seeds in bedrock mortars, or grinding holes. They socialized while they worked, telling stories, singing, and, no doubt, discussing the disturbing news blown in by the winds of trade.

They probably would have heard about the steady absorption, since 1776, of the peoples around the Bay and in the Delta by the Spanish missions, settlements and ranches, or of the successes that increasingly militarized Valley Yokuts and Plains Mewuk tribes, led by escapees from the missions, were having in their raids against the coastal settlements. Perhaps the men returning from elk and antelope hunts in the lowlands brought back strange meats and told of the huge free-ranging herds of cattle and horses that now trampled the clover in the great valley.

Some of this news would have seemed wondrous and some, terrifying, for since the arrival of the Spanish and American trappers who traversed the valley every winter seeking beaver and otter, terrible sickness had come to the people living along the valley rivers. In 1833 alone, a malaria epidemic wiped out nearly all the river villages in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. The fleeing survivors left thousands of bodies unburied where just a year earlier, trappers had seen populous communities drying the salmon harvest.

Still, the women contemplating this as their pestles rose and fell were likely insulated from the direct effects of the conquest, perhaps even enjoying new trade goods that began to trickle up to the mountain people. As far as historians know, no Spanish-Californians or trappers ventured into the mountains above Ione Valley, and the people around Rippled Cave had probably never seen the strangers who were so utterly transforming the coast. That was about to change.

Sutter's Pine Woods

In 1839, a Swiss-born American named John Augustus Sutter petitioned the Mexican governor for a huge tract of land encompassing present-day Sacramento. He got it, with the expectation that he bring the region under control.

Over the next several years, Sutter and his growing retinue built a thick-walled adobe fort armed with cannon brought from the former Russian colony at

Fort Ross on the north coast. His dealings with the valley tribes that surrounded him, and upon which he relied for most of his labor force, combined skillful diplomacy with brutal suppression. Sutter's 50,000-acre private empire at New Helvetia became a nucleus for American and European settlement in the great valley.

The one resource Sutter's grant lacked was quality timber, and every construction or boat-building project sent Sutter's scouts in search of a closer source. In 1845, they located a good stand of pine and cedar in present-day Amador County, about 45 miles from the fort. The location is now lost, but some historic accounts place the camp, Pine Woods, on a ridge very near Rippled Cave. The partly filled-in sawpit was said be visible as late as 1880 and might yet be found.

Certainly the Mewuk living near the cave would have noticed the new lumber camp, and may have worked there or supplied meat in exchange for trade goods. Sutter writes that he employed "nine white men and 10 Indians" at the camp in July 1845.

In that year and in 1847 after Mexico ceded California to the United States, Pine Woods produced whip-sawn lumber, shingles, barrel staves, and "pumps" (whatever Sutter meant by that term).

By 1847, however, his increasing need for lumber drove Sutter to locate timber close to a stream that could power a sawmill, at present-day Coloma on the American River, far to the north of Pine Woods. The mill was still under construction on January 19, 1848, when James Marshall, Sutter's partner in the endeavor, picked up a nugget of gold from the tail-race.

Mewuk hegemony in the central Sierra Nevada was about to end.

The Gold Rush

By the summer of 1848, prospectors swarmed over the western Sierra. Some of the richest placer deposits in the Amador area were along Dry Creek just northwest of Rippled Cave, and the shanty camps that sprang up there were soon crowded with miners from all over the globe. In these early years, the Mewuk also participated in the rush, whole families working together using tightly woven basketry to pan for the gold.

Soon, however, Americans began to target Indian and "foreign" miners, many believing that divine providence had reserved the gold for a more "industrious people" than had come before, i.e. white Americans. By 1850 when California attained statehood, a special tax was levied against "foreign" miners, who were often chased out of their claims regardless. Often the Mewuk were simply murdered, their children kidnapped and sold into indentured servitude.

In 1850, the first state legislature passed the ill-named "Act for the Government and Protection of Indians." Though it included humane provisions, it largely

bowed to existing practice by attempting to regulate, but not ban, “adoptions” of Indian children and enslavement of Indians arrested for vagrancy. It *did* ban the practice of grassland burning. The Indians used such burns to create habitats for many of the animals and plants important to their way of life. Struggling to survive, many Indians resorted to hunting livestock and suffered vicious reprisals.

Expelled from their streamside villages, Mewuk moved to marginal uplands where they hoped to escape harassment. It’s possible that Rippled Cave was used as a hiding place during this period. Two historical anecdotes describe Mewuk people taking refuge in foothills caves, in one case to escape a massacre near Columbia. A pestle found inside Rippled Cave in the 1960s was assumed to have fallen into the vertical entrance from the mortars above. What if instead it was dropped by a Mewuk woman escaping to safety in the cave’s labyrinth?

Upper Rancheria and the Limekiln

A mystery has long shrouded Rippled Cave. Many visitors have noted the evidence of quarrying on one wall of the entrance sink. Inside the cave, iron drill steels protrude from a boulder ceiling. Most intriguing is a small stone limekiln associated with the quarry (now on the adjacent property and off-limits).

Such kilns manufacture quicklime—the basis of lime mortar, plaster, white-wash, and agricultural lime. The Rippled kiln has a single cylindrical chamber, an open top, and a small draft hole at the base. Certain design features indicate that the ancient mode of operation was followed, hand-sized chunks of limestone being stacked in alternate layers with wood. The loaded kiln would have been left to burn for four nights, cooling for three more days before unloading the crumbly lumps of quicklime. Given the inefficiency of this process (commercial limekilns had three or more pots to keep employees continuously at work) and the kiln’s excellent condition, it’s likely that only a few loads were fired, perhaps only for a single project.

But what was the lime used for? Since no reference to the kiln, quarry or even the limestone deposit has been found, strictly local use is indicated.

Some evidence points to the mining camp of Upper Rancheria, the nearest settlement to the cave. The trip is only three miles on a remarkably direct road. More compelling, the earliest graffiti found in the cave is dated 1857 and 1859, during the town’s most active period. The Volcano Ditch reached the little camp in 1856, enabling the hydraulicking of its deeply buried auriferous gravels.

Hopes must have been high in the camp, for someone—the promoters, probably—built several dressed-stone buildings, the only such between Volcano and Sutter Creek, from the volcanic tuff capping the gravels. Such expensive structures were usually built only where a community had prospects of permanency, which Upper Rancheria, in hindsight, most certainly did not. The Volcano Ditch was reportedly a boondoggle—poorly constructed and mismanaged. The camp died in about 1860 without ever having attracted more than about 60 people.

By the early 1930s, only one of the stone structures remained, a two-story building nicknamed the Stone Jug. Twenty years later, it had been gutted by salvors and the foundations were slumping. Warned that it could collapse onto curious visitors, Elmer Evans and son dynamited it in 1954, selling most of the stones to Jock and Muriel Thebaut of Volcano, who used them to build a fine façade on their Jug and Rose ice cream parlor.

Elmer junior, now in his 80s, is sure that the stones of the old building were mortared, and an old photo of the only wall still standing after the demolition backs him up. Was the mortar made from mud or lime? It may yet be possible to compare samples from the site of Upper Rancheria and from the interior of the limekiln (its owner permitting).

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Since You Asked...Or Did You?

Many caver folk have asked me how Papke’s Room got its name. I gave it that name, but you can blame it on Morley Hardaker. I think it was May of 1969 that Morley and a couple of students of mine visited Rippled Cave with the thought of taking some pictures. I think it may have been Morley’s first trip to the cave, but I had been there many times before with the likes of Bill Roloff and Tom Giebe. It was on one of those trips that Bill Roloff mentioned a room located beyond the room that I had always referred to as the “pancake” room because of its flattened and somewhat circular shape. Back near the far edge of the pancake, there was a very small squeeze that I had looked at, but never attempted.

On this particular trip, I was really in the mood of crawling and squeezing. So I took on the task of attempting to get through the squeeze. I made it! Soon there were at least four of us in the room now known as Papke’s Room. I can’t find a writeup of that trip in the old Valley Cavers of that era, but I did find a report of a follow-up trip made by Lorell and Morley Hardaker and some teenagers a bit later in the year. I think their trip was in the fall. In any case, it is in this article that you will find the first mention of Papke’s Room, and Morley has always referred to it that way in conversation ever since. I guess the name stuck. There you have it.

Bill Papke



Photo: Morley Hardaker

1969 visitors to Rippled Cave, in what is now called Papke’s Room. That’s Bill Papke with the red helmet.

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But masonry isn't the only purpose for quicklime. For many hundreds of years, farmers have used it to neutralize acidic soils and break up clay.

The Oneto Family

In the days before automobiles, the only fresh produce obtainable came from "truck farms" situated within a few miles of the consumers. To supply the demand for fruits and vegetables in Sutter Creek, Amador City and nearby camps, farmers soon homesteaded every little valley with a creek and soil worth tilling.

Quite a few crops would have required occasional applications of lime, and so poor were many of these families that if they had the knowledge to burn their own lime they would doubtless have done so, just as farmers in Europe had done for centuries.

Constant labor was required to wrest a living from these hills. Just as most who'd come in search of gold twenty years earlier left in disgust when the money didn't come as easily as expected, so too did many of the farmers quit the land, selling out for little more than would pay their debts.

One of them found an eager buyer in the person of Giacomo Oneto, who had come around the Horn from Chiavari, Italy in about 1869 when only fifteen. Some time prior to 1880, after a stint in the Nevada mines, Giacomo made his way to Amador County, where he purchased a homestead just over the hill from Rippled Cave.

Starting with little more than a cabin, Oneto cleared the land, built extensive terraces and planted hundreds of olive and fruit trees, wine grapes and a large market garden. Soon, his younger brother Lorenzo joined him.

By the turn of the century the brothers and their families earned a decent if hard living as truck farmers peddling produce two or three days each week to the mining company boarding houses.

A major part of the family's income derived from the sale of raw logs to the mines in Sutter Creek and Amador City, which had an insatiable appetite for timbers. To facilitate this, the family rebuilt the old road to Sutter Creek, a major undertaking.

People who depend on the land for their living tend to acquire as much of it as they can, and true to form, the Onetos gradually expanded their ranches to a maximum of over 2,000 acres. And here, finally, we find the first legal claim to Rippled Cave. In 1917, the federal government granted Albert Oneto a homestead patent on the 160 acres containing the cave and limekiln.

The land was thickly wooded and the soil proved poor, which perhaps explains why previous claimants, if any (no record has been found), hadn't bothered to apply for a patent. Albert and some friends sank a shaft into a quartz vein at the edge of the property, but found no gold. After that, hunting and mushroom gathering were about the only uses the Onetos made of the land until Albert's death, with one interesting exception....

Dances in the Big Room

In those days, people found their fun as close to home as they could get it, and walked most places they needed to go. From about 1900 into the 1920s, Charlie Oneto and his friends and family held dances in the Big Room of Rippled Cave, complete with a fiddler. A permanent wooden ladder in the vertical entrance of the cave provided easy access. Though dusty, it was close by, deliciously cool in the heat of summer, and a novel location.

On a prominent bulge of the Big Room's wall, many visitors inscribed their names over the years, including prominent Amador County citizens like Louis Monteverde, the Sutter Creek storekeeper, and Gard Chisholm, the Oneto family's attorney and longtime Amador County District Attorney. Later graffiti has obscured many names. (This old-fashioned, but destructive way of recording visits has been replaced by a paper register, maintained by the Mother Lode Grotto of the National Speleological Society.)

Decline of the Ranches

According to Ernie Oneto, grandson of Lorenzo, the advent of motor trucks in the 1920s enabled large farms in the great valley to ship produce to distant markets. The mountain truck gardens quickly became unprofitable. Dances in the cave stopped at about the same time that automobiles came in.

Ernie also relates that the mines switched to sawn timbers and ceased buying the Onetos raw logs. As it happened, it wasn't much longer after that the gold mines entered their final decline, closing one by one until a government-imposed shutdown during World War II drove the final nail in the coffins of all but a few.

Interestingly, one of the ways Giacomo's family chose to diversify its investment was to open a garage and car dealership in Sutter Creek. After Albert's death in 1955, his son Frank took over management of the ranch, devoting it almost entirely to cattle, growing hay and some wine grapes.

The Urban Refugees

As the hill farms became marginal, many old families left to be replaced by hobby ranchers

like Harold Cummins, a horse trader who bought the Lorenzo Oneto property after Ernie's father passed on in 1943.

Ernie states that much of the land today little resembles the farms and ranches of the early and mid 20th century. The Onetos used to run nearly a hundred goats on their land to keep the chaparral at bay, supplemented by Ernie as a child, hacking vegetation with a mattock. Modern landowners allow the painstakingly cleared pastures to grow over with trees and brush.

But this reflects a simple fact: an ever-increasing proportion of rural landowners do not make their livelihood from the land.

The public became enamored with the history of the Gold Rush and drove those new-fangled cars all over the Mother Lode in search of slumbering mining camps and the "wild west." Amador County attractions like Daffodil Hill and Volcano came to the public's notice for the first time in the late 1930s. Naturally, many of these visitors fell in love with the countryside and began moving to the Gold Country.

Take as an example the family that gave "Soak Springs Ranch" just down the road from Rippled Cave its name. Great believers in the health and psychological benefits of social nudism, Ivan and Maria Brovont purchased the property as a private naturist retreat and held forth there for most of the 1950s. One wonders whether they visited the cave....

We leave our story here, just before land was subdivided and houses began popping up. On a trip to Volcano on February 3, 1952, a small group from the Stanford Grotto of the National Speleological Society (NSS) was told of a cave new to them between Volcano and Sutter Creek. They named it "Rippled Cave."

Introducing Mike White

The Western Cave Conservancy welcomed a new director to its board in January: Michael D. White of Murphys, California. Currently president of the Columbia Grotto of the National Speleological Society, Mike has been caving for over 20 years and brings to the Conservancy a strong work ethic, infectious enthusiasm and valuable contacts with Calaveras County landowners and cavers. Over the past year, he's been communicating with several major landowners on our behalf, and we hope his work bears some truly wonderful fruit.