

Do You Remember?



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Olivina: What's Left

I wrote about the development of the Olivina Winery, one of the first in California, in my column on 24 April 2008. I mentioned the double row of walnut trees that lined a dirt lane to the winery from the gateway that says "Olivina" at the corner of Arroyo and Wetmore Roads. Mostly dead, they were torn down by the Wente family, who recently bought this section of Olivina and planted the area in grape vines. It is wonderful to see Olivina soil bearing grapes again.

Julius Paul Smith bought the 2,000-acre property in 1881 and planted wine grapes on about 675 acres. By December of that year, workers had built a men's lodging house, Chinese quarters, a dining hall, and an office building. None of these have survived. In May 1885 work was begun on the excavation for a concrete winery.

Sycamore Grove Park now includes most of what used to be Olivina. About a month ago, my friend Dick Finn and I went on a journey with LARPD Park Ranger Pat Sotelo. We climbed into his truck at the ranger station near the VA Hospital and rode to the Sycamore Grove Park entrance on Wetmore Road. It was the Friday of President's Weekend, and many people were out walking in the park, enjoying the beautiful spring-like day. Pat drove carefully down the trail and stopped to point to an area across the Arroyo Del Valle where the rangers had found evidence of the colony of Chinese men who had worked at the old vineyard. We continued and then turned into another drive to the winery that had black walnut trees on both sides. Like the trees torn down by the Wentes, these large trees are mostly dead now, having reached their life expectancy. Pat explained that park em-

ployees had collected and saved enough walnuts to plant two rows of new trees between the old ones, and we could see them, vibrant with life, growing inside their plastic cages.

We drove down to the site of the Olivina Winery and its attendant buildings snuggled up to the base of a hill that runs from east to west. Park Ranger Darren Segur then joined us for our ride through history. Darren pointed out the probable site of the house built by Smith to the west of the two still existing buildings, the winery and the distillery. A hand-built waist-high stone wall runs in back of the site; the house burned in 1959. Built into the hillside are two small stone buildings painted white that have no windows—just doors. We looked inside of one and saw large hooks in the beam at the ceiling. This was a meat storage locker, where employees hung deer and beef and other meats. Since the temperature underground all year round stays at 55°, this would give natural refrigeration to the meat. The winery and distillery, farther east along the same hill's base, have been fenced in with chain link fence by the park to keep curious visitors from the dangerous dilapidated structures. In old photographs the winery had a top floor and roof of redwood, but these have fallen in, leaving the lower two floors of vine-covered concrete.

The distillery was originally of wood, but it has been covered with corrugated iron that has now rusted completely. It, too, has lost its roof. In this building, perhaps the first distillery in California, Smith made brandy from Folle Blanche grapes. In old photos that Pat brought to consult, we saw a barn-like building still farther to the east. It was built of wood and had three air ducts on the roof. Pat and Darren told of uncovering pieces of redwood

at the site, and while we were there, Dick and I found square nails brought up by a ground squirrel from its burrow. Old fire maps showed a building here. We decided tentatively from the evidence that this was a place for wine storage.

We all piled into the truck and rode up the hill behind the structures. This narrow gravel road, surrounded by olive trees, is one of the oldest in the Livermore area—here is where wagons pulled by horses hauled the grapes from Olivina vines up to the crushing house. The wooden crushing house is gone; only a hole remains at its site on the hilltop above the winery. After the grapes were crushed, they were sent down by gravity through a pipe and over a bridge into the winery.

The area behind the hill is flat, and the rangers walked with us toward the south. We noticed several sad-looking palm trees and then two more of a healthier type of palm planted side by side. This was probably meant to be the entrance to a new, fancier home for the Smith family. The rangers showed us a drawing of the proposed mansion that was never built. A windbreak of eucalyptus trees was planted behind the building site. Other non-native trees are scattered around the area. To the east of the site, the rangers showed us a rectangular-shaped excavation with rock walls. They believe this was a koi pond. However, Julius Smith died in 1904 at age 62, and the family never carried through with their plans for a mansion. We turned our backs to the site and looked northward; I drew in a breath with amazement. Spread out before us was a magnificent view of the entire Livermore Valley from Mt. Diablo to Brushy Peak. I was glad to see that the hills had a tinge of green.

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