



Ranching on the Point Reyes Peninsula

The Pastoral Zone

When you cross Inverness Ridge toward the Point Reyes headlands, you leave the pine/fir forest behind and enter the stark beauty of the coastal grasslands, dotted with cattle and occasional clusters of ranch houses. This open landscape is known as the Pastoral Zone. Here, working ranches and historical buildings invite the visitor to learn about the rich agricultural history of the Point Reyes Peninsula.

Fine Butter and Cheese

The California Gold Rush brought a rush of new settlers to the San Francisco area in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of those who came west in search of gold found gold at Point Reyes, all right. They did not find chunks of precious metal, but rather great golden wheels of cheese and casks of butter to be produced for the growing population of nearby San Francisco.

The cool, moist climate of Point Reyes provided ideal conditions for raising dairy cows: plenty of grass, a long growing season, and abundant fresh water supplies. “The grass growing in the fields on Monday is butter on the city tables the following Sunday,” as the 1880 History of Marin County reported.

The quality of Point Reyes butter was so high that the letters PR in a star stamped into cheesecloth-wrapped rolls or casks of butter became a nationwide symbol of excellence. This familiar symbol was actually forged by other dairy farmers of the time.

Record yields of this excellent butter and cheese came from the dairy farms at Point Reyes throughout the late 19th century. In 1867, Marin County produced 932,429 pounds of butter, the largest yield of butter in California that year. These huge amounts of butter were produced in an era when the finest restaurants served every good steak with a melting slab of butter on top.



From “A” to “Z” Ranch

The first western claims on the productive land of the Point Reyes Peninsula were land grants to Mexican settlers in the early 1800s. These claims, in time, were often disputed. Finally, in 1866, the San Francisco law firm Shafter, Shafter, Park, and Heydenfeldt established ownership of the entire peninsula. They sold the northernmost tip to an old friend from Vermont, Solomon Pierce. This piece of land is still known as Pierce Point Ranch. The Pierce family built a small town to support their isolated ranch at the end of Tomales Point. A schoolhouse, blacksmith’s shop, milking barn, and creamery still stand as reminders of the vigorous ranching life which shaped much of the Point Reyes area.

The law firm divided remainder of the peninsula into tenant dairies which they named after letters of the alphabet. “A” Ranch is closest to the Lighthouse, and “Z” Ranch is at the summit of Mt. Wittenberg. “W” Ranch is the current site of park headquarters and Bear Valley Visitor Center.

The tenant ranches were rented by Irish, Swedish, Italian-speaking Swiss, and Portuguese families. Many immigrants found their chance to get started in America through dairying at Point Reyes. In 1919, the Shafter firm sold the “alphabet” ranches to the tenants who had worked the land diligently. As a result, many of these families were able to establish themselves more securely in America.

Today

The creation of the National Seashore in 1962 brought another change in ownership to the peninsula. Legislation creating the park provided funds to purchase ranch land, which the park then leased back to the ranchers. Today there are sixteen operating ranches in the park, six dairy, nine beef, and one combination beef and dairy.

These ranches have kept up with modern agricultural techniques. Individual ranches no longer produce their own butter and cheese. Instead, they have

joined a cooperative creamery. Milk is picked up from twice-daily milkings and sent to a central processing plant. The neatly wrapped packages of butter and milk are a far cry from when Pierce Ranch school teacher Helen Smith walked into the creamery to scoop a small cup of cream from the cooling pans to pour over her breakfast pancakes.

And yet, the ranches still serve the same role in our society, providing quality food for the greater San Francisco area.

The National Park Service and the Ranches: Protecting the Land, Preserving our Heritage

The five- to twenty-year leases have created a partnership between the National Park Service and the ranchers as stewards of our heritage. Together, ranchers and the National Park Service protect and preserve the land as well as the rich cultural landscape of agricultural history.

Dairy cattle still dot the landscape as they have for over a hundred years. Point Reyes still provides fresh and healthy food to the nearby urban population. When you drive through the Pastoral Zone, you drive into a place where the past is still evident, and if you dine out, you may be tasting some of Point Reyes' finest.

