

A Little History of the Triple R

About a century ago, the place most newcomers here are used to calling the Triple R, where Rex and Ruth's new home sits next to Ruth Macchiarini's old farmhouse, was called the Joel Benton place. For much of the twentieth century it was known as the Drewry place. Several historic families have lived, worked, and played on this favored spot of earth, and doubtless the Native Mattole people spent a good deal of time here as well.

According to William Roscoe's History of the Mattole Valley, Joel Benton came to the Valley in 1857, with the first wave of white settlers. He was reputed to be fair, and generally pacifistic, in his dealings with the Indians (being one of the drafters of the 1858 treaty with the Mattoles), and a skilled and avid hunter of wild game. He was a native of Maine, according to the 1860 census, and 34 years old that year; ten years later, he married a widow, Mrs. Ann Davis, to whom his property passed at his death in 1901.

Mr. Benton was an industrious man who made good on the required promise to "improve" land in order to receive a patent (that is, first private ownership of it). In 1862, the 160 acres he claimed in the Southeast Quarter of Section 9 (T2S, R2W) was valued at \$100, and his improvements at \$640. In 1867, five years later, he received his patent; two years after holding title, his land was valued at \$470 and his cattle, etc., at \$800. After marrying, his worth quickly accelerated: the 1875 assessor's report claims his land and taxable property together to be worth \$2350. By then he had added 120 acres in Section 16, just south or downstream of his original claim, which he had purchased from Jacob Miner in 1872. He also declared a wagon worth \$50, harness worth \$20, 2 horses valued at \$250, 2 colts, 12 cows, 13 calves, 22 stock cattle, 8 beef cattle, 1 mule, 9 hogs, furniture, and a sewing machine worth \$30. They don't mention the chickens.

When Joel Benton passed away at about the age of 78 in 1901, a total of 480 adjoining acres in Sections 9, 10, and 16 made up the parcel he left his widow. Ann Benton sold that to John Hunter in 1904, for \$1000 in gold coin. John Henry Hunter, Jr., or Johnny, was the son of one of the five Hunter brothers who came to the Mattole Valley from Missouri in the very early pioneer days. His brother was Judge George W. (Washington) Hunter. He himself was born in Sacramento County in 1860, married Annie R. Duckett in 1889, and by 1898 had adopted Laura Stansberry, the aunt of Bob Stansberry. The Hunters lived on Elk Ridge (roughly between Ettersburg and Briceland), where Laura loved helping out on the ranch.

Laura wrote in a 1962 letter expressing regret at being unable to attend the Petrolia Day reunion, "In the year 1904, my mother decided I needed an education I was not receiving on the back of a horse. I was then 11 years old, so she firmly took my father and I off the Hunter stock ranches in the Honeydew and Elk Ridge area and established us on the small ranch now owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Drewry of Petrolia. I was enrolled at the old Petrolia School, the two-story building on the North Fork. Leslie Gould was the teacher. In 1906... that building was totally destroyed by the big earthquake... Mr. Gould got busy promoting for a new and modern building." Laura goes on to describe the beginnings of the building we now know as the Community Center; that schoolhouse, then located on the site of the present elementary school, sported the bell once gracing the top of the earlier North Fork building. "That old bell makes me dream of the past," she wrote. "I could leave my home when the '15-minute bell' rang and reach school on time on my little blue mare. It was so much fun to have a good horse."

(to be inserted)

Photo courtesy Bob Stansberry
Laura (Stansberry) Hunter at the Triple R, circa 1910

In 1913, Laura married Alonzo Smith. Soon afterward, Johnny and Annie moved back to Elk

Ridge, where Johnny managed George W. Hunter's Sunnyside Ranch. In 1925, the Hunters sold the Petrolia ranch to his cousin, Ira (the son of George Walker Hunter, who was the son of Johnny's uncle Walker S. Hunter of the Petrolia area). Just one month later, Ira and Leila Hunter sold it to Ira's brother Donald Hunter and his wife Agnes. I'm not sure what went on at the ranch in the decade preceding these sales, but such a productive ranch must've been leased out.

Irvin and Lillian Drewry enter the picture in 1930. They were from Harris, where Irvin and his sister, Sarah E. Drewry, for many years operated the East View Hotel (a popular lodging place and eatery with the "automobilist" crowd) and the Drewry family ranch. The siblings' mother had died when Irvin was only eleven days old, in 1891, and their care had been taken over by their maternal grandmother, who later helped out in the hotel business. Their father was John P. Drewry, who owned 1500 acres in Humboldt and Mendocino counties. In the late 1920's, Irvin married Lillian Zimmerman, a schoolteacher from the Alderpoint and Harris schools. They had no children of their own, but Lillian taught school at Petrolia in the mid-1940s.

Lyn Chambers remembers having Lillian Drewry as a teacher in the first and second grades. "She was a quiet person," Lyn recalls. "She wasn't real outgoing, but she was very nice. Now Irvin, he was a lot of fun. He liked to scare us little kids-not in a mean way; just making faces, pulling down his eyelids, you know. He was very tall [6'6", according to the Leigh Irvine history book], so he could really impress us!" Irvin was tall and thin, a real "string bean." Lillian was short and heavy. The couple didn't entertain much at their home, which Lyn attributes to Lillian's reticence. "Irvin used to call the Paul Jones dances at the Grange-everybody knew him from that. Lillian didn't usually even go to the dances."

Irvin religiously took a nap after lunch. "I don't care what was going on, he was napping between one and two. That was his shutdown time," Lyn says. "He kept pretty busy around the ranch, though. He liked his chickens and his dairy cows. He was an excellent butcher, on his own livestock, and for other people's, too. He scalded the hogs in the old-fashioned way. I remember he had a big set of sharp butcher knives."

Lillian passed away in the early 60's. By 1964, Irvin was splitting off some little parcels from the 480-acre ranch, mostly in Section 16 (Evergreen Way). Now a widower in his 70's, Irvin could use a little help. The Drewry place was just next door (downstream) to the John Chambers ranch. I asked Lyn Chambers if she knew anything about a lease of the Drewry ranch to her father, Johnny, which I noticed on the books from the 1960s. She said nothing special was memorable about any lease. "Irvin and my dad worked together quite a bit. They generally helped each other out, Irvin having a few sheep and some dairy cows." (The Book of Petrolia mentions them as Suffolk sheep and Guernsey cows.) Johnny Chambers was the help Irvin needed in his advanced years.

By 1972, Marvin Richard Jones was the executor of the estate of the late Irvin H. Drewry. On August 31 of that year, the ranch property was sold to Nelson Howard, of Lewiston, Idaho. He didn't do much but turn around and resell it; a year later, in May of 1973, he sold the parcel (still described as the original 480 acres, but minus all the parts that had been sold off), to Kermit P. and Margaret M. Jacobsen – the parents of Renee Jacobsen, whom most of us know from the Petrolia Store.

And in August of 1976, the Jacobsens sold to Ruth Macchiarini, Rex and Ruth Rathbun, and Richard Cogswell. These three parties were the original "Triple R," not, as many people have heard, "Rex, Ruth, and Ruth"-though that works presently. The only bit of history known by Ruth Macchiarini, who has lived on the place since moving there from a trailer near the old riverside Ranch House in '76, is that the house she occupies is not the original pioneer home. That burned sometime in the hazy past, as so many of the Valley's older wooden structures have. Her house has the rectangular footprint and low profile of typical 1910's to 30's home.

The old orchard remains, part of the legacy from the Hunters, or perhaps even the Bentons. It needs a little encouragement, Ruth says; and it would indeed be a shame to see it degenerate. When I see the children climbing in its limbs, searching for hidden Easter eggs on a beautiful Spring morning, their bright colors standing out against the fresh green grass and long view down the river to its mouth, I can imagine the colors of life in the days when it was planted--by an enterprising Joel and Ann Benton, or perhaps by the equally hardworking Hunters, helped by their beautiful young Laura. And once you start going back in your mind to seeing the view through the eyes of earlier gazes, the color is returned to a world we know visually only through black and white photos. The scale of that view west from the Triple R today is big enough that details are lost in the beauty of river, hills green with fir trees and grassy openings, and ocean mists wreathing around the twisted topography. So although many of the details have changed, it's possible to see from this vantage point the beauty of the Mattole Valley as even Native Mattoles might have seen it. And we may be sure this spot was treasured by them as well.