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Historic Nature Gem Hidden in Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Like Brigadoon, once a year the Nature Area at Wagner Ranch becomes visible to the general public at the Annual Olive Festival held by the Friends of The Wagner Ranch Nature Area. The rest of the time, this beautiful 18-acre retreat is available only to students in the Orinda Union School District. Plans are underway to change that, however, and to expand access to the Nature Area to a much wider segment of the population, including Lafayette and Moraga schools as well as senior citizens.

Nestled in the hills of Orinda bordering Berkeley, the Nature Area abuts the elementary school. The area is rich in history, as well as nature, having been occupied by native tribes prior to being part of a Mexican land grant. The area carries the name Wagner for Theodore Wagner, who owned the property, built a lavish home on it and improved the grounds in the 19th century.

The property is now home to an historic olive grove and a red-legged frog pond and has been improved by many projects built over the years by Eagle Scouts as well as many improvements provided by The Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, Miramonte High School, Orinda Intermediate School Service Club, Rotary, and individuals. Educational programs are offered to Wagner Ranch students by District Naturalist Toris Jaeger. Jaeger had been employed by the Orinda Unified School District until funding cuts in 2009. She now provides her services for greatly reduced remuneration provided by the Friends.

Previous administrations did not appreciate the Nature Area; one superintendent proposed uprooting the ancient olive trees and using the Nature Area as a maintenance yard. There is a new spirit abroad, however. Orinda Union School Board Vice President Carol Brown and board member Jason Kaune, who constituted the committee formed to pursue new policies for the Nature Area, told the Lamorinda Weekly, "We look forward to a new and exciting chapter for the Nature Area that both broadens and deepens its use. In order to achieve that goal, we are proposing a new inclusive governance model for oversight and an aggressive search for new funding and grants. Our goal is nothing short of making our beautiful Nature Area a vibrant learning center for teachers, students, community members, and beyond and a model for outdoor education across curricula."

Programs currently offered to Orinda students at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area:

Third Grade

Animal Camp: One full day of animal habitat, food chain, ecosystems studies.

Fourth Grade

Native American Studies: Two full days of California history with a focus on the cultures of the Ohlone and Bay Miwok tribes.

Rancho Days: Two full days of California history.

Fifth Grade

First Thanksgiving: One full day complete re-enactment of the First Thanksgiving.

Pioneer Days: Two full days of California history.

Orinda Olive Festival

The public will have access to the usually closed Nature Area at Wagner Ranch from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 2 when the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area present the 7th Annual Orinda Olive Festival. In addition to strolling through the beautiful 18-acre nature area, the public can enjoy olive oil tastings and cooking demonstrations and docent tours of the historic ranch. Food and live music will be available, and children can participate in native arts and crafts projects, pond and garden activities, and interact with turtles and baby goats. The proceeds of the event go to support the Nature Area, which is located at 350 Camino Pablo, adjoining Wagner Ranch Elementary School in Orinda. - Sora O'Doherty

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