

HISTORY OF THE VENTURA COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT

Long before there was a formal parks system, particularly pleasant places were selected by local residents and travelers as picnicking and resting points. There was something especially appealing or convenient about the location selected. Such a favorite spot is known today as Camp Comfort. Travelers between the Ojai Valley and San Buenaventura used this pleasant site nestled in a grove of oaks, with grass and water at hand. Few people traveling the Old Creek Road failed to stop here.

By the 20th century, the land belonged to Mr. John Hobson, who was logging the surrounding area. Mr. E.P. Foster, who enjoyed the area for picnics, wanted to rescue the land from potential logging. Foster, a very influential man at the time was able to convince the County Board of Supervisors to create a public park at that spot. Foster, and others, contributed money to the County and persuaded Hobson to sell 21 acres. Thus, the first Ventura County Park was established in 1904.

Foster had many suggestions for public park locations. One such place was at the entrance to Casitas Pass. In 1906, he purchased the first parcel of the Foster Memorial Park consisting of 30 acres, and donated it to the County in memory of his only son. Later he encouraged his colleagues such as G.W. Chrisman, A.L Hobson, and Southern Pacific Railway to donate adjacent parcels to increase the size of Foster Park.

In 1914, in order to facilitate construction of a State Highway, the Board of Supervisors under E.P. Foster's guidance, formed the County Board of Forestry. The purpose of this new board was to provide landscaping along the state highway and new county roads. There were five members of the Board of Forestry, but Foster's opinion was heavily weighed. One of the first actions taken was to appoint a County Forester. Foster suggested R. Gird Percy.

With R. Gird Percy and E.P. Foster as leaders, the Board of Forestry planted many trees along the highway and roads. The building of the Rincon Highway is also credited to this group.

While constructing the Rincon Highway, it was found that there were little plots of land between the highway and the beach. Many efforts were made by the Board of Forestry to obtain as many of these as possible. In 1915, with Foster's assistance, the County was able to gain control of three plots. The Hobson brothers (sons of John Hobson) donated two parcels, and the Faria family donated the third.

Hobson Point Park was named for the descendants of William Dewey Hobson, known as the "Father of Ventura County." He was instrumental in obtaining passage of the legislation that created Ventura County. Hobson Point Park currently consists of 31 campsites and is a favorite among summer vacationers.

The second park donated by the Hobson's was named for the family of Mrs. Edith Hobson Hoffman but it was later eliminated to make way for the construction of Highway 101.

Faria Park at Pitas Point was donated to the County by Mr. Manuel del Terra Faria who came from the Azores Islands in Portugal. It consisted of three acres of his beachfront property. He felt the need to give a gift to the people of the County for all that was given to his family. Today, this overnight facility provides 42 campsites and is a popular gathering place during the summer months.

In 1920, E.P. Foster convinced Robert and Mary Strathearn to sell 53 acres to the County. This new park, Oak Park, bordered on the little Simi River in the hills east of Moorpark. It was not good land for cattle grazing but was a prime location for a railroad camp since the railroad tracks passed through it. Its popularity increased when the automobile made the scene.

In 1924 when efforts began to build a road from Santa Paula to Ojai, another area was donated to the County, known today as Dennison Park. Once again, Foster persuaded the owners, the Dennison Brothers, to donate 33.9 acres. This parcel was in the original land grant to Fernando Tico in 1837.

The H.J. Dennison family came to the Ojai area in the latter part of the 19th century. Mr. Dennison was the first public school teacher in the valley and bought a large ranch in upper Ojai. Travelers would rest on the Dennison property at the top of the grade on their trip between Ojai and Santa Paula. Dennison still provides a grand view of the Ojai Valley, a view that is considered the best by many of its visitors.

Further actions by Foster enabled the County to acquire a park north of Santa Paula, in 1926. Foster influenced the Mayor of Santa Paula, M.L. Steckel, to donate a parcel to the County. In honor of his generosity and service to the City of Santa Paula, the park was named after Mayor Steckel. Mr. Steckel's varied career included being a saw mill operator and rancher, as well as serving as Mayor of Santa Paula. In 1939, his widow donated additional parkland to the County.

It is not known what influence, if any, Foster had in obtaining parcels of land for the County, but many parks such as Kenney Grove and Camarillo Grove parks are located incredibly close to sites pinpointed by Foster as ideal locations for parks. Camarillo Grove was transferred to Pleasant Valley Recreation & Park District in 2002.

Kenney Grove was named for Cyrus Kenney a beekeeper who lived near Sespe. He was born in Pennsylvania and came to the County in 1874. He was active in the farming business and owned a large grove of oak trees. In the early 1870's through the 1880's, he held Fourth of July gatherings at Kenney Grove, which was a convenient place for folks living between Saticoy and Piru to congregate. The site was made a County Park on May 1, 1929.

Since the 1930's, seven major parklands have been added to the system. In 1958, Zaidee Soule donated a 192 acre parcel to be made into a golf course and park appropriately named Soule Golf Course and Park. Agnes Toland willed 212 acres to the County, effective upon her death, in 1962. This facility was also named after its benefactor hence the name Toland Park. The owners of the Lang Ranch in Thousand Oaks donated 486 acres now known as Oakbrook Park in 1969. The Conejo Recreation and Park District now runs this park. In 1970, the County purchased 200 acres in Simi Valley called Tapo Canyon Park and 2,700 acre Happy Camp Park was acquired

from the State of California in a land swap for Mandalay Beach in 1983. Mandalay Beach reverted back to State operations Dec 2014. Camarillo Regional Park's 121.1 acres were acquired through the Federal Lands to Parks program from the Federal Government in 1986 and was transferred to California State University, Channel Islands in 2009.

The 74.4 acre College Park property, located north of Rose Avenue was purchased from Petit Ranch Company in 1978. Additional acres were given to the County by the City of Oxnard for future development into a recreational facility. In 2000, all of the College Park property was transferred to the City of Oxnard for park development.

The Parks Department also maintains and operates community centers and parks in five unincorporated communities in Ventura County. In 1954, a one acre parcel with a schoolhouse in Casitas Springs was deeded to the County by the Nordhoff Union Elementary School District. The schoolhouse was converted into a community center and a playground. An outdoor basketball court was later added.

In 1961, the County acquired from Mr. and Mrs. William C. Stroube a three quarter acre site where the El Rio Library and Roger Jones Community Center are presently located. In 1972 picnic areas, turf and irrigation, outdoor lighting, playground equipment, and landscaping were installed to compliment the Center.

The Oak View Community Center was completed in 1980 and provides a recreational gymnasium, full kitchen facility, restrooms, meeting room, playground, and outdoor patio with large BBQ.

The Saticoy Community Park and ball field was constructed in 1967, consisting of a group picnic area, playground, ball field, and outdoor basketball court. The corrugated iron building which was converted into a community center was once the local fire station headquarters. In 1990, a new community center was constructed.

Piru Fruit Rancho, Incorporated donated property to Ventura County in 1937 for a public park that, in accordance with the gift, was to be known as and called Warring Park. Improvements to the property were constructed in 1972 with funds from a Housing and Urban Development Block Grant. The improvements consisted of playground, lighted basketball court and ball field, and individual picnic areas. In the late 1970's three portable structures were converted into one large facility to be used as a community center. In 1990, a new community center was constructed. In 1994 additional parking, a new park restroom, a group barbecue area and new play equipment were added.

These local park facilities provide important services to meet the recreational needs of the citizens of these five unincorporated communities.

The Parks Department made very few changes from 1914, the date it was formed, and 1953. R. Gird Percy resigned in 1918, and D.D. Davis took the position of County Forester until asked to resign by E. P. Foster in 1926. N. Sanborn became the third and last County Forester in 1926 until July 1934.

In 1934, the County Forester position was replaced by the Superintendent of Parks, within the department of Parks, Grounds and Highway Equipment. John Ward held the position in 1934. Mr. Ward died in 1945, and Cliff Hughes was appointed to take over his position as Superintendent of Parks.

In 1953 the Department of Public Works was formed. The Parks Department became a Division of the Buildings and Grounds Department of the Department of Public Works. Mr. Les Goebel became Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds and served until 1957 when Mr. Don Williams was appointed Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds.

In 1963, the Department of Maintenance Services was formed with Mr. Williams as its Director and the Parks Department as one of its three divisions. A management study of the Maintenance and Services Department in 1968 led to the Parks Department becoming a separate Department with Mr. Austin Cline as its Superintendent. In 1974, the Parks Department became part of the Property Administration Agency along with the Harbor and Airports Divisions and was under the Recreation Services Department. Mr. Paul Lamp was appointed as the Parks Superintendent when Mr. Cline became Deputy Director Recreation Services of the Agency.

Upon Mr. Lamp's retirement in 1979, Mr. George Lawhead, Landscape Supervisor became Parks Superintendent until 1982 at which time reorganization occurred. The title of Parks Superintendent was changed to Parks Manager and Mr. Gary Kryszak was appointed to fill this position, which he held for a little over a year. Mr. Rich H. Harrison took over for him and held the position for nine months.

In 1986, the Property Administration Agency went through a major reorganization and combined with the Support Services Agency to make up the present General Services Agency. Mr. Blake Boyle became the Deputy Director of County Parks and Harbor. In 1996 another major reorganization of Recreation Services Department occurred when the Harbor split off and became its own department. Mr. Johnny Johnston became the Parks Department head in 1999 and when he was selected to become the Director of GSA in 2000, Mr. Andy Oshita, the Parks Manager became the Department head until his retirement in 2006. In 2006 Mr. Ron Van Dyck was hired to fill the Deputy Director position. Mr. J. Colter Chisum was hired to fill the vacancy left by Mr. Ron Van Dyck in 2020.

**CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF VENTURA COUNTY
PARKS DEPARTMENT HEADS**

	<u>FROM</u>	<u>TO</u>
R. Gird Percy.....	1914	1918
D.D. Davis	1918	1926
N. Sanborn.....	1926	1934
John Ward	1934	1945
Cliff Hughes	1945	1953
Les Goebel	1953	1957
Don Williams	1957	1968
Austin Cline	1968	1974
Paul Lamp	1974	1979
George Lawhead	1979	1982
Gary Kryszak	1983	1984
Richard Harrison	1984	1985
Blake Boyle	1986	1999
Johnny Johnston	1999	2000
Andrew Oshita	2000	2006
Ron Van Dyck	2006	2020
J. Colter Chisum.....	2020	Present

*This section is dedicated to Mr. E.P. Foster
“Father of the Ventura County Parks System”*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EUGENE P. FOSTER

By

Great Granddaughter Mildred Ranger Schofield

Eugene Preston Foster, born in 1848 in Plainfield, Illinois, was the eldest of Isaac and Roxanna Foster. The Foster Family traced their roots to a Lord Foster of Suffolk, England and further back to Anarcher, Great Forester of Flanders (837 A.D.). This linkage to forestry is in line with E.P. Foster’s lifelong interest in trees and the beautification of Ventura County.

Eugene came to California via wagon train in 1852. His father and grandfather had been a part of the great Gold Rush of 1849, with the result that the entire family moved to California by 1852. They brought the first herd of Durham cattle to San Jose, later moving to Half Moon Bay in 1861. The family now consisted of Roxanna and Isaac, and their children Eugene, Lucy, Fred, and Frank.

In 1867, Isaac was lured to Santa Barbara by the same newspaper article that took Richard K. Sexton south; news of the sub-division of the Daniel Hill land grant. The joining of these two families by the marriage of Lucy Foster and Joseph Sexton would influence the course of Eugene Preston Foster’s life and fortune.

Joseph Sexton’s skills as a nurseryman and interest in rare plants changed forever the look of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties and far beyond. Eugene P. Foster used many specimens obtained from his brother-in-law’s nursery to beautify Ventura. As an example, he gave the two giant Star Pines to the San Buenaventura Mission. They are still there today. E.P. also tended the original orchard of Oaks, which now remains as “Two Trees” today.

In 1871, Eugene visited Ventura and purchased some land in the Santa Clara Valley. He returned to Goleta until 1873 when Ventura County was separated from Santa Barbara County. Shortly after that, Eugene went into the sheep business on the Conejo, becoming ranch superintendent for H.W. Mills.

In August of 1874, Eugene married Orpha Woods and they settled into life on the Conejo. Their first daughter, Orpha Woods Foster (Pearl) was very likely the first American child to be born in the Conejo in June 1875.

In 1876, E.P. purchased 807 acres of land from John Edwards, a family friend. At this time, he had 2,000 head of his own sheep and managed a combined herd of 10,000. During the great drought of 1876-77, he and many others lost their land and livestock. After this financial disaster, E.P. walked into Ventura and got a job as ditchtender from the Santa Ana Water Co. for \$40 per month. Orpha got a job as keeper of the Water Company’s books. They eventually saved enough to buy a piece of land on Ventura Avenue, which became their home. Eugene planted an apricot nursery on his property, often-working 16-18 hour days as ditchtender and nurseryman. On James Day’s 200 acres in the Mound Tract, E.P. planted his apricot seedlings and tended the

trees until they were fruit bearing. He was to receive half the orchard in return. He rented the land that became the foundation of his fortune. E.P. traded his land for 10,000 worth of stock in the Bank of Ventura, the county's first bank. E.P. became the cashier and later the President until the bank was sold to the Bank of Italy, the forerunner of Bank of America.

It is for their many philanthropies that the memory of Eugene and Orpha Foster should be revered. They were both active in civic affairs and supported many worthwhile projects over the years. The Big Sisters Orphanage was a favorite charity of Orpha's. At one time, the orphanage was moved to land and a building adjoining the Foster home, at the Foster's expense. Orpha assisted in many details at the Orphanage and children were invited to special family meals and picnics.

For many years, E.P. was head of the Ventura High School Trustees. Orpha was a trustee of the School of Girls when it was first established. Each Christmas for many years every boy in the Avenue School received a pocketknife from E.P., every girl a hand embroidered handkerchief from Orpha.

The Fosters loved trees and family picnics. They traveled first by horse and buggy and later by car to restful and beautiful spots all over the county. In 1904, E.P. had the idea for a series of County Parks. Camp Comfort had been a favorite stopping and picnic place on the creek road to Ojai. The land belonged to John Hobson and he was cutting thousands of cords of wood from the property. E.P. put up \$5,000 of his own money and convinced K.P. Grant to do the same with the county putting up the balance. The first County Park came into being. This action being taken to save the trees and lovely picnic site for all to enjoy.

Eugene and Orpha Foster had five daughters and one son, Eugene. Eugene was never a strong child and died in childhood. This was a difficult blow for the family. In 1906-7 E.P. and Orpha bought the original 65 acres of what is now Foster Park from the Ayers Ranch and presented it to the County in memory of little Eugene. E.P. then persuaded G.W. Chrisman then head of the Water Co., to give 35 acres of river bottom with the Company preserving the water rights. It was here that water was taken out by ditch to supply Ventura. The Southern Pacific Railway added another 40 acres. Later when O.A. Wadleigh sold Casitas Ranch to the Hobson's, E.P. persuaded them to give an additional 160 acres of wooded hills behind the park.

Next E.P. and Orpha envisioned a miniature Golden Gate Park where the old racetrack and grandstand were near the mouth of the Ventura River. John McLaren, designer of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco was a family friend. The park was to be a beautiful gateway to Ventura, where families could walk and picnic, play tennis and enjoy family outings. They bought the original 65 acres and presented it to the County, adding another 14 acres later. It was eventually turned over to the state for the fairgrounds, and does not look today anything like E.P. had envisioned.

E.P. and Orpha did even more. One Christmas E.P. received a copy of the life of Andrew Carnegie. E.P. was much impressed with Carnegie's establishment of libraries. E.P. and Orpha bought a part of the Shepherd Gardens near the corner of Chestnut and Main. They built the beautiful building, which is now the rear portion of Foster Library and gave it to the City. By this

time E.P. was retired and he built the lovely fountain with his own hands just as he had planted so many trees in parks and other places.

With the need for a new hospital in Ventura, The Big Sisters League attempted to raise money for the new building. All five Foster daughters were involved; Orpha, Ida, Edith, Grace, Mildred. Eugene scoured the county looking for subscribers. Lacking \$50,000 or more, (figures vary) of raising enough E.P. donated the balance. The hospital was later named E.P. Foster Memorial Hospital. (Community Memorial Hospital is its current name).

E.P. and Orpha Foster passed away in the early 1930's. They were pleased to be able to return so much to the community in which they had prospered. They set an example for others and made everyone in the County their heirs.

RESOURCES:

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R. Gird Percy, Letter to Mildred Ranger Schofield.