THE NATURAL HISTORY OF STIVERS LAGOON

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SIMEON STIVERS

Simeon Stivers

Simeon Stivers was born in New Jersey on July 23, 1826. When Simeon was three, his parents died in an accident. He was then adopted by his aunt and uncle Earl and Letitia Marshall. As a young man, Simeon was trained to be a carpenter. In 1846 his family packed their belongings and boarded the ship "Brooklyn." This vessel took the first group of Mormon settlers from the east coast to California. The journey took over six months as they sailed around Cape Horn to Hawaii, with the final destination of San Francisco.

After spending two years in San Francisco (then known as Yerba Buena) the Marshall Family moved to what is now Fremont's Civic Center and Central Park area, at the urging of John Horner. During the Gold Rush, Simeon and his uncle went to find their fortune in the Sierra's, but they soon realized that Aunt Marshall made more "selling milk for a quarter a quart than they did panning for gold."

In 1850 Stivers finally settled down to the quiet life of dairy farming. At the time of Simeon's death in 1898, Simeon owned approximately 612 acres of land. This was one of the last intact open areas of open land owned by a single family at the time of Fremont's incorporation in 1956.

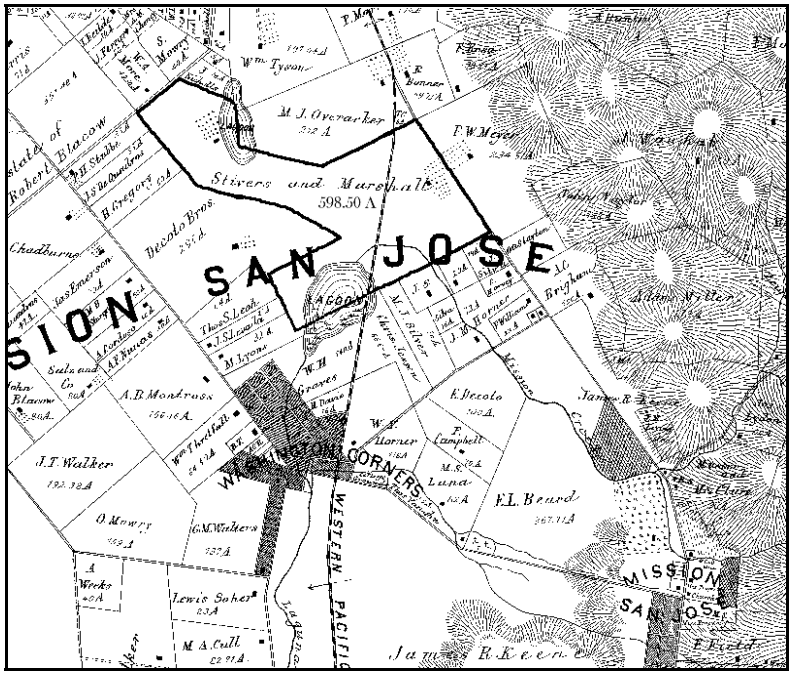
Earl Marshall

THE HISTORY OF STIVERS LAGOON

The original lagoon was approximately 200 acres in size. The area had an open lake as well as a fresh water marsh. As this area became more populated this natural waterway was changed. Areas of the original lake and marsh were filled causing the flow of water to change to conform to the growing community.

Prior to the massive population boom in Fremont, the marsh was probably deep enough for boating and swimming. In 1776 an explorer described the lake as being "somewhat salty," pointing to a possibility of salt intrusion from the San Francisco Bay. It was described as a green and flower-covered route to the bay waters.

The marsh area at Stivers Lagoon was deeper in the late 1800's then it is presently. The main tributaries included Mission Creek and Morrison Creek, which drained from the hills. The groundwater table was much higher than it is today, helping to maintain surface water all year. An account by early settlers claimed that, "you could dig 15 feet down and come up with a substantial well."



Map of Stivers and Marshall property in 1878. The lower lagoon is where today's Stivers Lagoon rests.

Tules that grew in the pond bordering the Stivers/Marshall property were originally used by Native Americans to build boats, homes and other essential items. Later in the 1860's they were harvested and sold to local nurseries for packing their plants and trees for shipping. The tule ponds which bordered the Stivers and Marshall's property provided an area for birds to feed and roost.

F. M. Smith, a contractor from Oakland, attempted to establish a gun club in 1883 at the pond; unfortunately, there was not enough wildlife for the members to hunt. Thus the club moved a few years later to Coyote Hills. Sometime in the 1890's a levee was constructed to restrict the amount of water flowing into the lagoon. As a result the marsh


Aerial Photograph of the marsh and Central Park existing in 1964.

could not maintain surface water, throughout the year. In the 1930's there was a movement, initiated by land owners, to limit flooding of the area caused by the natural watershed. This led to the channelization of Mission Creek. At the same time Hetch Hetchy, a San Francisco water aqueduct funded by the City of San Francisco, was being constructed through the area; this caused further drying of the marsh.

In 1956, the year Fremont was incorporated, Simeon Stivers' granddaughter sold part of the undeveloped land to Alameda County Flood Control. They in turn leased the land to the newly incorporated City of Fremont for use as a nature area in Central Park.

Aerial photograph of Stivers Lagoon in 1995

In 1960, Central Park included only 12 acres of land with a Community Center. Today, the park area has grown to 450 acres which include: a 40 acre nature area at Stivers Lagoon, a Swim Lagoon, four playground areas, an 88 acre lake, sports complex, soccer fields, tennis courts, lawn areas, and picnic areas.

The creation of Lake Elizabeth in 1968, caused the most damage to the marsh at Stivers Lagoon. Mission Creek was rerouted through the marsh which allowed the marsh to drain more rapidly and dry during the summer. This allowed more upland plants and trees to grow in the former marsh area.

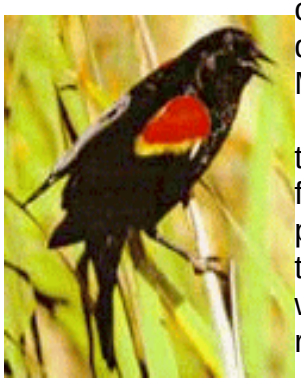
In 1971 the park won an award for its beauty and design. The Candlelighters donated $20,000 towards construction of the nature observation boardwalk into the marsh area and the kiosk near the natural education area. These two structures were built by both volunteer labor and donations.

Unfortunately over the past twenty -five years the boardwalk and the kiosk have fallen into disrepair due to a lack of maintenance of this vital area. Currently the City of Fremont, in partnership with the Math/Science Nucleus, is working to restore the wetlands at Stivers Lagoon. The goal is to develop and provide an outdoor education program and to reestablish the natural environment for future generations to enjoy.

STIVERS LAGOON TODAY

Stivers Lagoon is part of the Laguna Creek Watershed, whose headwaters begin at the elevation of 2500 feet and drop to sea level within 5 miles. This steep decent is a result of uplifting caused by faulting. Ten creeks and drainage channels flow into Laguna Creek, draining the hills and developed areas of Mission San Jose, Irvington, and the Industrial Districts. Mission and Morrison Creek join in the southern part of Lake Elizabeth to form Laguna Creek. Laguna Creek is diverted at Stivers Lagoon into a high flow (historic channel) and low flow (flood control channel) drainage system (during storm events). Both channels then flow into Mud Slough in southern San Francisco Bay.

Kiosk and beginning of boardwalk surrounded by tules.



Red- winged blackbird

Movement along the Hayward fault zone caused a depression to form in this area. Since large reservoirs of ground water can be found underneath (called the Niles Cone Aquifer), water easily percolates upward in this area to cause a natural pooling of water that existed before present day man-made Lake Elizabeth. Storm waters and springs along the hillsides also bring water into this region.

The present day lagoon supports a variety of different habitats spanning from Paseo Padre Parkway to the Southern Pacific Railroad to the path of Mission Creek. The various environments including the marsh are important in the preservation of a marsh habitat and provide a refuge for numerous native species of plants and animals.

Squirrel

The maintained grassland has the largest number of non-native species of plants including; wild oats, ripgut brome, soft chess, Mediterranean and hare barley, mustard, fennel, poison hemlock, cocklebur, and yellow star thistle. The animals of this area include small birds and small mammals, especially rodents.

The most visible habitat is the riparian and forest environment. This area contains numerous native plants, including: California black walnut, Fremont cottonwood, arroyo and polished willow, California blackberry, poison oak, sandbar willow, wooley sedge, baltic rush, pink smartweed, and lippia. All of these plants have regenerated themselves in the last 25 years. The animals in this area are mainly swallows, warblers, towhees, sparrow species, finch species and various raptor birds. This is a sheltered area where they can forage, nest, and roost.

Great Egret

The current marsh area has remained relatively undisturbed and is only accessible from the boardwalk. The dominant plant is the native hardstem bullrush. Other native species are the; pink-flowered knotweed, arroyo and polished willow, and western goldenrod. The wildlife found in this area includes great egret, great blue heron, green - backed heron, marsh wren, common yellowthroat, American bittern, red-winged blackbird, Western pond turtles, raccoons, foxes, muskrat, Virginia opossum, striped skunk, and rodents such as deer mice. In dryer areas, non-native plant species such as fuller's teasel and bristly ox tongue invade the landscape and inhibit the growth of native plants.

Muskrat eating shellfish in the tules.

Mallards

The Mission Creek ecosystem is an open water environment. The plants are mainly aquatic and consist of duckweed, pondweed, cattails, and tules. These plants help prevent erosion and an excess amount of silt from entering the waterway. The wildlife in this area include the common ducks found around Lake Elizabeth as well as small fish and crayfish found in the stream running through the lagoon.

The entire lagoon and nature area are essential to our community. It has been an excellent resource for school aged children to learn about Fremont history as well as various habitats. Fremont Recreation Programs have included short trips to the lagoon to go "crawdad fishing" and learn/experience the natural habitats that exist in the area. This refuge is home to a wide variety of different animals and plants that need this area to survive because they cannot survive anywhere else so please treat this area with care and respect!

Tules and other marsh plants surrounded by willows and other riparian plants.

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Credits:

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