
CALIFORNIA GRASSES AND CATTLE RANCHING:

PARALLEL CHANGES IN OUR EAST BAY UNIVERSE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL SUPKOFF

As a native Californian, I have always admired the state's grassy hills: spotted with oak, freshly green in spring, soft-rolling gold in summer. I remember craving the dry season, when my friends and I would build cardboard sleds and slide down the grass-slick slopes. The grass was thick and the stickers followed us home. All these years later, I find those stickers remain in my mind as questions. What are those California grasses?

The first thing I learn is that California's grasses are not necessarily Californian. Many are infiltrators that arrived in the 18th century, springing from European seeds that accompanied the Spanish missionaries and their livestock as the string of missions was built along El Camino Real, the path that connected the missions of Alta California to Mexico City. Seed may have traveled by sheep—clinging to the wool—or within

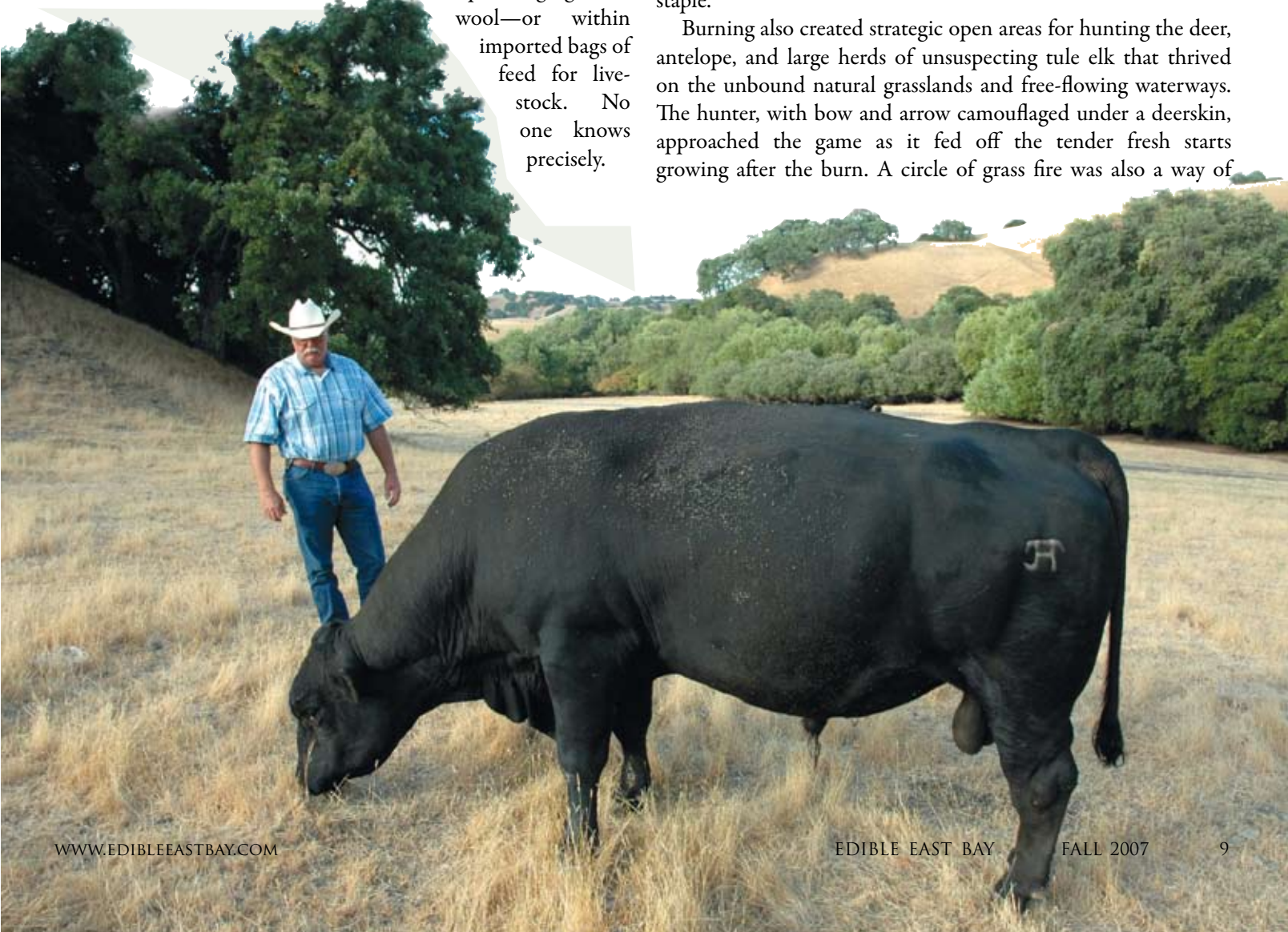
imported bags of feed for livestock. No one knows precisely.

Today, the hills of the East Bay are a hodgepodge of transcontinental grasses. In Wildcat Canyon alone, of the 60 found types of grasses and grass-like plants, only 37 are native. Fortunately, this includes purple needle grass, the official California state grass, but it also includes the likes of *Lolium multiflorum*, an exotic “awned Italian” rye grass, which causes 99 percent of hay fever cases.

PREHISTORY OF THE GRASSLANDS

The Italian rye grass would not have been around to bother the East Bay's native peoples, the Ohlone, the Bay Miwok, and the Yokuts. They knew the grasslands well and worked them through controlled burning. Fire fostered the growth of such edible grass seeds as blue wild rye, which with other seeds and wildflowers was ground in a stone mortar to make *pinole*, a Native American staple.

Burning also created strategic open areas for hunting the deer, antelope, and large herds of unsuspecting tule elk that thrived on the unbound natural grasslands and free-flowing waterways. The hunter, with bow and arrow camouflaged under a deerskin, approached the game as it fed off the tender fresh starts growing after the burn. A circle of grass fire was also a way of





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corralling grasshoppers in the dry fields after seeds were harvested—the roasted grasshoppers were a crunchy treat.

Also important in the Ohlone diet was the large native bunchgrass called tule (or California bulrush) that once grew in abundance in marshy areas. Young and tender tule is edible, and the seeds from the mature flower could be incorporated into the pinole. Tule reeds were cut, dried, and woven into the cone-shaped Ohlone house. A good place to get a look at tule grass is at Tyson Lagoon, an earthquake bog adjacent to the Fremont BART station.

If you're in the Fremont area looking for tule grass, you might also head into the nearby Sunol Wilderness for a chance at spying some tule elk. The proud horned animal was wiped out in the Bay Area within 20 years of the California Gold Rush, but after being reintroduced to Santa Clara in 1978, a small herd migrated into the Sunol area around San Antonio Reservoir.

EARLY EAST BAY RANCHING

Wildlife was in ample supply in 1797 when Franciscans established Mission San José, which still stands in Fremont as a living artifact of the period of Spanish rule in California. The mission was founded with a substantial dowry from Mission Santa Clara to the south: 600 cows, 4 teams of oxen, 4 tame horses, 3 mules, 2 bulls, 28 steers, 78 sheep, and two rams—a healthy start. Trusted American Indian vaqueros (cowboys), trained in ranching, tended the cattle through the Sunol, Amador, and San Ramon valleys, and north into what is now Oakland. These were prime areas for cattle ranching, with vast grasslands and numerous creeks spilling through the East Bay watersheds.

With such bounty, the San José mission prospered. In 1810, the herd of 600 cattle had grown to 7,109. By 1832, it was 12,000. The mission's agricultural output was second in the territory, and its olive oil production was the highest. By 1816, the Californios, as these Spanish/Mexican residents of Alta California were called, were trading by boat, taking goods across the bay to ocean-bound ships. Coffee, sugar, spices, hardware, fabrics, and other supplies were easily acquired by trading cattle hides and tallow (beef fat), a main ingredient in candle making.

During the period of Spanish rule, gifts of land were tokens to faithful Spanish soldiers, veterans of the conquest of Alta California. For a 40-year service to the Spanish Crown, one Californio, Luis María Peralta, was gifted 44,800 acres called Rancho San Antonio. To house vaqueros during their first winter, Peralta established a crude adobe structure near a creek that now bears his name. Peralta's herd grew to 8,000 head of cattle as trade improved following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1822. The family built a wharf on the bay to trade hides and tallow produced from their cattle. The Peralta hacienda became a social center for the vast Rancho San Antonio, where weeklong celebrations included rodeos, cattle roundups, and fandangos. The Peralta House, built in 1870 by Luis's son Antonio, is still standing in Oakland near

the site of the original adobe. The house is open to the public, and at one special event, I watched native tribesmen honoring their ancestry through song and dance. They displayed a sample of a deerskin hunting costume and I imagined their dance was a tribute to the spirits of the animals for the abundance they provided.

Another vestige of Californio ranch history is Rancho San Ramón, granted to José María Amador, who began an enterprise in 1826 on his 16,517 acres. He eventually managed 14,000 cattle and 4,000 sheep, which would be about one animal per acre. For the sake of comparison, consider that a modern-feedlot might have a thousand cattle bunched into one square acre.

EAST BAY RANCHING INTO THE PRESENT

California became a state in 1850. Among the ranchers running cattle in the East Bay after that time was none other than George Hearst, father to newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Another who came late in the century was the grandfather of John Hoover, currently a rancher and resident of Moraga. Hoover quotes his grandfather as saying, “where the horse died is where you stayed.” The “where” for grandpa was Livermore, but John Hoover’s ranch came to him through marriage into the Carr family—Scots who arrived in Moraga in 1916, and whose “home ranch” still runs behind suburban homes in the Moraga area. The Carrs, like many pre-World War II ranchers, also ran a dairy farm. That farm was in Fremont. After the war, meat was in high demand and the industry shifted to higher yields. Finishing cattle in centralized feedlots became the means to increase productivity, but before 1946, beef was mainly fed on grass.

In the East Bay today, open grazing land is scarce and costly. Ranchers such as John Hoover and Hunter Holding (see article on the next page) lease grasslands from the East Bay Regional Park District, East Bay Municipal Utility District, and surrounding cities. Hoover says he works with David Amme, wildland vegetation program manager for the East Bay Regional Park District, who is an expert in the subject of East Bay grasses. The mutual goal of park staff and ranchers is to educate the public about the parks’ ecosystems and to show how managed grazing helps reduce fire hazards and foster habitat diversity. Ranchers learn to identify and move cattle away from areas where wildflowers and native grasses are gaining a foothold.

John Hoover says that when he and his sons are out riding inside the park, they often need to explain to hikers that the ranchers need the grazing area but that they also understand they are guests



Tribal dancing at the Peralta House in Oakland

in the park. “That right is not to be abused,” he says. “We have the public out here. If someone comes up to us and asks us questions, we tell them exactly what is going on so they have an idea of what this is really all about.” He adds that there is no reason to be frightened when you see a cow in Briones Regional Park, since his calves are taught to be comfortable around people.

Hoover runs a cow/calf operation that raises black white-faced Angus and a Hereford and Angus mix. The calves are raised right on the ranch and without vaccines, and when tests on local grasses in Briones showed low levels of selenium and copper, Hoover began to add these supplements to the salt licks. In June, after the sweet green grass has faded to brown, Hoover’s calves are put on a scale, priced to weight, and taken away to other ranches, where they are raised until ready for market. Some of Hoover’s calves go to Hunter Holding’s ranch, Holding Angus. Working so close together, the two ranchers share cows, bulls, and ideas about ways to improve breeding. Seasoned stock takes years to develop and the two have produced bulls that are impressive in girth.

Legend has it that some old-timers would let their cattle range on grass until they reached 1,000 pounds, but as Hoover explains, there’s a right time for picking cattle “just like pickin’ apples. There is just a certain time . . . about two or three weeks. When the grass turns completely brown, the cattle stabilize. They grow in height and size like a thirteen-year-old kid, but they don’t put on that fat, that weight.”

Hoover does some of his work from the seat of a pickup, but he also works on horseback (wearing a cowboy hat). He says that the most peaceful part of the day is when he can ride on horseback over the grasslands. And like the vaqueros of the old East Bay ranchos, he knows that his wealth still depends on the health of the East Bay grasses. ☛