

The story of Barham Ranch

Barham Ranch is now forever wild -- finally saved for future generations.

Publicly owned for over 100 years, it is located in the heart of a Regional Park system. Bordered by Santiago Oaks Regional Park and Irvine Regional Park, it is also adjacent to the Weir Canyon area currently owned by the Irvine Company, which has been dedicated as permanent open space. Its 509 acres are largely steep and rugged. Covered with spectacular native vegetation, including majestic oaks, sage, and wildflowers, it is also home to a complete native plant community including toyon, lemonade berry, numerous varieties of sage, sugar bush, laurel sumac, yucca, prickly pear. In addition, the willow woodland habitat in the flood basin behind the dam has been identified as the most extensive in all of Orange County. It is a delightful birding spot, being home of species ranging from the water-loving great blue herons and egrets to the numerous hawks and owls, the endangered California Gnat Catcher, Acorn woodpeckers, Least Bells Vireo and cactus wren.

In 1996 the Nature Reserve of Orange County designated Barham Ranch as the top priority acquisition to be incorporated into the Reserve System.

Historically, the area that is now the flood basin behind the Villa Park dam had a ranch house on the south side of Santiago Creek. W.E. Squires built the house in 1870. The adjoining lands were used for sheep grazing. In 1875, Mr. Squires sold the ranch house to R.M. Barham, and the name was changed to Barham Ranch. Eight years later, in 1883, the ranch was sold to two water districts, the Carpenter & Serrano Irrigation companies, because of the significantly valuable water rights. The area was referred to as the "water ranch." In 1979, Carpenter Irrigation sold their entire "one-half interest" of Barham Ranch to the Orange Unified School District at a price that was significantly below market value, in the hope the property would thereby remain a significant public asset.

For two decades two co-owners, the Serrano Water District (SWD) and Orange Unified School District (OUSD), owned Barham Ranch. For years different developers tried to pave a road to Barham Ranch through the regional park in order to build homes and/or a golf course. The School District even considered building schools. All proposals would have destroyed the pristine wildlife habitat and seriously degrade the wilderness nature of all three surrounding parks.

In 1999, a booming real estate market and the construction of Serrano Heights led to a proposal to develop Barham Ranch that caused a significant conflict between the two co-owners. A development company proposed cutting through Santiago Oaks Park to construct 600 homes on the property. A very complicated legal challenge followed. SWD filed a partition lawsuit against OUSD in an effort to force a sale to the developer. A coalition of citizens' groups and environmental organizations filed a CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) lawsuit against SWD. The Attorney General for the State of California filed an amicus brief in support of the citizens' CEQA complaint. Ultimately as a result of the pressures presented by the legal actions, the contract between SWD and the developer was largely rescinded.

For the first real time, there were opportunities for other groups to buy Barham Ranch for preservation. County of Orange funds had been earmarked earlier for the purchase, and Supervisor Todd Spitzer stepped forward on numerous occasions and expressed his commitment to preserve Barham Ranch. He unequivocally offered to purchase the land at the highest fair-market appraised value. Additionally, with the help of Scott Ferguson, from the Trust for Public Land a commitment to purchase Barham Ranch was also secured from the State of California. Within a few months of the onset of the conflict in 1999, all seemed to be falling into place to secure Barham Ranch as park property. Then suddenly SWD unexpectedly sold their undivided half interest to OUSD in January 2000, and all proposals and negotiations were required to start anew.

Notwithstanding this setback, the "Save Barham Ranch" leaders continued their efforts to purchase and preserve Barham Ranch. A multitude of hurdles were worked through, including a recall and a regular election of OUSD board members. On August 20, 2002, after doing a comprehensive feasibility study, the Board of Trustees declared Barham Ranch "surplus property," and as such it was required that the school district first "offer the property for park, recreation or open space purposes to specified public entities."

Finally, at the historic -- standing room only -- school board meeting on October 24, 2002 Supervisor Spitzer made his final offer. The Orange Unified School District Board of Trustees then voted (5-2) to sell Barham Ranch to the County of Orange for parkland. Escrow closed on January 15, 2003.

Through the efforts of many dedicated persons, investing time, money, and heart, Barham Ranch was finally protected and preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Marilyn Ganahl and Theresa Sears, Co-chairs of Save Barham Ranch