

Mary Howard Smith Farm
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The Mary Howard Smith Farm

Forever at Home on the Farm

Research Team

Barbara Burrows, Karin Farrin, Mary Goldberg, Beth Miller,
Lynn Preiss, Sherry Reynolds, Bev Taylor

Special Thanks

to

John Frisk

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by

Beth Miller

A red-tailed hawk eyed a young jack rabbit as it lazily drifted high above the secluded farm at the base of the Conejo Grade. Wildflowers and prickly pear cacti covered the steep slopes but the farm below was a patch work of fruit trees and crops. Not far from the farm, the gentle lowing of the Adohr Farms Guernsey herd echoed in the background. The sweet scent of recently harvested alfalfa filled the air. This was the peaceful and sheltered farm of Mary Howard Smith. In later years, two neighboring families would be commemorated with streets named Pancho (*Camarillo*) and Howard Roads.

Mary Howard Smith was a farmer who cared about her land and animals, her neighbors and her community. She never wanted to leave her land and she never did. Mary was mentioned by her neighbor, Adolfo Camarillo, in his 1936 diary. Those brief diary notations were about horses and contacts in Santa Barbara. She and Adolfo shared a love of horses that included careful breeding and training. Mary bred magnificent Morgan horses. Adolfo bred his cherished Camarillo White Horses to Morgans. But it is unknown, if the neighbors had a breeding arrangement.

Mary was related to the Howard family who were pioneers in Ventura County. Joseph Howard was a rancher and stockman. He came from New Jersey at age 14 with his parents to Santa Barbara in 1880. Joseph worked on his father's ranch where he gained experience before setting out on his own. In 1886, he married Elizabeth Middleton, the daughter of a prominent Ventura County family. She had

inherited from her stepfather, Samuel Hill, 2,500 acres in Ventura County. Joseph and Elizabeth had nine children. Mary, their sixth child, was born in 1898 and came to Ventura County in 1911 where her mother started a ranch in the Santa Rosa Valley. Mary met her future husband, Jacob Victor “Jake” Smith, when he was managing a ranch with her brother. The couple married in 1916.

In his 2007 memoir, Camarillo and Other Remembrances, Mayor Emeritus Stan Daily recalled seeing Mary and Jake Smith around town.

“I recall Jake Smith and his wife, Mary, coming into town and shopping for groceries... He drove a big green Chrysler 2-door coupe. It was about a 1946, purchased immediately after World War II. Jake was a successful farmer out south of town, where the Smith ranch was located. They both loved the land so.

Jake would often come to town and he and Dad would stand outside the corner of what was Howell’s Market and “shoot the breeze”...The community lost a fine man when Jake Smith passed on. His wife, Mary, being the trooper she was, continued to farm for the remainder of her life on the home place.”

In 1936, Jake and Mary Howard Smith purchased 700 acres of the Lewis Ranch in Camarillo and in 1943 purchased 133 acres that were originally part of the Camarillo Ranch. The Smith Farm was established on that former Camarillo Ranch acreage. In 1944, they purchased an additional 251 acres of former Camarillo Ranch land which they later sold to Adohr in 1946. Mary raised cows, black Morgan horses, sheep, pigs and turkeys and grew 350 acres of row crops. Having lived in Ventura County since 1911, she told of driving cattle from Camarillo to the Los Angeles stockyard. It was a three-day journey.

Mary believed that farming should be as self-sufficient as possible. She milked a cow, made her own butter and raised enough cattle and sheep to supply the needs of her farm. “I like animals,” she said in a 1956 Oxnard Press-Courier interview.

With the help of friends and employees, Mary worked her land. Many years later she leased 450 acres for row crop cultivation. Adohr Farms permitted her to pick up remaining alfalfa from the fields. The arduous job was accomplished by Mary and her neighbor Verna Frisk. The Frisk family came to Adohr when Verna’s husband, Ray, became foreman at Adohr. Mary and Jake did not have children. She was very proud of the fact that she raised her brother Joseph’s three children. The Frisk children were also very important part of Mary’s life.

The Frisk children played at the Smith Farm on Mary's donkey called Sambo. John Frisk recalls snacking on the delicious limes from Mary's grafted citrus tree. The children learned the polite and proper way to obtain fruit from a neighbor's tree. "You always go to the door, knock, and ask permission to pick a lime," said John. "I loved going to her house," he added.



Photo Courtesy of John Frisk

Adohr children, Mary's nephews and Frisk children all playing with Mary's donkey Sambo

Left to Right: Richard and Luis Howard, John Frisk riding the donkey

James Frisk, Howard Smith, Janet Smith, unknown, Barbra Smith in front

Finding a feather from one of Mary's peacocks was a joyful event for the youngster. John remembers that Mary took "great care of her animals."

John also learned first-hand from Mary that nothing on the farm was wasted. After a hog was slaughtered, the blood was collected in a "great big pan." He helped Mary deliver it to a "little village of Mexican workers" who were living at the base of Conejo Grade. He watched a pan and its contents gently sway back and forth as they drove to the homes. The 'villagers' would turn the blood into a classic sausage delicacy.

Though he always called her “Mrs. Smith,” John knew, even as a child, that Mary was a “tough old gal. She was no frail girl.”



Photo courtesy of John Frisk

Lima Bean Festival 1947 Frisk children with mother and Mary Howard Smith
Left to Right: Dawn Frisk, Mary Howard Smith, Verna Frisk holding Waneta “Loy” Frisk, James Frisk

The buggy was pulled by one of Mary Howard Smith’s prized black Morgan horses.

Somewhere along the line, Mary and Jake separated. Each had their own home on Smith Farm. They may have separated, but they never divorced. “Both Mary and Jake were Catholic,” said John. When Jake died in 1949, he was buried in Ivy Lawn Memorial Park in Ventura. He was 60 years old. Jake left an estate valued at

\$350,000 which his brothers attempted to claim. There was no will. Mary Smith's ownership of the estate was legally recognized in 1951. Those legal problems led her to formulate a plan that would allow her to remain eternally on her land.

Mary claimed that the legal action prompted her to dispose of some of her property as gifts prior to her death. She gave ten acres to the Camarillo Sanitary District for the construction of a water treatment plant and donated more than one hundred acres to Conejo Mountain Memorial Park where she was buried in 1992. She reportedly told her niece that by donating land for the cemetery "they can't get me off my land when I'm dead."

Mary played a key role preserving a Catholic chapel at Conejo Mountain Memorial Park. The historic Chapel of the Islands, built in 1942, was originally named Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Port Hueneme. In 1962, the church was part of a large urban renewal project which called for the relocation of the building or be demolished. Mary placed a bid for the church that was moved to the cemetery in 1966 and situated in what was once lima bean fields. "I pray the good Lord doesn't send me to the city to finish my days. When they move me, I hope they move me feet first. I would rather die with my boots on than off." Mary died in 1992. She was 94 years old.

Her gravestone was inscribed: "She leaves a wealth of memories and love."

John believes that Mary may have had Jake interred at Conejo Mountain. Today the couple's headstones are together in the Camarillo cemetery.



Historic "Chapel of the Islands" Conejo Mountain Memorial Park

The Frisk Family



1355 Howard Road

This California Bungalow was built in 1918 when Juan E. Camarillo was the property owner.

He leased the land to a tenant farmer who likely constructed the home and lived there.

In 1944 it became the Frisk family home.

During the time of Adohr Milk Farms in 1944, a charming bungalow became the home of Ray Frisk and family. He was a foreman for the dairy. His son, John, grew up in the house that holds many fond memories. While helping with a remodel in the 1950s, John remembers that behind a wall a 1919 calendar was uncovered.

Adohr was an adventure land for the Frisk children. In the Adohr Village, (homes for employees) the weekly ice delivery meant fun for the kids. They would “slurp chunks of ice as if they were popsicles.” Sometimes they would “sneak a cup of milk” before it was pasteurized, recalled John. Because of his father’s work at Adohr, John has an extensive knowledge of the Adohr operation.

Across from the house were barns, sheds and other buildings used by Adohr. The u-shaped bunk house had been brought from the former Adohr property in Tarzana. Ray Frisk also arranged for the purchase of World War II era Quonset huts that were also placed near the bunkhouse and operation buildings. Today the bungalow's neighborhood includes a metal shed and three houses that had been transferred from Tarzana.

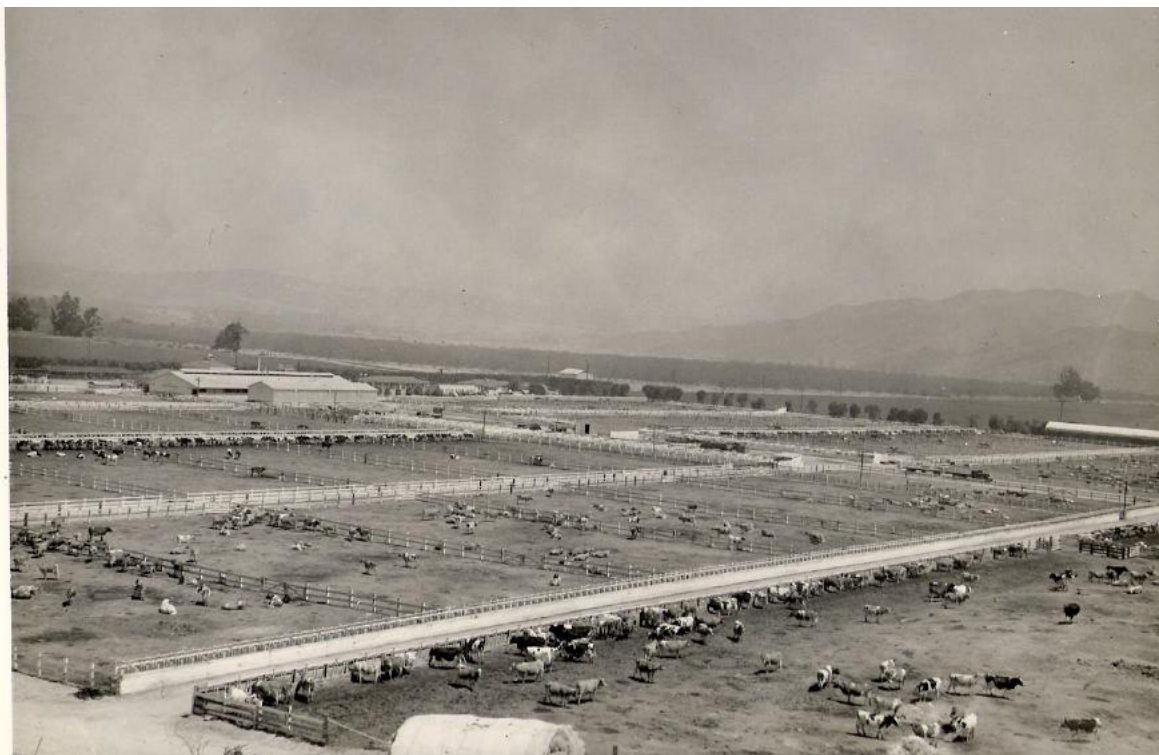


Photo courtesy of John Frisk
Corral layout at Adohr Farms undated

John grew up picking buckets full of lima beans that “we’d eat right out of the husk. My Mom canned these fresh green limas.” John chopped the weeds in the lima bean fields. By this time, the limas were irrigated. Fields were flooded with a “ten or eleven sprinkler system.”

John’s many experiences on the farm helped him as a young adult to understand the importance of many types of crop roughage used as cattle feed and soil amendment. Mary had taught him that nothing should be wasted. He handled 50 pound bags of beef pulp (what was left over from processing the beet). “It was slippery but smelled good.” Another byproduct was barley copra and raisins packed in solid 100 pound bags. It was not an easy job to load into the feed barns. But the most difficult byproduct to upload by hand was the high protein rice bran. “It was dusty” work.

His earliest childhood memory of Camarillo was when the family was moving into the house that would be their home at Adohr Farms. "A truck was in front of the house, we were moving in and I was sitting in a big chair." At just four years old, he watched in wonder at a "big wooden horse drawn wagon with a water tank. Water was seeping through. I drank a cup of the coolest, sweetest water."

As a youngster, John's adventures took him to the Camarillo Ranch. Once he and a friend decided to build "a little bridge across the creek." They wanted to get across the water without getting wet and possibly being exposed to sewage that was dumped in that area. Just as the boys began their construction plans, a Ranch employee stopped them. "We were taken to the big house," recalls John.

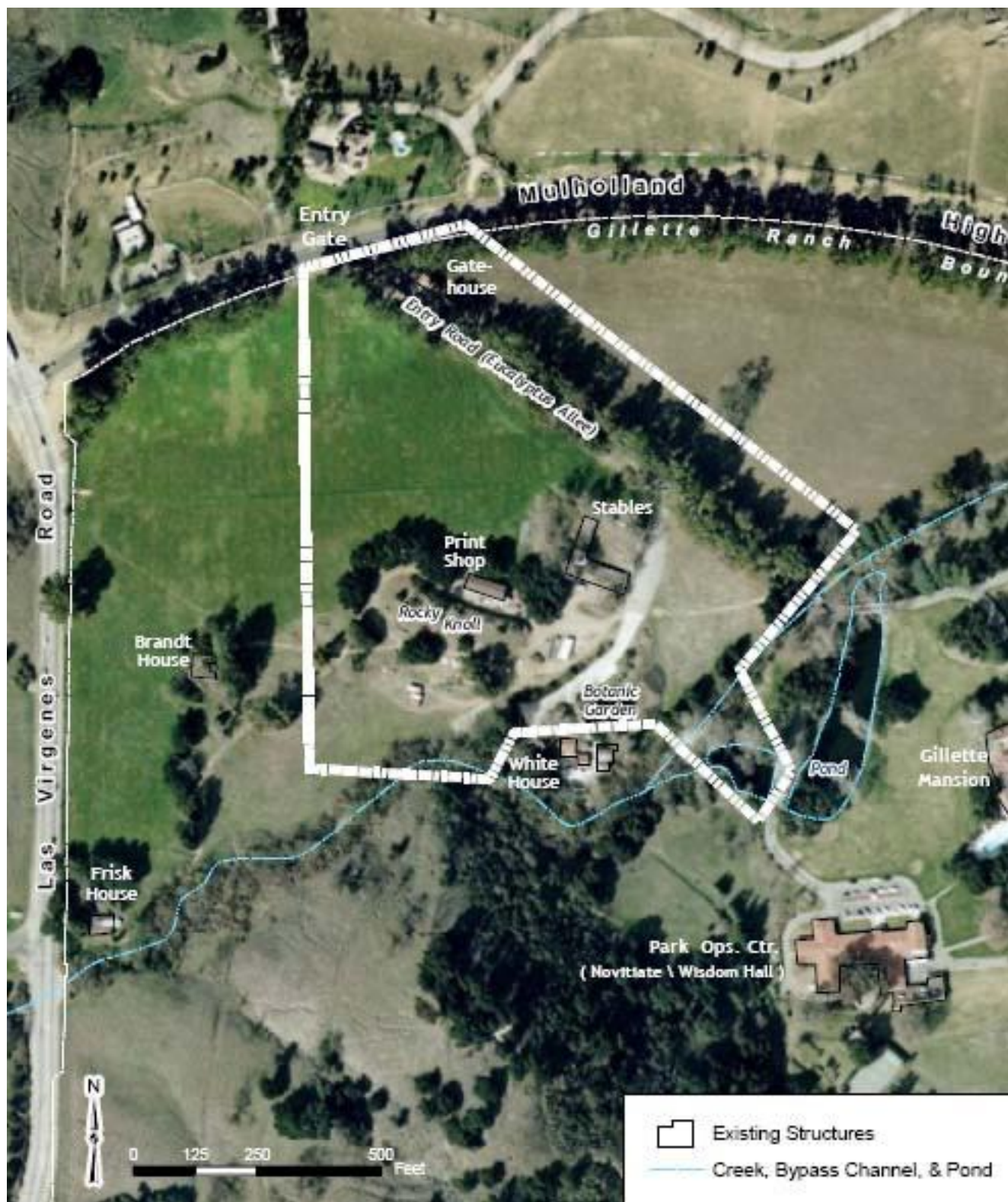
"I was scared to death to be taken to the house," said John. He had remembered seeing Adolfo Camarillo and "his white horses and lots of silver saddles," but this situation was different.

Even though "we got a tongue lashing," recalled John, "he never raised his voice. He was soft spoken." Adolfo explained that the boys should not be playing or 'building a bridge on my creek.' John remembers that Adolfo's "voice was deep, but not loud." And although the children were reprimanded, John said Adolfo "was a pleasant man to hear him talk."

John remembers seeing Adolfo at the Lima Bean Festival that honored his 90th birthday in 1954. "Leo Carrillo was the grand marshal and spoke in both Spanish and English at the program."

Four years later, John went to St. Mary Magdalen Chapel to pay his final respects before Adolfo's funeral. There was a clear cover over the coffin and John was able to see Adolfo one last time.

Besides the historic homes and farms of his youth, John's roots go back to the King Gillette Ranch. Gillette was a businessman who invented a best-selling safety razor. His invention was a thin, inexpensive disposable blade of stamped steel. Gillette purchased a large ranch in the Santa Monica Mountains near Calabasas in 1926. John's grandfather, James Alvin Frisk, worked for Gillette and "took care of the area," said John. There is a little house on the grounds called "The Frisk House."



The King Gillette Ranch
National Park Service Map
Lower left: Frisk House

The Morgan Horse: Mary's Favorite Breed

The Morgan horse was one of the first horse breeds to be developed in the United States. The founding stallion of the breed was a horse named Figure owned by Justin Morgan in the late 1700s. No one knows for certain what Figure's pedigree was, but it's generally accepted that it was the offspring of horses with Arabian, thoroughbred and perhaps Welsh cob or Friesian bloodlines. The stallion developed a reputation for his athleticism and pleasant disposition. Figure passed his traits to his offspring, and the breed was eventually named after his owner.

Over time, the Morgan became the ultimate all-purpose horse, equally at home in harness, under saddle, on the race track, or at work in the fields.

From: Morgan Horse: Breed Profile by Katherine Blocksdorf



Getty Images

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Please contact Karin Farrin

kg.farrin@gte.net