



Cell Phone Tour Script

Stop 1: Outside the Visitor Center Back Door: Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to John Muir National Historic Site. This audio tour explores the historic grounds and orchards. There are 11 stops on the tour. Throughout the site there are signs indicating a cell phone audio stop.

John Muir was an explorer and writer, known today for his work in preserving nature. Later in life, Muir was a fruit farmer and a business man. His success as a fruit rancher provided affluence that supported his family and travels and allowed him time to write. It also provided him access to a political arena where he was able to build support for his preservation efforts. Much of what Muir wrote on preserving and protecting natural areas was completed during this time. Learn more about Muir the rancher and the agricultural history of the site with this orchard tour.

Move toward the easy access path to reach the next stop.

Stop 2. Easy Access Path Start: John Muir in Martinez

This land and house was once owned by Dr. John Strentzel and his wife Louisiana, John Muir's future in-laws. Dr. Strentzel was a medical doctor with a talent for growing fruit who experimented with more than a thousand varieties of fruit trees and ornamentals. Through his work in those early days of California horticulture, he was able to determine what kinds of fruit would grow best in this northern California climate. At one point, he grew 50 different varieties of pears.

John Muir was encouraged to visit Dr. Strentzel through a mutual friend. Knowing of the doctor's interest in trees and the promise of a warm meal was all it took to get the bachelor Muir to visit the Strentzel family. Little did he suspect that Strentzel's beautiful daughter Louie would become his wife.

Dr. Strentzel's first home in Martinez was a modest house located about a mile south of here. Muir writes his sister Sarah about a visit in 1877:

"Coming home here I left my boat at Martinez, thirty miles up the bay, and walked to Oakland across the top of Mount Diablo, and on the way called at my friends the Strentzel's, who have eighty acres of choice orchards and vineyards, where I rested two days, my first rest in six weeks. They pitied my weary looks, and made me eat and sleep, stuffing me with turkey, chicken, beef, fruits, and jellies in the most extravagant manner imaginable, and begged me to stay a month."

Stop 3. Halfway to Train Trestle: Transportation: Then and Now

The Strentzel Ranch filled the Alhambra Valley, totaling 2,600 acres by 1890. After the death of Dr. Strentzel, John, Louie, and their two daughters Wanda and Helen joined the widowed Mrs. Strentzel in the "Big House". A more pastoral scene of fruit and nut trees, wheat and grapes would have been hard to find. Looking around you now, 20th century changes are everywhere. The park immediately around the home is now only nine acres and surrounded by other homes, businesses and roads. The buzz of Alhambra Valley bees has taken on another form.

The sounds of our 21st century are much different than that of Muir's 19th century. One of the resources in National Parks is called a "soundscape". Trying to preserve the quiet of the Grand Canyon might be easier than here in this suburban park. Though the roar and howl of vehicles can be disturbing to us now, here is what John Muir innocently thought about the future of automobiles in our national parks:

"All signs indicate automobile victory, and doubtless, under certain precautionary restrictions, these useful, progressive, blunt-nosed mechanical beetles will hereafter be allowed to puff their way into all the parks and mingle their gas-breath with the breath of the pines and waterfalls, and, from the mountaineer's standpoint, with but little harm or good."

Stop 4. Train Trestle View: Trains

The railroad trestle above the freeway spanned the Alhambra Valley and crossed through the Muir property in 1900. Prior to the railroad, fruit would have been boxed and loaded in wagons, then taken to Strentzel Wharf in downtown Martinez two miles from here. It was then sold and loaded on ships for transportation to San Francisco and beyond.

Muir sold the easement through his property to the San Francisco and San Joaquin Valley Railway for \$10 and a lifetime pass for the railroad. In addition, the railroad station for Martinez, located on the far side of the trestle from the house, was named in Muir's honor as Muir Station. Though no longer in existence, the station provided easy access for Muir to ship his fruit to far away states, delivering it quickly, fresh and unbruised.

Muir's daughters, Wanda and Helen, grew up with a fascination of trains and went to explore the construction of the trestle being built in their backyard. Wanda later wrote to her father:

"There has been much blasting and banging away on the railroad cut. We went up there Sunday and found a lot of fossil shells. There was one flat rock about three feet square that was just covered with different kinds of shells and Helen was very much pleased to find a petrified worm."

Stop 5. Mourning Cypress Tree: Ranch Labor

Maintaining the 2600-acre ranch required a lot of work. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the 1870's, help was available in the form of displaced Chinese railroad workers.

Here in Northern California, they didn't have to look too far for work. The planting, growing, pruning and harvesting of fruit required many ranch hands. Behind the mansion stood the "China House", a segregated dormitory for the men working in the orchards. Chinese workers were accustomed to hard work and long hours, but if the pay wasn't good enough, they would leave for better prospects at other fruit ranches. Muir, like all ranchers, struggled with the cost of labor cutting into his profit margins. Failure to maintain the balance could lead to his fruit rotting on the trees.

By 1890, Chinese workers in this orchard and others would have been taking care of all aspects of fruit and nut production. It began with the planting, grafting, pruning and spraying of trees, then on to the harvesting, boxing and delivering of fruits and nuts to buyers. It would have been impossible to have had a successful orchard business without the experienced help of the Chinese laborers. Muir himself described the running of the ranch as "an eternal fountain of work".

Stop 6. California Bay Tree: American Indians in the East Bay

It seems that everyone here in California came from somewhere else. John Muir arrived in California in 1868. Dr. Strentzel, his father-in-law, arrived here in the Alhambra Valley 14 years earlier. Before them came the gold miners of 1849 and the Spanish exploring this area as early as 1776. Earlier, the Ohlone people – American Indians – settled in this bountiful eastern area of the San Francisco Bay.

Even before the lush orchards of the Alhambra Valley were planted, it would've been an Eden. Ohlone men would have caught salmon, bass and other fish in the creeks. They hunted deer and smaller animals for food and hides. Women and children collected berries and shellfish from the Carquinez Straits. Come fall, they would have migrated to the tribe's special oak trees for a massive harvest and preparation of acorns as a winter food supplement.

Many other native plants played an important role in the life of American Indians, such as the wavy-leaved soap root, which was been harvested to clean the body and hair. The tule reed was used to make baskets and canoes, the California buckeye nut was used to stun fish, and miner's lettuce was just one of the plants eaten as a leafy green vegetable.

Above you is a beautiful native tree called the California Bay. Try to find a leaf on the ground, crunch it in between your fingers and give it a sniff. These highly aromatic leaves were used by American Indians in a variety of ways. They could be used to smoke out bugs from a lodge, to spice up food, placed under a headband to stop a headache, or simply crushed, rolled up and stuck up the nose to relieve congestion and ease breathing.

The Bay tree also played a part in the Muir family as well. Instead of cutting down a tree each year for Christmas, the Muirs would trim a branch off of one of the Bay trees on Mt. Wanda (named after Muir's oldest daughter), then bring that to the home and decorate it. It looks different and certainly smells different than the traditional Christmas evergreen, but was easy to get used to once covered in Victorian ornaments.

Stop 7. Bent Palm Tree: Freedom Through Fruit

After his father-in-law's death in 1890, Muir took over the running of the ranch and began to transform much of the ranch to

growing Bartlett pears. He also grew a variety of fruit for family consumption, including cherries, apricots, and peaches. These Elberta peach trees before you are of the same heritage variety as the ones that Muir once grew.

Muir was a successful rancher, although he found the work difficult and tiring. After 10 years of hard work, he hired his brother-in-law John Reid, husband of his sister Margaret, to manage the ranch. With Reid taking care of operations, Muir was free to enjoy strolling through the orchards again, with little thought to the strain of running the business.

Throughout his time in Martinez, Muir's wife Louie knew that Muir wasn't happy with ranch work and could achieve more. She continually encouraged him to keep exploring and writing, and he did. John Muir often left the house for months at a time but also missed his life with his family. When he left the ranch, it was usually to connect emotionally with nature and gather data for his books and essays that he wrote in Martinez. Muir considered this ranch where his beloved family lived his home. John Muir could not have been the man we know of today without the complete support of his family.

Louie's belief that ranch life should not interfere with her husband's passions for nature can be seen in this letter :

"A ranch that needs and takes the sacrifice of a noble life or work ought to be flung away beyond all reach and harm."

Stop 8. Sequoia Tree: Sequoia Love

John Muir's love of botany is expressed in the many varieties of trees planted around the home and orchards. Most are not fruit bearers but were chosen by Louie, John or Dr. Strentzel for their beauty and uniqueness. John Muir would often send seeds and plant cuttings through the mail to his family here.

One of John Muir's favorite transplants was this tree he brought from the Sierra Nevada when it was just a seedling. Now, at over 70 feet and 120 years young, this is still a baby and could someday grow to more than 250 feet high, 100 feet around and 3,000 years old. This will only happen with proper care and enough water – a tough thing to provide to a tree miles away from its natural habitat. This tree is the mighty Sequoia. As large as this tree could grow, its height would be completely eclipsed by another one of Muir's favorite trees. The genetic brother of the sequoia is the California state tree and the tallest tree on the planet, the coastal redwood.

After seeing the Merced grove of sequoias in what would eventually become Yosemite National Park, Muir writes a good friend about his divine experience among the giants:

"Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! Seems all I can say. . .I'm in the woods, woods, woods, and they are in me-ee-ee. The King tree and I have sworn eternal love. . .and I've taken sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drunk Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter."

Stop 9. Quince Bush: What Is It?

These large bush-like relatives of the apple and the pear are called quinces. This old-fashioned fruit is rarely seen in stores today. Quinces are not ripe until November and are usually cooked before eaten. They are often used in making jams and jellies because of a high pectin content which serves as a gelling agent.

The reason for quince use here in the Alhambra Valley has nothing to do with their taste. In Muir's day pears were sickened by a fungus that attacked their roots. The quinces, however, were not affected. So fruit ranchers of the time grafted pear trees to quince rootstocks to help increase disease resistance.

Grafting is a common process in horticulture. A sample is taken from a species or variety you want to grow and attached to the rootstock of a related variety. For example, horticulturalists graft English walnuts, the favored variety of walnuts, onto native Black walnut root stock. This ensures healthy growth and production of the exotic variety in an area where it would normally fail.

Though Muir preferred the "wild" apples and fruits of the woods to the grafted and "tamed" ones, he realized that grafting was a crucial part of a successful agricultural business.

Stop 10. Grapevines: Plums and Grapes

To your left are several varieties of plum trees, including Santa Rosa and Cherry Plums. If it's July, stroll into the orchard and pick up a sweet treat from the ground. Please don't climb the trees or pick fruit. The ripe plums and the sweetest ones are already on the ground. Don't let a blemish or some easily brushed off dirt stop you from enjoying this delicious fruit.

On the right, the short, bushy vines are grapes. The Muirs grew both wine and table grapes, but they did not make wine on the ranch. The three varieties you see before you (Tokay, Muscat and Zinfandel) were planted in the 1970's by Muir's grandson. Muir was very discerning about which grapes should be grown on the ranch. Here is what he had to say about one of the varieties he

removed:

“The Mission Vine, the first planted in California, is a good table grape, but a poor wine grape and brings a very low price for either table or wine. The Padres ought to have known better – such good judges they were in most things relating to the stomach.”

Stop 11. At the Adobe: Martinez Adobe

More than a place for business, this property formed the centerpiece on which Muir’s family life was built.

This adobe building in front of you is the oldest in Martinez. It was built by Vincente Martinez in 1849. During Muir’s time ranch managers used the adobe as their home. One of these men was Thomas Hanna, who married Muir’s oldest daughter Wanda. The short distance between the adobe and the house allowed Muir to spend time with his daughter and later grandchildren, building strong family ties that Muir valued.

Muir wrote to an old friend about his family and the sun setting on his life:

“It is now seven years since my beloved wife vanished in the land of the leal. Both of my girls are happily married and have homes and children of their own. Wanda has three lively boys, Helen has two and are living at Daggett, California. Wanda is living on the ranch in the old adobe, while I am alone in my library den in the big house on the hill where you and sister Kate found me on your memorable visit long ago.

As the shadows lengthen in life’s afternoon, we cling all the more fondly to the friends of our youth. . . .”

John Muir died on December 24, 1914.

After his passing, Muir’s daughters sold the house and the land that was used as a fruit ranch. The Muir home and the Martinez adobe went through five different owners before being designated as a National Historic Site in 1964. The site now gives you insight into John Muir’s life as a rancher, father and husband, which is inseparable from his accomplishments as a writer and preservationist. As you walk back to the entrance, consider how the ground you are walking on supported one of nature’s most devoted defenders, John Muir.