

Story by Megan Alpers • Photos by Matt Salvo

gift for future generations

Silicon Valley park has one foot in the past, one in the future

In many ways, Martial Cottle Park in San Jose is a 287-acre time capsule, yet at the same time, it is one of the newest and most innovative parks in Silicon Valley.

A fully functioning 1941 Type B John Deere tractor sits patiently in the 150-year-old barn, ready to prepare a field for planting. Ten thousand fruit boxes are stacked for harvest time, and a horse-drawn carriage dating from the original homesteading family looks as if it were just put away for the evening.

Meanwhile, on a paved path circling one of the farm's fields, joggers enjoy the weekend away from their hectic high-tech jobs and a young woman walks her dog and chats on her cellphone. Beyond the field, you can see cars zipping along an overpass.

The park sits on some of the region's most fertile and valuable soil.

When Walter Cottle Lester donated his most precious possession—his family's farm—to Santa Clara County



Eric Goodrich manages Martial Cottle Park, dedicated to Silicon Valley's agricultural heritage.

and the state of California in 2003, he outlined his wishes in specific terms. The property would include a park bearing the name of his grandfather, Martial Cottle. Most importantly, it would forever maintain its agricultural roots as a working farm, serving as a bridge for visitors to experience and appreciate the area's history.

"It was an unprecedented gift to the residents of Santa Clara County," said Eric Goodrich, the park's manager. "The family had incredible foresight and wanted visitors to see the value of agriculture in the Santa Clara Valley."

Lester was born in 1925, and he and his older sister, Edith, lived their entire lives on the farm. They watched as houses, freeways, schools and shopping centers replaced neighbors' cattle pastures and prune orchards.

Since the 1950s, more than 60,000 acres of Santa Clara Valley farmland have been replaced by bustling cities as the valley became home to thousands of families.



"Those 60,000 acres lost include barns, farmhouses, tractors, fields, orchards," Goodrich said. "This park represents all of those."

A vision for the park

During the years, the Lesters turned down unimaginable wealth in the form of development offers. They once said no to an offer of \$500 million.

"Walter Cottle Lester really saw himself as a steward of the ranch," Goodrich said. "His mother instilled that in him, and he took it very seriously. He had specific requests about how the land would be used and preserved, going so far as to say that this property would not become a repository for other historical structures. It would maintain its own sense of place."

Lester made it clear that no swimming pools, baseball diamonds or playground equipment were welcome on the property. Instead, the park's creators introduced innovative architectural and landscape design that honored the past and supported present farming operations and neighbors.

In place of a traditional playground, farm animal sculptures fill an area for children to run, climb and explore. Picnic areas and parking lots include drought-tolerant, native plants



Martial Cottle, shown below near dog in 1887, raised cattle, grain and other crops on the property. His grandson, Walter Cottle Lester, learned how to manage the farm at a young age and grew up to become the property's steward. When Walter passed his family's farm to the public in the form of a park, he had specific requests: Instead of playgrounds and athletic fields, orchards and working farm fields, above, would help those lessons in farming continue.



as well as porous pavement to help rainwater enter the ground. There are 4 acres set aside for the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, and plans are in motion for the new Sunset 4-H club to have its own facilities.

Near the park's entrance, a LEED-certified visitor center hosts interactive displays, historical timelines and objects belonging to the Lester family, including model cars that Walter Lester built as a child and an icebox and butter churn from the farmhouse kitchen. Students on field trips meet Jeffrey, a California kingsnake, to learn about ecosystems and are given a glimpse of what daily life was like for the valley's first residents—the Ohlone tribe of Native Americans.

Farming in the suburbs

The ranch still grows crops. Pescadero-based Jacobs Farm, which operates organic farms in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties, leases 180 acres within Martial Cottle Park to grow sweet peas, rosemary, thyme, onions, garlic, melons, dry-farmed tomatoes and more to be sold in grocery stores and through an on-site farm stand. In October, the stand hosts hundreds of schoolchildren with a pumpkin patch, teaching about the life cycle of plants and about food production.

The opportunity to farm within a multi-use park surrounded by subdivisions intrigued Brendan Miele, director of domestic farming operations at Jacobs Farm.

"It was really appealing for us to be involved in something with such a close connection to the community," Miele said. "Our motto is 'healthy soils, healthy plants, healthy people,' and we believe it is part of our job as farmers to teach our neighbors about



how we grow their food and what it takes to run a farm."

Miele says Martial Cottle Park is a unique partnership among the farm, county parks department and neighbors.

"It has been a really positive experience," he said. "We have hired people from the neighborhood to come work for us. Our employees are always ready to answer questions that park visitors have about what we're doing out here."

The new stewards

As the Jacobs Farm employees take to the fields, inspecting young squash plants or tending to the orchard, they walk in the footsteps of Walter and Edith Lester and their ancestors. The Lesters' great-grandfather, Edward Cottle, arrived in California in a covered wagon and purchased the property—once part of a Spanish land grant—from Jose Joaquin Bernal. Walter's uncle, Monte Lester, taught Walter how to farm and prepared him to take over management of the property when he was just 18.



"Through the development of the park master plan, construction and programming, we often ask ourselves, 'What would Walter Cottle Lester want?'" Goodrich said. "Returning to that question ensures we are fulfilling the mission and vision for the family."

Neither Walter nor his sister married or had children. Edith Lester passed away in 1999, leaving Walter the sole owner and setting in motion the decision for the farm to become a park.

Living out his days in the tall, white 1883 Italianate Victorian farmhouse where he was born, Walter passed away on Jan. 31, 2014, at the age of 88. It was just hours before the walking trail he helped design opened to the public and a few months before the official park opening ceremony.

"I think he knew his job here was done," Goodrich said. "This park represents the agricultural heritage of this valley. Thanks to the Cottle and Lester families' generosity, we are able to share the story of farming and ranch life in the valley as well as provide our community direct access to agriculture."

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Brendan Miele of Jacobs Farm, above left, said he appreciates the opportunity his company has been given to farm at Martial Cottle Park and encourages his employees to take time to answer questions posed by visitors, such as queries about educational displays including the owl boxes above. The top half of the aerial photo, left, shows the population density around the property in 1948, while the bottom half shows the density as of 2010.

Photo courtesy of John Falkowski