



The Hoffman Farm

2125 Silverado Trail
Napa, California 94558

Text and Photographs by

Leslie Erickson, Business Manager

Napa County Landmarks, Inc.

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Napa County Landmarks, Inc.

NOMINATION FOR 2004 AWARD OF MERIT

Architectural Project: **Preserving and Protecting a Natural Landscape & Habitat**

Architectural
Criteria (circle one):

4. Cultural landscapes. The study, preservation or restoration of a natural or man-made landscape environment having particular historical significance, whether through its integral contribution to the context of a qualified property or district, or in its own right.

Project: **The Hoffman Farm**
Address: **2125 Silverado Trail, Napa, CA 94558**
Owner: **John and Margaret Hoffman**
Contact Telephone: **226.8938**
Architect/Designer: **John Hoffman**
Builder:
Purchase Date: **1949**
Project Completion Date: **Ongoing**

I'm not sure exactly what category John Hoffman fits into but he epitomizes the earth tender. In 1949, John and his wife, Margaret, bought the twenty some acre "farm" on Silverado Trail. John treated the land as if it were his sacred gift: studying what trees to plant; finding a wonderful diverse group of fruit trees to plant in the open fields; nurturing the soil but also believing in the natural cycle of things; letting nature take its course. For more than 50 years, John with his wife, Margaret, by his side, has lovingly tended this piece of land that now remains as one of the last farms open to the public.

Over the years, several generations have come to the Hoffman Farm to pick apples and pears and other assorted fruits. The children of our Valley have learned first hand what it is to see the bounty of nature; to be part of the circle of the food chain.

John has taken every opportunity to utilize his working organic farm to teach. An active member of the Master Gardener's program, he has also put together his years of experience and learning into a book on trees in the Napa Valley. He is one of our community treasures who has worked to protect our land and to give the rich resources we hold the respect and care they are due. For this lifetime commitment, I would like to nominate our own John like Mr. Muir before him.

Submitted by: **Judith Butler Lacy - Feb. 20, 2004**
Daytime telephone: **265.6718**
Address: **P.O. Box 4331 Napa, CA 94558**



The 23-acre Hoffman Farm is perhaps the last non-grape producing agricultural concern of what was in 1851 the 6,652-acre Juan Antonio Vallejo rancho. Through the years, the land subdivided and was owned by many whose names recall Napa's pioneer history, such as George Grisgby (1857) and Felix Borreo (1875). Located on Silverado Trail several hundred yards north of Trancas Street, the farm today stretches west to the Napa River.

John and Margaret Hoffman bought the spread from Paul and Frank Rossi in 1949 and raised their four children there on farm-fresh eggs and goats' milk. Except for their current home, which the Hoffmans built in 1982, the original house and farm buildings today remain much as they were constructed in the 1880s (most likely by Borreo, who arrived in the 1860s and operated a grocery concern out of the 1887 stone building still standing on the northwest corner of Soscol and Third streets in Napa).

In 1949, 17 acres were in prunes; one acre in cherries; one acre in Bartlett pears, and some in wheat. The Hoffmans soon gave up wheat, put in vegetables and produced loose hay for their own livestock.

But while farming was their passion, it wasn't always a sufficient living, and John went to work at Mare Island Naval Shipyard for a time. An arborist, John later went to work as a landscape specialist for the City of South San Francisco in 1966, and the farm became a working weekend getaway. The crops were tended by others but always under John and Margaret's supervision.



Working the Farm in 1951-2

Clockwise from top left: Oldest children Walt and Marian Hoffman ride on a stack of empty pear lugs, while second daughter, Helen, helped tend the vegetable stand at the side of the circa 1880s farmhouse. John Hoffman (left) and hired hand John Traverso work the prunes.

The Hoffmans marketed their prunes through Sunsweet, but when that company shutdown its Napa operations in the 1970s, the Hoffmans replanted most of their orchards with an English walnut variety known as Hartley, which was first developed on the Hartley Ranch on Napa's Big Ranch Road.

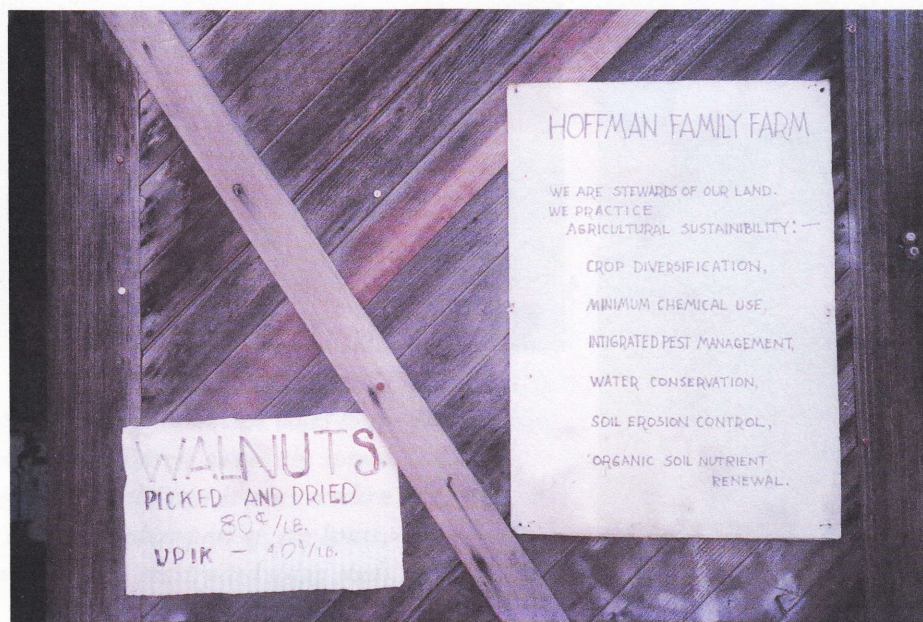
The Hoffmans retired fulltime to their property in 1981 and the wholesale operation became a retail concern, with much of the farm's produce sold direct to the public from roadside stands. The Hoffmans were integral in forming Napa County Farming Trails, Inc., and it was with regret at waning interest by other farmers that John moved to dissolve the corporation in 2003.



Margaret was once known as “the mum mom” as she marketed her chrysanthemums. Today, the commercial vegetable garden and the chrysanthemums are gone but Margaret still cans and exhibits at local fairs. The ribbons on display in the retail produce stand are but a few that she has won over the years.

The Hoffman children were once active in 4-H.

Today, that livestock is gone but Margaret still keeps five laying hens.



The public is welcome to pick pears, prunes and apples in August, and walnuts in October.

Pickings are weighed at the shed a stone's throw from the barn.

The Hoffmans don't follow the State of California's program to be certified organic, although minimal chemical use and a dependency on dry farming techniques render their crops as close to nature as it gets.

In days gone by, the Hoffmans led 4-H groups and some still visit now to look at John's bonsai. Today, this master gardener brings out other master gardeners for training on planting and pruning fruit trees. His *Trees of the Napa Valley* was published in 2002 by the University of California Cooperative Extension, Napa County Master Gardeners, and is available through local bookstores.



The public is welcome to pick pears, prunes and apples in August, and walnuts in October. Pickings are weighed at the shed a stone's throw from the barn, which today houses the 1955 Caterpillar tractor youngest son Andy Hoffman uses to till the orchards.

The alluvial soil is mostly clay loam and is excellent for the dry farming that the Hoffmans practice, despite putting in a 350-foot well some years ago.



The original redwood farmhouse dates to the 1880s when Felix Borreo owned the spread.

The addition at the rear is more modern and, unlike the older part of the house, was actually constructed using studs.



Look around and the 19th century is still very much in evidence. Most everything is of unpainted redwood, including the still functioning outhouse. The 1880s house was constructed without studs: vertical standing 1" x 12" redwood planks served as the underpinnings. John has replaced with concrete the rubble and brick foundations of the old house and barn, but the buildings otherwise retain their original appearance. Antiquated farm machinery of a vintage older than the Hoffmans' 55-year tenancy dots the farmyard, lending nostalgic ambience to the place.



*A view of the farmyard from the main track looking east.
The shed where the prunes were heaped to sweat is on the left.
The utility shed where the Hoffmans slept weekends while working the farm is on the right.*

Down the lane from the house and past the retail shed and barn are other 1880s farm buildings, including the shed where the Hoffmans once bunked on working weekends and the shed opposite that served for prune storage during that part of cultivation known as “sweating.” Further down the lane, the kiln-like structure, where prunes were soaked in lye baths before being laid out on the orchard floor to sun dry, still stands.

Abundant roses and persimmon, pomegranate, quince and other fruit trees (there’s even a jujube standing sentinel over the outhouse) shade this oasis. A legacy for their nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren, the Hoffman Farm is truly a treasure the community should cherish for years to come.

- Leslie Erickson - April 27, 2004

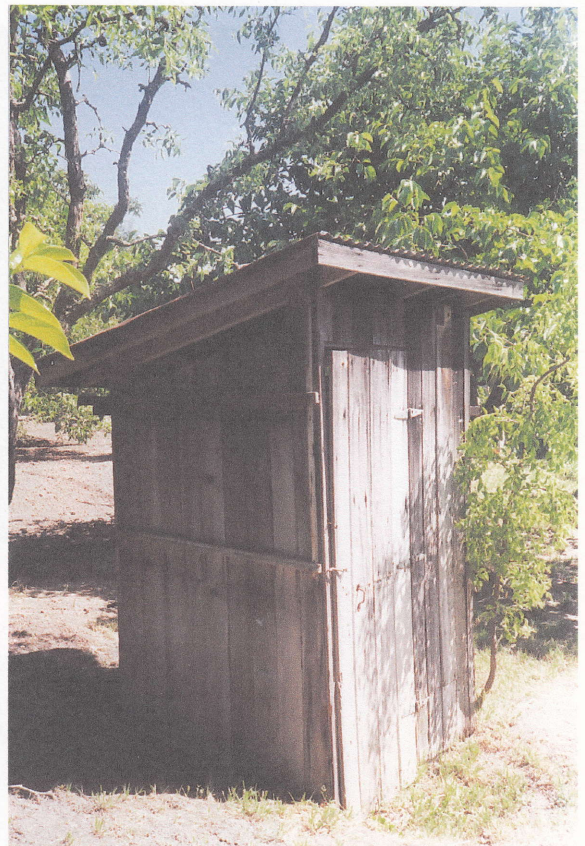


John Hoffman stands in front of the circa 1880s shed which housed his prunes as they “sweated.” A look at the foundation (below) of the same building is visual evidence that 19th century farmers didn’t always put a permanent foundation under their structures. During the Hoffmans’ 55-year stewardship of the land, they did replace similar supports under the barn and farmhouse with new concrete foundations.





Clockwise from top left: The weathered redwood farm structures are pretty in spring under the shade of various fruit and nut trees. Thompson Seedless grapes run along an arbor at the rear of the barn (above). Elsewhere on the 23 acres, blackberry patches, both cultivated and wild, abound. The barn floor was only dirt when riding horses boarded there. Today, the concrete-floored barn houses the 1955 Caterpillar tractor that youngest son, Andy, uses to till the orchards. A jujube tree, akin to a Chinese date palm, shades the outhouse (below), which still functions today for those visitors harvesting their own pickings in summer and fall. Once lugs of prunes were dipped in lye baths in the kiln-like structure (below left) before being spread on the ground to sun dry.





Margaret and John Hoffman

*The John Deere tractor was a fitting foil for recent Christmas greetings (above).
The couple stands before a beautiful English walnut on April 27, 2004.*



Stewards of the Land

In 1851, Juan Antonio Vallejo owned a 6,652-acre spread in the Napa Valley. The land was subdivided many times over the ensuing century. Today, the Hoffmans' 23 acres may well be the last non-vineyard working farm of this one vast agricultural tract. The Hoffmans see themselves as stewards of the land. John and eldest daughter, Marian, compiled *A Deed of Trust: A History of the Hoffman Farm* in 1991. Marian researched title back to the rancho days:

1851: Juan Antonio Vallejo
1853: Martin Fiscus
1854: Justus Struver
1855: Francis Schultz
1856: Charles W. Plass
1856: William Seawell
1857: George Grigsby
1858: George W. Crowey
1875: Felix Borreo
1883: George and Michael Bernhard
1929: Paul and Frank Rossi
1949: John and Margaret Hoffman

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Napa County Landmarks was founded in 1974 to
Promote preservation and community appreciation of irreplaceable historic buildings and sites in Napa County;
Provide community educational programs, public policy advocacy and direct technical services;
Protect a living record of the past for future generations.

Dottie Nettle, a former colleague of John Hoffman's, did the front cover illustration many years ago.
It shows a water tower that has since blown down. The Hoffmans possess the original line art.