

JOHN MUIR HANNA

Biography

FAMILY

John Muir Hanna was born on March 15, 1909 in Oakland to Wanda Muir and Thomas Rae Hanna. He was the second child of six. His older brother was Strent (Strentzel) who was born in 1907. His younger siblings were Richard, Robert, Jean, and Ross. His grandfather was the naturalist and preservationist John Muir and his grandmother was Louie Strentzel Muir whose parents had settled in Martinez in 1853.

John's mother, Annie Wanda Muir, was the elder daughter of John Muir and Louie Strentzel. She and her sister, Helen, were home schooled. Helen was not a healthy child and Wanda helped care for her as well as her grandparents. She was determined to further her education and told her father she was going to Berkeley. John Muir was not in favor but did not forbid his daughter to go. She walked to Berkeley and enrolled in the precursor to Mills College and after completing her college prep requirements entered the Univ. of California. When she was one semester shy of graduating her sister became gravely ill so she dropped out of school to go to Arizona and help care for her. While there, she filled in for an ailing stage driver and drove a stagecoach for tourists to the Grand Canyon. On her return to Martinez she married Tom Hanna in 1906. She died of sepsis in 1943.

Tom Hanna was from a farming family near Gilroy. He met Wanda while he was an engineering student at Cal. While a student he spent his summers working in the mountains. One summer he worked for a company that was surveying the Hetch Hetchy Valley for the city of San Francisco. He also spent at least one summer monitoring grazing permits on National Forest land on the east side of Yosemite. After marriage he helped manage the Strentzel-Muir farm as well as engage in several entrepreneurial endeavors, including owning a gold mine near Bodie. He spent many months a year for several years in the eastern Sierra. He is credited with discovering the Paiute trout and there is a mountain named after him to the west of Bridgeport. After his wife's death he appointed John as executor of the family estate and went to Alaska to work for the Army Corp of Engineers. He died in 1948.

John and his older brother Strent spent several summers traveling by horseback before they were teenagers. While teenagers their temperaments grew apart and they were mildly estranged during middle age but reconciled well before Strent's death in the early 70's. Dick was always taking the opposite side in a

discussion and thus became a lawyer. He moved to Nevada, became a District Attorney and later a judge. He retired to Montana where he died in the mid 90's. Robert was an aviator (I think) in WWII and sold insurance for a living. He died of heart failure at age 45 (1957). Jean moved to Carson City with her three children after her divorce. She became executive secretary to the governor of Nevada and died of cancer about 1980. Ross was the musician in the family and John gave him a saddle so he could trade it for a new trumpet. He was in the navy in WWII and graduated from UOP. He was a partner in a slaughter house in Dixon and John used to sell him the cattle he raised. Ross and his wife still reside in Dixon.

EARLY EXPERIENCES

Shortly after his birth John had to share his mother's breast. Wanda's cousin who also lived in Martinez had given birth to twins. She became sick and had passed the illness to her infants. The doctor sent a nurse to take the twins to Wanda for her to nurse. All survived but John said that is why he was the shortest of his siblings.

John lived with his family in the Martinez Adobe near the Strentzel/Muir house until the spring of 1915, shortly after Muir's death. He remembers little about Muir other than he liked children and always had candy in his pockets. The adobe is now part of the John Muir National Historic Site and John was consulted by the National Park Service during its restoration. In the early 1970's he planted the vineyard which is currently on the site.

After Muir's death the family moved to Crockett where Tom Hanna was developing a housing project. John went to grammar school there and recounts an incident when a delivery truck's brakes failed. He was delivering a payroll for the sugar mill by horseback and standing near the curb holding the reins. The horse shied and threw him to the ground right in front of the truck. The truck straddled him but he received a bad cut to the head. Bystanders took him to the nearest establishment, a bar, and laid him on the table while others went for his mother and a doctor. Wanda arrived just before the doctor and the bystanders wouldn't let her in because she was a woman. She said "That's my child in there!" and physically cleared her own path to the table. A few stitches and a dressing and John was as good as new.

John had a lifelong fascination with and love of horses. He watched his father and hired hands training horses from the time he was a toddler. When he was three he stayed behind after his father had finished working with an as yet unbroken wild stallion, climbed the corral fence, and climbed on the horse when it came near. His mother came looking for him when he didn't return with his

father and was afraid to take any decisive action because it might spook the horse. The horse was being quite calm so she told John to guide it over to the fence and get off. The minute he was clear of the horse she grabbed him by the collar with one hand and spanked him with the other. He had his own horse by the time he was five and kept riding a good part of his life.

The family journeyed to Yosemite in 1916. Tom and Wanda were in a wagon with Richard and Bob while John and Strent rode bareback. They passed over Tioga Pass and down into the Mono Basin. They turned north, passed through Bridgeport then came back home via Sonora Pass. The very next year, when John was 8 and Strent was 10, they and a foster brother who was 14 rode (bareback) with pack horses from Martinez to Yosemite and Tuolumne Meadows where they spent the summer. Tom and Wanda joined them for two weeks after driving up by car. The next year they repeated the trip.

In 1919 they decided to do something different. The three boys rode from Martinez north along the foothills of the Sierra to Klamath Falls, Oregon. They returned using a more coastal route and passed through Napa on the way to the Benicia ferry.

Tom and Wanda moved the family back to Martinez in time for John to attend high school there. During this time he helped cultivate the orchards and vineyards using teams of horses. He had the contract to prepare the high school football field for use (disc it up and harrow and drag it smooth) using his team. He also got a contract to grade driveway approaches to a new county road. Sulfuring grapevines to prevent mildew was done by shaking a burlap sack with finely ground sulfur over the vines in the early morning. John improved on this by tying a bag to each end of a pole and riding through the vines, thus doing two vines at a time. He says the first time he did this the teachers were distraught when they saw his eyes tearing. He explained he had sulfured that morning and the sun was reacting with the sulfur making his eyes water.

At this time the family also had several milk cows. At milking time they would send the dog Hector to herd the cattle down. One time Hector brought the cows down but one was missing. John told Hector to go back and get the wayward cow. The next thing he heard a bawling and barking and saw a cloud of dust. Hector was running at the cow from the side and grabbing hold of the tail with his mouth. The momentum carried him to the other side and clear of the wildly kicking feet of the cow. Thereafter, that cow was the first back into the barn.

John used the money he earned to buy beef cattle. He gradually built up a sizable herd which he hoped would finance his college education. After graduation from high school he was accepted at Stanford University. He did well academically but missed the horses so he joined an ROTC cavalry unit on campus. When the officer found out how well he could ride he was immediately drafted onto the polo team. When the depression hit the value of his cattle was not enough to pay his expenses so after one year he dropped out.

YOUNG ADULT

Tom Hanna had bought the May Lundy Mine to the northwest of Mono Lake at the end of 1919. John spent part of his high school summers up there helping his father do assay work. His father had bought the mine on speculation, hoping to sell it to a large mining company. The depression put an end to that so the family decided to build a new mill and reprocess tailings to pay the taxes until they could sell the mine.

John decided to find work near a college so he could continue his education. He moved to Oregon and worked on a state highway near Florence then got a job helping to build the Columbia River jetty. The contractor on both jobs was a friend of his father's. After two years of working he had saved enough to enter Oregon State. There he continued to play polo and earned money cutting hair and washing dishes in a fraternity house. He became a partner with two of the members in a riding academy but after two years again had to drop out.

He returned to California and went to Lundy to work with his father. He worked at least a couple of seasons (April-October) there. One year he stayed on into November trying to keep things operating longer. He grew lonesome prior to Thanksgiving so shuttered the cabin and got a ride out to the highway. He caught the "stage" which was a truck with a few added seats that made deliveries all along the way. He had hoped to get a haircut and shave (he had had neither since April) in Minden but the stage took too long and he didn't have time before the train left. He rode the Virginia&TruckeeRR from Minden to Reno and thought he would still have time for a haircut and shave in Reno but the train was indeed a "milk run", stopping at all the farms along the way to pick up and deliver milk and other freight and chat with the families. The shops were closed so he just called home to tell them he was arriving the next morning and to send someone to pick him up. He waited around the station awhile then walked into the parking lot in time to see his brother Richard about to leave. He shouted and got his attention. His brother swore in amazement and hardly believed it was him. When he walked in the door his mother dropped what she was doing, stared at him, and said, "Son, I never thought I'd live long enough to see a son that looks as old as you!"

He later obtained part time work at the Union Oil refinery nearby and then landed a permanent job at the American Smelting & Refining Co. plant at Selby in 1938. He started working in the warehouse but in a short time got the job of purchasing agent, the job he retained until his retirement in 1972. His retirement coincided with the closing of the Selby plant and he managed the sale of all the assets.

MIDDLE YEARS

Once he had a job he could contemplate marriage. Brother Ross was playing in a dance band and invited John to get a date and attend. He asked his brothers for suggestions and one said he knew a gal nearby. He called her and she said she'd be happy to go with him but had a friend visiting from Stockton. John said he'd take them both. The friend was Virginia Young and he was smitten. The old saddle turned Ross into a matchmaker. In the summer of 1938 John was at Lundy with his father. His sister Jean was to be married in Yosemite so Virginia came to Lundy with his brother Richard. When she got there Saturday afternoon, John and his dad were talking with the regional Catholic priest, Father MacInness. He asked John and Virginia if they wanted to go to the dance in Bodie that night and if so, he would take them. They went and forever talked of the wild ride through the sagebrush and on the narrow bumpy road. John and Virginia were married in August 1939 in Stockton.

Virginia graduated from the College of the Pacific in Stockton in 1934 and had been teaching in Stockton. The newlyweds honeymooned up the coast and visited many of John's friends in Oregon and Washington and then settled in Berkeley. She couldn't find a teaching job so took a job in the accounting department of Capwells. After their son Bill was born in 1945 they moved to a rental house in Albany, CA.

The love of farming was too strong in John and so in November 1950 John and family moved to a 100 acre ranch just north of Napa. It took a while for city raised Virginia to adapt to rural life but she grew to love the solitude and beauty. She never forgot their anniversary in 1951 as she and Bill spent most of the day rounding up some of the cattle that had broken through the fence. That September she started work as a teacher, Bill started first grade, and her mother came to Napa to look after Bill.

John worked 5 ½ days a week at Selby and only received 2 weeks vacation. He spent all weekends working the ranch, tending the cattle, vineyards, and prune orchard. His vacation was spent harvesting the prunes and grapes. In 1953 he turned the vineyard into pasture and added more cattle. He became a

member of the county Farm Bureau in about 1952 and remained a director until his early 80's. He also became a director of the cooperative farm supply and stayed for 40 years. He was selected by Gov Reagan to be a director of the 25th Agricultural District and served as its President for several years.

While he was a director of Farm Bureau he helped shape the way Napa Valley is today. He was a member of the committee that drafted the Agland Preservation Ordinance which, when passed by the Board of Supervisors, established the Agricultural Preserve. He remained active on the Farm Bureau Land Use Committee which helped the county establish the Winery Definition Ordinance which sought to limit the activities of wineries that were within the Ag Preserve. He was also on the formative committee and one of the first directors of the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association.

During the decade of the 50's, John began teaching Bill about farming and even managed a few brief camping trips to the mountains. He taught Bill to ride horses, raise cattle, chickens and ducks, and of course, how to drive. First it was an old model T truck, then a 1947 Fordson tractor, then a 1949 Chevy pick-up. In the late 50's John started getting three weeks of vacation so he and Virginia could take a week by themselves. They decided to sell the pasture land in 1960 but kept the house, barns and 10 acre prune orchard. By 1961 Bill had a driver's license and could drive the flatbed truck to the dehydrator so John didn't have to spend two weeks with the harvest. From that time on he always took vacation time with the family.

In 1969 John decided that prunes were getting less viable and decided to plant grapes. He pulled ½ the orchard in 1969 and planted grapes in 1970. He pulled the remaining orchard the same year and finished planting vines in 1971. He did much of the work himself, including driving all the stakes. He chose to graft the rootstock to chardonnay on the recommendation of Mike Grgich. His first crop was in 1972 and he sold it to Chateau Montelena where Mike was the winemaker. It was their first harvest and John's grapes were the first in and received the traditional blessing. His harvest was a little bigger in 1973 and again was the first into the winery and was again blessed. In 1976 the world was shocked to learn that French judges had chosen the Chateau Montelena 1973 vintage the best of the chardonnay wines they tasted. His grapes have been an integral part of Chateau Montelena's Chardonnay ever since.

In 1972, just as John was retiring from the smelter, Bill and his wife Claudia decided to buy 25 acres of nearby property so they too could raise grapes. At the time Bill was in the Air Force stationed in Sacramento. John said he would help farm it so Bill could stay on active duty until the vineyard was mature

enough to provide a livelihood. They harvested the prunes on Bill and Claudia's property then pulled the trees and planted vines in 1973. In 1974 he began operating 10 acres next to Bill and Claudia's property for an absentee owner, Frank Takahashi. In 1975 he partnered with a friend to establish a 13 acre vineyard but had the friend operate it. In late 1975, Frank bought 40 acres across the road from John's and asked him to run it. It contained 20 acres of producing vineyard and 20 acres of bare land. John planted 10 acres of new vineyard in 1976 and started farming the remainder. When Bill and Claudia and their children returned to Napa in 1977, the "retired" John was farming nearly 80 acres of grapes!

John continued actively farming with Bill until about 1990. He and Virginia had already started taking more and longer trips with their RV. He and Virginia were active members of SIRS (Sons in Retirement) and took many trips with the RV group. He was always around for harvest and last hauled grapes to the winery (Chateau Montelena) in 1994 at the age of 83. In 1996 they took their longest and last RV trip from California to Oregon, Washington, the Dakotas, Wisconsin, down to Arkansas and to Texas to visit long lost family. From Texas they returned to California following the route his great grandparents had taken in 1849.

John and Virginia's granddaughter, Kristin, was married in 1998 in the presence of all eight grandparents. Virginia died in February of 1999 and when grandson Michael left active duty in the Navy in May, he returned and lived with John. His memory and strength began declining more rapidly after Virginia's death and he finally turned in his driver's license in 2002. Michael married Leonora Particelli in July 2003 and they continued to live with John until May 2004 when he came to live with Bill and Claudia. He moved to Choctaw House in June 2006 so he could have 24 hour care. He died in his sleep on December 1, 2007.

EPILOGUE

John loved to tell the stories of his experiences. Since he had done so many things he had a wealth of stories. As his memory faded the stories related to the events farther and farther back in time. The last stories he tried to tell were about Lundy and his visit there with his parents in 1916.