

**DRAFT**

**Capitola Road Robert Merriman History  
Early “Ranch-Home” Subdivisions**

L. Wilshusen & Norman Poitevin, 9/24/20

**FULL VERSION**

“Ranch-home” subdivisions of the 1920’s fundamentally changed the nature of urban residential development in Live Oak.

Aimed toward farmers in the Central Valley, mid-West, and even Europe, local Santa Cruz realtors hit on a winning formula with Wilson Bros. Tract Nos. 1–6. Inspired by similar early residential subdivisions in the area, Wilson Bros. purchased large, formerly productive wheat and corn farms, subdivided them into mostly 1-2 acre parcels, and sold the land for between \$400 and \$750 per acre. If you wanted, they would also build you a “modern ranch home” that, unlike the suburban ‘ranch home’ design of a later era, often included a poultry barn, a water tower, and whatever other accessory buildings you might want.

Wilson Bros. widely advertised their offerings, noting that Live Oak was the “Finest Location for Chickens, Bulbs, Berries or Ranch Homes in the vicinity of Santa Cruz.”<sup>1</sup> Advertisements highlighted that the parcels were “already equipped with electricity and telephone connections, RFD mail service and city water.”<sup>2</sup>

The Merriman home was Built on Lot 3 of Wilson Bros. Tract No. 1 of 1916. This 19-parcel tract, a former hayfield, spanned the area south of Capitola Road between El Dorado on the west and 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the east.<sup>3</sup> “Eight new homes averaging in price \$6,000 each” were built in this first tract which also included a new street called Harper. While most of these original Tract 1 lots have been further subdivided, Harper Street in particular still offers a sense of Live Oak during this early subdivision period.

Between 1921 and the early 1930’s, Wilson Bros. developed five more tracts of ranch-homes and poultry barns throughout Live Oak, some which came already stocked with chickens. The local poultry business collapsed during the Depression, leaving families with land that they found they could eventually sell or develop during the California population boom that started after WWII.

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<sup>1</sup> Santa Cruz Evening News, May 28, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Santa Cruz Evening News, February 23, 1924, p.9.

This poultry ranch-home subdivision era is significant in that it set the stage for the unique nature of a large portion of Live Oak's subsequent residential development. While Arana Gulch, Rodeo Gulch, and the Monterey Bay provided the geographical backdrop for this unincorporated, urbanizing area,<sup>4</sup> residential development opportunities in the 1950's, '60's and '70's in Live Oak often meant subdividing these 1-2 acre parcels into smaller lots for houses or apartments. Also, consolidated ranch-home parcels and larger, unsubdivided farm parcels were also conveniently available for new mobile home parks. There are over 25 mobile home parks from this era in Live Oak.

Finally, the limited number of streets and roads established by early subdivisions posed difficulties for modern road network upgrades that may otherwise have been considered as the area grew and cars became the preferred transportation mode. The railroad tracks that ran through the middle of Live Oak provided access to passenger rail service until after WWII, but also limited access between the northern and southern parts of the community. And, of course, Live Oak's natural geography of gulches, lagoons, and ocean results in access limitations for everyone, then and now.<sup>5</sup>

Today, our Live Oak community reflects the diversity of how our neighborhoods and urban environment have changed over time. The site of the former Merriman home is a significant part of that history.

*Word count: 540.*

## **SHORT VERSION 1**

"Ranch-home" subdivisions of the post-World War 1 period fundamentally changed the nature of residential development in Live Oak.

The Merriman home was built on Lot 3 of the Wilson Bros. Tract No. 1 subdivision on Capitola Road and Harper Street. Wilson Bros. subdivided and sold six tracts in Live Oak between 1916 and 1932, including many that came with a modest house, water tower, and poultry barn already stocked with chickens. These 1-2 acre parcels were created from large wheat and corn fields that were no longer profitable.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilshusen, Linda. *Between the Gulches: The Twin Fates of Live Oak Cityhood and the Broadway-Brommer Road*. Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, History Journal 9, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Wilson Bros. promoted “R.F.D., phone and electricity; near...R.R. station and beach; ideal for poultry, berries, bulbs”<sup>6</sup> in their voluminous advertising during the 1920’s.

In the California population boom that followed World War II, residential development opportunities in the Live Oak Wilson Bros. tracts were generally limited to subdividing these existing 1-2 acre parcels. The variety and nature of in-fill development here is a result of this subdivision history, together with our 25+ mobile home parks built during the 1950’s – 1970’s on ranch-home parcels and unsubdivided farmland.

Today, our Live Oak community reflects the diversity of how our neighborhood environments changed over time. The site of the former Merriman home is a significant part of that history.

*Word count: 205.*

## **SHORT VERSION 2**

If you happened to live across a small field from Robert Merriman’s family in 1924, your families would probably be owners of a new kind of “ranch-home” – a modest house, a poultry barn large enough for hundreds of hens, a water tower, and free mail delivery. You may even have one of those new, popular Model T automobiles, and your neighbors might speak Swedish, Portuguese, or French, or have notable accents from New York and Michigan.

The Merriman home was built on Lot 3 of the Wilson Bros. Tract No. 1 subdivision on Capitola Road and Harper Street. Between 1916 and 1932, Wilson Bros. purchased six tracts of fallow wheat and corn farms in Live Oak, subdivided them into 1-2 acre parcels, and sold them together with a new house and chickens for the poultry barn, if you wanted.

The local poultry business collapsed during the 1930’s, but in the California population boom that followed World War 2, these 1-2 acre parcels set the course for the unique nature of Live Oak’s housing diversity.

Some property owners of the 1950’s, ‘60’s and ‘70’s further subdivided their lot into three or four homes; others built apartments and duplexes. Some lots, as well as undivided farmland, were combined and turned into affordable mobile home parks.

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<sup>6</sup> Santa Cruz Evening News, March 1, 1919, p. 1.

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*Word count: 245.*

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ATTACHMENT: Advertisement for Wilson Bros. Tract No. 1, Santa Cruz Evening News, March 1, 1919.

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**WILSON BROS.**

# Tract No. 1

**On Capitola Road and 17th  
avenue**

Acres for \$400 to \$425  
per acre, 1-3 cash, bal.  
5 yrs. 6 per cent; only  
1 block of Live Oak  
school; R. F. D., phone  
and electricity; near  
carline, R. R. station  
and beach; rich sandy  
loam soil; land gently  
rolling; ideal for poul-  
try, berries, bulbs and  
truck. No city taxes.

**Wilson Bros.**  
Real Estate, Insurance, & Loans  
126 Pac. Ave. Phone S. C. 54

## 1919-3-1 SantaCruz\_WilsonBros

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