

Audrey Bramhall, Walnut Creek Open Space Founder, at Open Space 30th anniversary celebration. (Bob Brittain photo)

## Audrey Bramhall: “The General”

*(This is the third in a series of profiles we’re running about founders of our open spaces. Here, Foundation volunteer and Outreach Committee member Karen Van Der Veer writes about founder Audrey Bramhall and her role in creating the Walnut Creek Open Space and our Foundation.)*

Although the moniker was teasingly directed at Audrey Bramhall by her long-term colleagues, “The General” accurately reflects her inspiring leadership role in establishing the Walnut Creek

Open Space and its Foundation. From her initial angst about proposed plans to develop Shell Ridge to her vital leadership during the arduous process of securing support for ballot measures to set up the Open Space Commission and bonds to pay for the land, Bramhall was a commanding influence in helping protect the Open Space.

How did she get involved? By default. Bramhall acknowledges that her Political Science major in college put community involvement “in her wheelhouse”. She noted that most women did not work in jobs outside the home 40 years ago while men were the breadwinners so there was a whole lot of additional talent and energy ready to be harnessed. Also, homeowners associations were very active all over the city, working hard to make wise long-term decisions for their community. Audrey Bramhall professes that it was, “The right time, the right place, the right circumstances [for the movement to stop development’s march right up Mt. Diablo]. I was a facilitator.” She was a leader.

*(continued on page 3)*

## What’s in Bloom

Spring is when we see wildflowers in the open space, right?

They may be most abundant in the spring, but our open spaces have wildflowers in bloom year around — you just have to know where to look.

Fall is especially rich with blooming natives. Phil Johnson, Foundation Board member and horticulturist, recently took a look in the Sutherland region of Shell Ridge and discovered 10 blooming wildflowers: Deerweed (lotus scoparius), Heermann’s tarweed (holocarpha heermannii), vinegarweed (trichostema lanceolatum), willow herb (epilobium brachycarpum), common hareleaf (lagophylla ramosissima), naked buckwheat (erigonum nudum), telegraph weed (heterotheca grandiflora), California fuschia (epilobium canum), golden aster (heterotheca sessiliflora), and milkweed (asclepias fascicularis).

*(continued on page 2)*

### Looking Back

#### Henry Cowell’s Lime & Cement Co.

*(In his volume, Ygnacio Valley 1834-1970, George Emanuels describes a conflict between the Cowell cement operation and valley farmers.)*

In February, 1908, the Henry Cowell Lime & Cement Co. started quarrying on a large scale, running steam trains full of limestone from the pits overlooking Ygnacio Valley to their kilns at the head of Cowell Road. On this three-mile narrow gauge line the company moved a score of six ton capacity bottom-dump cars with a pair of oil-fired saddle tank locomotives. Ultimately the fleet grew to 42 of the steel cars and two big, heavier more powerful engines of the same type.

Day after day steam billowed from locomotives readily seen by residents on the valley floor. They heard the trains whistle and the blasts of dynamite in the quarry. On an easterly wind, cement dust blew over the valley coating everything in its path: grape leaves, farm implements, houses; the dust even sifted in through window sash. In 1910 valley farmers threatened to sue over the nuisance, so Cowell built a huge stack to carry the dust high over the valley and dissipate it on rising air currents.

But dust still came down and still coated every living thing and the disgusted residents took legal action. On January 13, 1917, after many delays, a judge handed down the verdict: “Dust is a private nuisance, not a public evil.” From then on, valley residents had to live with the pollutant.

### Upcoming Events

#### Tuesday Volunteer Group

Every Tuesday  
Location Varies  
9 to noon

#### Sutherland/Fossil Hill Restoration

Every other Saturday  
Shell Ridge  
July 26–November 1  
9 to noon

## Your Letters

We love hearing from our readers. If you have comments on our stories, or questions about the Open Space and the Foundation, write to us at P.O. Box 309, Walnut Creek, 94597, or by email: [contact@wcosf.org](mailto:contact@wcosf.org).

### Lauds Jasperson Story

Editor: "When I showed up in Walnut Creek in 1986, Bob Jasperson was at any number of meetings I attended. I never knew too much about him other than he was very nice, polite, humble and I'd even say a meek man. I knew he had a role in Mineral King but not a whole lot more. So thanks for remembering him for us [Summer 2014 newsletter]. Brought a tear to my eye."

**Stephen Barbata**, Executive Director of The Lindsay Museum, 1986-1994



Vinegarweed (*trichostema lanceolatum*)



California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*)



Heermann's Tarweed (*Holocarpa heermannii*)

(*"What's in Bloom"* continued from page 1)

Let's take a closer look at three:

### Vinegarweed

(*trichostema lanceolatum*)

This annual herb of the mint family is commonly known as vinegarweed because its foliage contains volatile oils that have a strong vinegar odor. Other common names for the plant include turpentine weed and camphor weed.

Vinegar weed is a wildflower, 4-5 inches high, bearing striking purple-blue flowers on short green stems. The numerous leaves are juicy and green and are covered in fluffy hairs. The plant is well adapted to its native range in California, where it thrives in dry, nutrient-poor, sun-baked clay soil. In hot weather the vinegar smell of the plant becomes intense as the oils in the tissues permeate the air. It's resistant to deer.

### California fuchsia

(*Epilobium canum*, formerly called *zauschneria*),

*Epilobium canum*, also known as California fuchsia or *Zauschneria*, is a species of willow herb in the evening primrose family. It is native to dry slopes and in chaparral of western North America, especially California — and easy to spot in our open spaces.

*Epilobium* produces brilliant scarlet flowers "rising out of straggly clumps of narrow grey green leaves," notes

the San Francisco Botanical Garden website. "After five or more months without rain, their arrival on the landscape reaffirms the resilience of nature in our Mediterranean climate." The plant isn't pollinated by bees, who can't climb into its narrow trumpet-shaped flowers. That task is left to hummingbirds.

### Heermann's tarweed

(*Holocarpa heermannii*)

Heermann's tarweed grows in the hills, mountains, and valleys of the central and southern part of California. It is most common in the inner coast ranges, in the eastern San Francisco Bay Area, the southern Sierra Nevada foothills, and the Tehachapi mountains.

The plant, growing upwards of 2-3 feet, produces a sticky resin that helps protect it from harsh conditions. The resin gives the plant a fragrant scent, pleasing or displeasing, depending on who's smelling it. One naturalist/blogger describes it as "very sage-like, with a slight hot-asphalt edge, and a power and pungency..."

(*Heermann's tarweed is named in tribute to the 1850s naturalist Adolphus "Dolly" Heermann, of New Orleans, who made multiple collecting trips to California and who tragically shot himself at the age of 44 while cleaning his rifle.*)

—David Ogden

(Sources: *iNaturalist.org*, *Nature of a Man blog*, *Wikipedia*, *davesgarden.com*, *San Francisco Botanical Garden*.)  
Photos, David Ogden

*(“Audrey Bramhall” continued from page 1)*

**“Disneyland of the North”**

It started in 1969-1970 when the Walnut Heights Homeowners learned about developers’ intentions to level 200 acres of Shell Ridge into housing subdivisions as well as create a year-round “Disneyland of the North” complete with ski slopes. Seriously! As Bramhall pointed out, there was no water, sewer or police service, plus four school district boundaries converged on the land. These plans would open up the whole open area to development. Where would it end? There was tremendous urban pressure, especially with BART’s construction. How did they reverse this trend?

Audrey Bramhall believes that people unified through consensus-building; no one group took it over as they recognized and pursued their common interests. Her colleagues, Jo Ann Hanna and Tom Dunne, however, contend that “...she was the most important factor” in gaining support for the critical bond issues that established the Open Space and funded the land purchases.

After organizing two successful referenda for the property, Bramhall and friends had two years to find the money and buy the land. Quintessential negotiator, she managed to unite groups as diverse as the East Bay Municipal Utility District, Contra Costa County, the City of Walnut Creek, the regional, county, and state park systems, Girl and Boy Scouts, myriad homeowners associations, the AAUW, plus the Board of Realtors and more. “We’d talk to any three people who would

get together,” she confessed. This meant literally hundreds of meetings, thousands of hours.

**Led Charge for Ballot Measure**

By sharing her vision for how the proposed open space would enhance Walnut Creek’s unique identity and lifestyle, Bramhall and Jim Hazard (before he was elected to the city council) led the charge to gather needed signatures to get referenda on the ballot. They helped convince city leaders to change the Master Plan in which orchards would transition to subdivisions. Then they continued their outreach to the public to secure the funding needed to safeguard the land in perpetuity.

By leading the action committee through the rigorous first days and subsequent complex negotiations, Audrey Bramhall rallied the troops to understand and petition for what was needed to protect the Open Space. She had the skills, interest, and vision to fight the war on many fronts and the grace to recognize her good fortune in being able to work with such quality people. “It’s her nature. She cares about her city,” proclaim her close colleagues.

We are beneficiaries of her passion and leadership.

— Karen Van Der Veer

*(Editor’s note: A long stone’s throw from the Sutherland Gate in Shell Ridge, you’ll find Bramhall Pond and Bramhall Trail, named in honor of our profilee.)*



Outreach Committee Chair Katrina Nagle welcomes visitors to booth at Walnut Creek Centennial celebration in October.

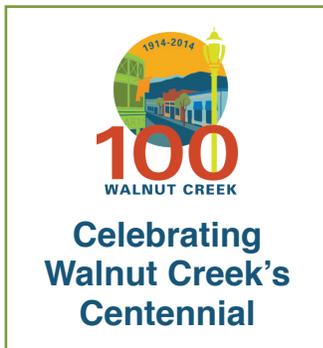
**Our Busy Outreach Committee**

It’s been a busy fall season for the WCOSF Outreach Committee. We’ve been spreading the word about all of the things we love about the Foundation and trying to encourage more membership and support. Our fall outreach schedule brought us to the Master Gardener’s Sustainability Fair in September, Walnut Creek’s Centennial Birthday celebration, and Howe Homestead Harvest Festival both in October. We’ve been presenting displays of the various projects done by the Foundation over the years and educating people about important native plants such as the milkweed.

**Seed Balls a Big Hit**

The biggest hit so far has been our seed ball making activity that was available at both the Centennial and the Harvest Festival. Kids found it especially fun to help us mold small balls of native plant seeds, soil, and clay which we will use to help with our restoration efforts in the open space.

Next time you’re at an event, keep an eye open for us, and let us know if you’re ever available to help. The Outreach Committee is always looking for members and new ways to engage the community. Contact [Katrina at ktrinan@wcosf.org](mailto:Katrina@ktrinan@wcosf.org) if you are interested or have an idea to share.





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**Yes, I want to help protect and preserve Walnut Creek's Open Spaces.**

We invite you to join the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation. Memberships and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. There are numerous areas where you can help. Interested? Drop us an email at [volunteer@wcosf.org](mailto:volunteer@wcosf.org), visit our website at [www.wcosf.org](http://www.wcosf.org), or fill out the form below and mail it to WCOSF, Box 309, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0309.

**I would like to join the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ CITY \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL (WE NEVER SHARE) \_\_\_\_\_

PATRON—\$500  BENEFACTOR—\$250  SUSTAINING—\$100  SPONSOR—\$50  FAMILY—\$40,  INDIVIDUAL—\$25

**I WOULD LIKE TO VOLUNTEER TO:**  MAINTAIN OAKS  PLANT NATIVES  CREATE WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

**Membership  
Renewal Time**

As a Foundation member, you will soon receive a request to renew your membership. Your donations help accomplish the work that you have read about in this year's newsletters. The Foundation's membership year runs from November to October. Our members send us generous contributions throughout the year.

You may have renewed your membership in the past few months but you will still receive a request for renewal. If you've renewed recently, please disregard the request.



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