

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Eucalyptus Trees

One of the thousands of immigrants to California during the Gold Rush was the eucalyptus. No one is quite sure exactly when it arrived or who brought it—obviously someone from its native Australia. The first successful known growth at a nursery was by the Golden Gate Nursery in San Francisco, where W.C. Walker planted seeds from several species in 1853. Twenty years later, the tree was a common sight in the state, having easily adapted to our Mediterranean-type climate.

California forestry experts hoped to replace the redwoods and oaks that were lost to early construction and firewood needs with the eucalyptus, a fast-growing tree. Railroad men hoped to use the wood for ties. These uses were tried, without early success. The tree holds a great deal of water, and if its timber is used green and not allowed to dry, it will twist and split. If allowed to dry, the wood becomes so hard that it is almost impossible to put a nail through it.

There are more than 700 species of eucalyptus trees. "Eucalyptus" means "well-covered," referring to the woody fruit which has a button-like cover which pops off when the seeds are ripe. The largest and earliest planted in our area is the blue gum, *Eucalyptus globulus*, with its light, peeling bark, its tall height, and, in old trees, its wide trunk. Eucalyptus trees are evergreen, and their leaves have a distinctive pungent herbal odor. In Australia they are called gum trees like the tree on which the kookaburra sits in the old campfire song. When the bark is wounded, the tree's sap (gum) bleeds at the wound. This particular species is called "blue" because the young oval-shaped leaves have a powdery blue back. The dark green older leaves are sickle-shaped.

Whenever you see the tree in the local countryside, it usually serves as a marker for old build-

ing sites. At their two homes built in the 1800s near the end of North Livermore Avenue, the Weymouth brothers put up fences, making a yard that protected their houses and out-buildings from their cattle, and they planted blue gums around the perimeter of the yard. The trees served as windbreaks in the flat valley with its strong winds from the north and west and also probably were planted because people believed that their odor and oil were medicinal. One of the Weymouth properties has 22 eucalyptus trees (counting a few stumps), and the other 31. Many other local ranches and farms have several of the towering trees near their homes.

In the Bay Area, there are large areas of eucalyptus trees, especially in Berkeley and the Oakland hills. Unfortunately, they burn easily and were a major problem in the October 1991 Oakland hills fire. In Livermore the trees were not planted in such dense clusters. *Croft's 1880 New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide* described the town of Livermore and mentioned: "Here are particularly noticeable the eucalyptus or Australian blue gum tree." The first owner of the *Livermore Herald* was interested in planting trees in the city and in the countryside. Some time between 1878 and 1890, he had hundreds of black locust trees planted along city streets and along country roads; he chose this tree because of its ability to survive without irrigation. The locust trees still lining North Livermore Avenue north of I-580 are the best remaining examples of his work. Recognizing the growing scarcity of firewood, he also had flats of 100 blue gum seedlings delivered to the *Herald* office and offered the seedlings to ranchers.

We know that the Livermore Grammar School on Fifth Street had eucalyptus trees planted

around it because in 1926 they were removed in order to put in sidewalks. Last week I enjoyed a eucalyptus treasure hunt, looking for the old blue gum trees surviving in Livermore. One area still having a grove of eucalyptus is the city park in the housing area called The Grove on Sonia Street. This property once belonged to the Coast Manufacturing and Supply Co. The Livermore Heritage Guild had a dig there before the park was created and found a number of artifacts from the Chinese workers that had once lived in the grove.

Despite its name, old Oak Knoll Cemetery, now the daffodil hill near Granada High, has eucalyptus, not oak trees planted on its peak. Another group of eucalyptus stretches from behind Oak Knoll north and west along the Arroyo Mocho. A city trail follows its path, ending at Isabel Avenue, although the trees continue west of the city line to El Charro Road. In the city Summer Tree Drive and Daisyfield Drive circle part of the area. Roselawn Cemetery has a row of eucalyptus lining its southern edge. Hagemann Farm has a number of blue gum trees scattered on the existing farm and in the adjoining park. A row of eucalyptus crosses the intersection of Olivina Avenue and Murrieta Boulevard, perhaps planted by the Hagemanns; local residents fought to save them. LARPD maintains Big Trees Park near the Lab on Susan Lane; it has a long double row of blue gums.

Today, very few people in Livermore plant blue gum trees. Full grown, they are very messy, dropping branches and shreds of bark. If you have time, I recommend a short drive on Sonia Street to see the well-groomed park with its striking eucalyptus trees.

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