

## **The Two Trees of Ventura**

Along the Southern California coast, Two Trees stand as guardians of the city of Ventura and the neighboring cities that lay below it. These trees are one of the many iconic landmarks for residents and visitors to the area, as they can be seen standing proudly atop the Ventura mountain range. Dating back to the 19th century, the Two Trees have witnessed over a century's worth of growth for the surrounding county, including the physical spread and development of the County of Ventura and the people who have also spread their roots into the fertile soil of this agricultural area. Two Trees is actually a group of seventeen Blue Gum eucalyptus trees that have been replanted to uphold the legacy of the landmarks. Spanning the last two centuries, these seventeen trees have seen the region grow on a daily basis. Much of Ventura's history and current residents are predominantly white, but the Two Trees have witnessed the stories of the diverse marginalized communities who live under its gaze. The Two Trees serve as a visual reminder that anyone can call Ventura home.

### **Before the Two Trees**

The land upon which the Two Trees were planted bears a history of change, community, and resilience for the people who are indigenous to Ventura. The Chumash natives are the first human inhabitants of the Channel Islands and the Ventura and Santa Monica region. The Chumash are excellent seafarers, hunters, gatherers, and caretakers of the land (*Chumash History*, n.d.). Like other native communities along the California coast, the Chumash were colonized by Saint Junípero Serra under the Catholic Church in 1749 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2021; Morrisset & Simondi, 2015). Under Spanish rule, the Catholic Church would eventually establish 21 missions along the California coast, a process that forever changed the lives of native communities and the development of California. The establishment of the

Mission de San Buenaventura would establish the origins of the city and the county's name and lead to the eventual rise of the city that Ventura is today (Morrisset & Simondi, 2015). The Trees watched as Ventura's historical Main Street would be planned and developed around the mission. It is possible to imagine that the trees feel at home in protected hills despite the massive growth below.

Although the Chumash and their land were colonized, their legacy remains today despite the efforts of the Spanish colonizers to eradicate the native culture. The Trees are planted on the Topatopa Mountains, a bluff overlooking the County and the Pacific Ocean (see Figure 1). The name is derived from the Chumash word "topa", meaning many reeds (*Topotopa Bluff*, 2014). Although the Trees were planted decades over a century after the area was colonized, they are still connected to the sacred earth of the Chumash, which might explain the sacred significance we locals feel when looking at the Trees on the horizon. The Chumash both "feared and respected the natural world as the greatest Teacher of Knowledge..." (*Chumash History*, n.d.). The Chumash people's relationship with the earth provides a lens to learn from the Two Trees and become inspired by their symbolic history.

### **The 19th Century**

Like many families who call Ventura home, the Trees are not native to this land, but through community and care, they can adapt and become resilient. The history of Two Trees begins with a story that is similar to those of many current-day residents, as they are the product of dedication and hard work from a migrant who settled in Ventura. In 1867, Joseph Sexton moved to the area from Ohio and worked hard to establish himself as a horticulturist and member of the community (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). Sexton was one of the pioneers who helped develop the agricultural industry that still exists today, as he

introduced walnuts and avocados into the area's crops (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). In 1898, Sexton, the Father of the Two Trees, planted thirteen Blue Gum eucalyptus trees upon the Topatopa Mountains (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). Many historical records have speculated the significance of the thirteen trees. Some guess that the trees represent family, perhaps to represent Sexton's wife and twelve children or that they were planted in honor of a son who had passed away in a tragic accident, or simply, to act as a notable landmark for ships seeking the Ventura Harbor (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). Despite the uncertainty of the tree's intended purpose, they are a symbol of hard work, as the maintenance of the saplings required a long trek on a *burro* or donkey to haul water up the mountain (McAlpine, 2015). Today, the remaining trees still serve as a beacon for ships returning to the Ventura harbor to reach the California mainland.

### **The Early 20th Century**

The thirteen trees repeatedly suffered and witnessed a variety of damage throughout the years, resulting in their namesake of the iconic Two Trees. First, in 1903, wildfires destroyed eight of the thirteen trees (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). Residents then named the trees "The Five Sisters". At this time, during the early 20th century, a small neighborhood in West Ventura remained from the post-Spanish colonization era. This neighborhood was a melting pot of many people, from Chumash natives, Mexicans who fled the Mexican Revolution in the early 1910s, poor White Americans who were fleeing the Dust Bowl in the 1920s, many Asian families in the 1930s, and later a small group of African American families (Jackson, 2006). This poor neighborhood had many names: Indian Town, Spanish

Town, or the Flats (Johnson, 2013). Like the Trees, this neighborhood's name changed in response to its changing characteristics.

### ***Tortilla Flats***

The Trees were saplings that grew along with this colorful neighborhood and may have found comfort in people who were once foreigners like their father. In the 1940s, the neighborhood was finally and unofficially named "Tortilla Flats" because of the large number of low-income Mexicans living there, and also as a result of the popular 1942 film based on John Steinback's novel, *Tortilla Flats* (Johnson, 2013). Like the Trees, Tortilla Flats residents worked hard to survive and thrive amidst the difficult periods of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the World Wars, etc. The Trees sadly watched as similar to other neighborhoods across the United States (Stromberg, 2016), Tortilla Flats eventually fell victim to the automobile and the creation of the freeway. The construction of the Ventura Freeway in the 1950s tore right through the center of Tortilla Flats; many residents lost their homes due to eminent domain and were displaced to other unfamiliar neighborhoods or nearby cities (Johnson, 2013). Although the neighborhood suffered a terrible loss, the Trees likely took solace in knowing that residents made unforgettable memories in that special community.

Thanks to the work of Sexton, the Trees' father, and other agricultural pioneers, the industrial agricultural industry quickly boomed in this fertile basin between the Transverse Ranges. The Two Trees witnessed the birth of a massive industry that would soon be home to Japanese and Mexican field laborers who harvested lemons, strawberries, sugar cane, beets, spinach, etc (Barajas, 2021). Ventura began to turn from a mostly white town to a County that is home to many immigrant families, largely from Mexico.

## **The Mid-20th Century**

The preceding 75 years represent a time of rapid change for both the city and the Trees. The Trees, known during this time as the Five Sisters, kept watching over the city, until 1956 when Halloween pranksters cut down three of the five trees. The community immediately came together to plant three more trees to return the total to five. Two years later, two of the trees were cut down again (McAlpine, 2015). By this point, there were two 1898 trees and one 1956 tree remaining. In 1966, one of the 1898 trees was nearly burned down by another wildfire, leaving behind a charred stump. The name of the trees is officially registered as the Five Trees, yet the name of the Two Trees was popularized after the 1966 incident and has remained to this day. A quick Google search reveals that many local businesses have adopted this name, from restaurants to beer breweries and medical offices. This story of the Two Trees, and their adapting names, represents the intricate relationship to the land that the Chumash believe in, and how we as people feel a sense of belonging despite the rapidly changing landscape around us.

### ***Agricultural Movements in the 1960s***

The Two Trees were likely filled with pride to see the growth of the city and surrounding land as the agricultural industry transformed the local economy. One can imagine they were also likely pained to see the poor working conditions of the farmworkers who developed the land; although many could have focused on the economic prosperity during these times, the Trees are witnesses to the impacts of the agricultural industry on the people of this community. The Two Trees are a reminder that there is beauty in the struggle, as the community continues to come forward to take care of the land and its people. In the 1960s, Ventura County quickly became home to large labor organizing movements. Notable movements include Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union, which championed labor rights for farmworkers through a national boycott

campaign led by Chavez (Barajas, 2021). Ventura is also a center for community organizing to support undocumented residents to help them find resources and find community in existing immigrant spaces. Residents of Ventura County, like the Two Trees, repeatedly suffered, but through the power of collective efforts continue to create a stronger community for all.

### ***Climate Disasters in the 21st Century***

The Two Trees continued to witness massive changes, especially in the environment around them. The most notable change the Trees witnessed is the increase of wildfires, as the County of Ventura has suffered many wildfires because of significant drought and sensitive terrain. In 2017, Ventura was hit by the Thomas Fire, one of the largest and most destructive wildfires in California's history. The Thomas fire burned 281,893 acres, cost \$10 billion in damages, and burned 1,000 structures (Andone, 2018). Sadly, the Thomas Fire also burned down one of the two trees, the last of the original 1898 trees which was slowly dying (see Figure 3). As part of our community's efforts to recover from the fire, Ventura residents quickly came together to plant a Blue Gum Eucalyptus sapling in honor of the 1898 tree (*The Remarkable Tale of Two Trees – Aries Moon Adventures*, 2018). The Trees have been harmed by wildfires before, but this recent loss was a wake-up call for many residents to take care of the Earth (Martinez, 2016). Once more, the Trees serve as a reminder of the compassion that its residents have to care for each other and the entire community. Although the trees have been vandalized or harmed, the community continues to watch over the trees just like they have for us.

The Two Trees are not necessarily the original thirteen trees Sexton planted, but the collective group of seventeen trees have witnessed generations' worth of growth, families, and disasters as Ventura has grown. Throughout the 20th century, the County became home to a United States naval base (Hooper, 2021), countless schools, parks, communities, and commercial

agricultural industry, which have collectively lured many to this seaside area. Ventura is a unique area, as it is both rural and suburban. The Trees represent the contrast between undeveloped nature, developed nature, and the built environment. Perched atop the Topatopa mountains, the Trees have witnessed massive global phenomena (i.e. immigration patterns, agriculture, suburban growth, climate change) unfold in their home.

### **Blue Gum Eucalyptus**

The thirteen blue gum eucalyptus trees are a part of the eucalyptus genus and share a fascinating history due to their non-native history. *Eucalyptus globulus* Labill. is a tree that is native to Australia; about 16,000 hectares of blue gum were planted along the entire California coastline between 1856 and the 1930s (Wolf & DiTomaso, 2016). Australian settlers planted the trees because they grew quickly in California's climate, which provided both the wood needed at the beginning of the California gold rush and also served as "windbreakers" (Potter, 2018).

Eucalyptus trees today are seen as valued symbols of California's landscape, despite their foreign origins. The blue gum trees can grow to be over 100 feet long and are known for the high branches, peeling bark, and unique scent that is often used for healing and medicinal remedies (Potter, 2018). These trees can live up to 400 years in their native Australia, yet scientists speculate that their ability to evolve to California's climate may increase their lifespan beyond this estimate (Million Trees, 2018). Despite their status as California landmarks, some argue that Blue Gum trees pose a significant threat because of their invasive nature and peeling bark that can increase vulnerability to fires (Potter, 2018). As previously mentioned, the Trees were gravely harmed as the Ventura hills are prone to wildfires due to the Southern California climate; despite their symbols as landmarks, they pose a risk to hills near the trees that must be regarded

with careful mitigation. Regardless of the controversy, eucalyptus trees will continue to be a part of California's history and aesthetics.

### **A Home for All**

Once more, the Two Trees are symbols of the persistence and dedication of foreigners (both human, insects, and botanical) in Ventura. Although many contest their presence in California due to their foreign presence, they have evolved to be home for endangered "eastern" monarch butterflies who migrate to California from Canada in the winter months (Wolf & DiTomaso, 2016). Interestingly enough, the monarch butterfly has become a symbol for undocumented immigrants' rights movements to represent "resilience and hope" (Meza, 2020). The monarchs, or *monarcas*, are also a reminder of the ancestral home for many of us residents who are of Mexican descent, despite the fact these Eastern Monarchs travel from Mexico to the Rockies in the east (Meza, 2020). While the monarchs have historically settled about two hours north of Ventura County in San Luis Obispo (see Figure 3), the occasional monarch fluttering through the ocean breeze in Ventura brings a smile to many residents' faces. Like Two Trees, many businesses and organizations have adopted the name of the monarch. Together, the monarchs and the Two Trees serve as a reminder of strength and beauty for Ventura residents, especially those who have migrated far to call this land home.

### **Conclusion**

The Two Trees, like the area itself, have changed throughout the years, but their sacred importance to residents represents endurance amidst the struggles and the ability to dream. Those of us who call the Ventura region home have dreamed of better futures, from the Chumash to the Spanish missionaries, to Australian gold miners, to Joseph Sexton, to working-class families, farmworkers, and immigrants. It is peaceful to think about Two Trees as a testament to the power



and beauty in community, despite the hardships inflicted by the outside world. Ventura is not perfect; it has a dark history that is often white-washed to establish the city as a peaceful seaside town. But the Trees know that it is important to acknowledge, honor, and respect the past in order to move forward. The story of Two Trees is a reminder of the beauty of hidden stories of those who came before us, those who work hard to create a place for belonging, and the importance of the environment around us. The future generations of Ventura residents must acknowledge the tragedies that have taken place, and honor each other and the land by continuing to care for the Trees, just as they have watched over us.

### **Reflection**

This assignment was an interesting opportunity to combine creative and analytical writing. Thanks to feedback from my peers and the teaching team, I revised the draft to expand unclear sentences and emphasize the theme of belonging and community. The biggest change I made was to organize the flow of the paper to chronological order, rather than grouping by topic. I hope that this structure will help the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the ecological history of Ventura through the eyes of the Two Trees. I also amended topic sentences and restructured paragraphs to have a more organized and focused flow. Many of my sentences were long and wordy, and I revised them to be more specific about the message I wanted to convey and provide more analysis. I had hoped to find more information on Sexton, but most of the research focuses on his families' struggles and his success as a businessman. I hope that taking a more contemporary approach emphasizes the radical changes that took place in the 20th century and into more recent years.

## Appendix

**Figure 1**



By Virnig, Joe. n.d. [Aerial photo of Two Trees, Ventura].

**Figure 2**



[Photograph of the Mission San Buenaventura, Ventura, CA]. (n.d.)

**Figure 3**



By Aries Moon Adventures. 2018. [Photograph of the charred and last 1898 tree after the 2018 Thomas Fire].

**Figure 4**



By Gabrielle Canon. 2021. [Photograph of monarch butterflies on eucalyptus leaves].

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