

## Travelin' in Time: Diestelhorst pioneers were an enterprising family

By Dottie Smith

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Travelin' in Time is a weekly look at historical places in the north state.

### The location

The Diestelhorst family once owned, worked and lived on 84 acres that stretched along the south side of the Sacramento River adjacent to the historic Diestelhorst Bridge in Redding.

### The history

Gotlieb Diestelhorst (known as John) and his wife, Caroline, arrived in Shasta in 1852 during the height of the Gold Rush. While at Shasta, Gotlieb established a laundry business as well as a produce business; the produce business was his favorite.

He conceived the idea of gardening as a business in Shasta when he realized how great the demand was for fresh vegetables. He purchased a small lot, spaded it, and planted radish, lettuce and onion seeds. Soon he was selling everything he grew and making a good profit.

In 1859, he purchased 84 acres for \$2,500 at what was called Poverty Flat beside the Sacramento River. This land included much of present-day downtown Redding. He and his family moved to the new property where they built on it and improved it, and began growing more vegetables, hay and other farm products. Over the years, his family also grew and Gotlieb and Caroline became parents to seven children: Louise, William, Justice, Carrie, Jennie, Charles and John.

Gotlieb eventually sold his farm to his sons Charles and John, and retired. His sons not only continued the farming business, but also established more businesses.

Gotlieb's son John built what became known as the Diestelhorst Waterwheel to irrigate the fields and vegetable gardens. The giant wooden water wheel was on the south side of the Sacramento River just west of the present Market Street Bridge. At times, 20 to 25 men worked in the massive gardens. The vegetables - mostly corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and watermelons - were transported in peddling wagons door-to-door, as well as to the stores and to the outlying copper mining areas where they were quickly sold.

In about 1895, John and his brother Charles built and operated the Diestelhorst Dredge. It was powered by a steam engine that dug gravel with a small-scooped shovel. The gravel was screened and washed in sluices. The dredge was first

anchored in the Sacramento River near Middle Creek; it was later moved to Clear Creek, where it operated for several more years.

John and Charles also built and established the Diestelhorst Auto Camp in the 1920s beside the Sacramento River, just west of the Diestelhorst Bridge and where Middle Creek Road existed - Middle Creek Road today serves as the foundation for much of the southern end of the Sacramento River Trail. The auto camp was one of the very first auto campgrounds in Northern California, if not the first.

Over the years, their resort evolved from tent camping to 31 small cabins. It became a very popular summer resort and included a gas station, an overnight campground and a store. The gas station, a Union station, was built in about 1919, making it one of the earliest service stations in Redding.

John also built several flat-bottomed boats to take people salmon fishing and duck hunting. According to John's daughter Maybell, "we caught all the fish that we wanted."

Redding's swimming hole was here from 1915 until 1940. Remnants of the kiddie pool still exist. The Diestelhorsts hosted three- and four-day-long water carnivals on the river at the Diestelhorst Bridge each summer. Events included swimming, boating races and dancing. In 1940, everything at the resort came to a sudden end when 30 of the 31 cabins and 12 acres were washed away in a flood.

In 1977, the last surviving family member sold the remaining ranchland to the city of Redding for the establishment of a park.

### **Present**

Enter retired Redding anesthesiologist Randall Smith. "Randy" took on the massive project of removing a jungle of blackberry bushes beside the Sacramento River Trail and the Diestelhorst Bridge following his retirement. While clearing away several inches of forest debris and several feet of blackberry bushes and other plants, he began uncovering "mysterious things" along the way that proved to be the remains of the Diestelhorst Auto Camp.

His efforts have now blossomed into a full-fledged community effort to make and install signs that will be placed between the Diestelhorst and Court Street bridges.

The signs will explain the past and the future of this once-popular place to anyone visiting this important Redding historical site.

Dottie Smith is the author of "The Dictionary of Early Shasta County History" and the former curator of the Shasta College Museum. Check out her daily history blog at [www.redding.com](http://www.redding.com). Contact her at [historydottie@yahoo.com](mailto:historydottie@yahoo.com).

