BY ERIC HOFFMAN

TULE ELK:

HENRY MILLER'S LEGACY

At the turn of the century, "Cattle King" Henry Miller spent his summers at his Mount Madonna retreat with a 360-degree view that encompassed the Monterey Bay, the Santa Lucia Range, Pajaro Valley and the cities of Watsonville and Monterey.

PHOTO BY FRANS LANTING

By turning his head to the east he looked down on Gilroy and the Santa Clara Valley. Miller loved Mount Madonna and often invited his ranch superintendents and prominent Californians to join him at his spacious Ahwannee Hotel-like structure. He even had his remains strewn on a nearby mountain. Today the inscription on the monument near the ruins of Miller's stronghold reads:

"The foundation you see before you is all that remains of the "Miller Lux" Empire. The large foundation on your left was the Henry Miller Summer Home and the other two foundations were his children's homes. Before his death on October 19, 1916, Henry Miller owned 1,000,000 acres and 1,000,000 cattle. All of these were part of his estimated 50,000,000 dollar holdings."

Ironically, the empire Miller created that should have insulated his heirs for the rest of the century was squandered in 10 years, while the elk he decided to protect are the most noteworthy living benefactors of his personal and financial power.

In Miller's own day Tule elk that once populated the Monterey Bay area in great numbers already had been eliminated by the Spanish. The species was first sighted by the Spanish near what is now Salinas in 1769 during the Portola expedition. Friar Juan Crespi, the group's chronicler, wrote in his journal: "While (we were) exploring in this place, some bands of animals were seen which must have numbered more than 50, accompanied by their young. They were large as cows, without horns, the color of deer, with feet like a cow, head and face like mules and excrement the same." Later, Crespi saw some of these strange new creatures with antlers and concluded they were "mule deer" because their size was closer to a mule when compared to the relatively small deer and elk found in his native Spain.

Once the mission system was in place along the California coast the elk quickly disappeared. The elk occupied prime grazing land which put them in direct competition with the Spanish cattle herds that were the backbone of the colonial economy. Since elk, like all wild game, were seen as "carne fria" and not fit for human consumption, they were seen as pests worthy of sport and eradication. Vaqueros along the Central Coast developed stylized ways of killing them.

Armed with a "luna," a machete-like knife, a lone vaquero would close on an elk, lean from the saddle, and chop the animal's hocks, severing the tendons, without dismounting, the rider dispatched the crippled elk with a slice to the throat. Hunting in this fashion usually took place in the spring when elk were slowed by excess weight from eating lush grasses. In an act of machismo, vaqueros often caught up to the heavier bulls first and lassoed them. While the animals reeled and jumped at the end of a rope one vaquero dismounted, deftly moved close, and in a single motion, cut the animal's throat — a risky enterprise because the powerful, 700-pound bulls, with their many-tined antlers, were the first to tire and were most often roped. By 1820 all Tule elk in the Monterey Bay area had perished.

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After the 1849 Goldrush, nearly all the elk in the Central Valley had been eliminated, too, by market hunters who worked to supply the growing cities of San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, as well as miners in the Sierra. As it turned out it was lucky for the Tule elk that Miller was part of the human onslaught that engulfed the state. If the last two elk, a single pair, hadn't been found on one of his ranches, it is most likely the species would have never survived to see this century. Miller was their rescuer.

He made his fortune by squeezing every drop of blood out of millions of cattle in a no-holds-barred competition with other cattle barons who systematically drove wildlife from the Central Valley as they converted it to a vast pasture and farm land. Miraculously, the last two elk survived and reproduced healthy young without creating genetically defective offspring, something that often occurs with inbreeding.

On the surface, Miller appears to be an unlikely savior. A butcher by training with little formal education, he arrived in San Francisco from Germany in 1848 with six dollars in his pocket. Through hard work and good business sense, he began amassing cattle and land. By controlling water rights and constantly using the courts to his advantage, he devoured competitors until he sat atop an empire worth $50,000,000 — an empire that sustained itself by slaughtering 200,000 cattle a year. During the 1890s, Miller owned the largest cattle business in the U.S. In the Central Valley alone, he owned 100 miles of uninterrupted frontage along the San Joaquin River.

His ranches were characterized by employee loyalty, a clear chain of command, and a high sense of order. A harsh taskmaster, Miller was usually relentless against competitors, not very philanthropic, and usually frugal with compassion. He cared for the families of loyal employees and built a handful of churches and schools for those who served him — but then it served his best interests to have happy employees. He was guided by the profit margin and went to great lengths to continually maximize it. He chastized ranch foremen for everything from failing to store pitchforks correctly, "always with the prongs at the top so they don't rust," to expecting his men to skin any cattle found dead on the range, "so the hide at least would make it to market."

Miller's constant dictums to ranch superintendents were always carried out; if not, it was understood he would find out why. This way of operating proved to be the guarantee that saved the elk — that is, if Miller was disposed to save them.

By the mid-1800s the last Tule elk took to hiding in tule swamps and, even though they are an open grasslands creature, they were inappropriately dubbed Tule elk — the name they still carry. By the 1870s many market hunters who had once

made their livelihood from hunting elk and selling the meat to labor and mining camps considered Tule elk extinct. However, in 1874, A.C. Tibbits, a warden for the California Department of Fish and Game in the Bakersfield area, found the last two Tule elk in a thicket on one of Miller's ranches.

Although the California legislature had voted to protect California's only native elk, poaching of nearly everything — including cattle — was common and enforcement nearly non-existent. The happenstance in which the last two elk were found on one of Miller's ranches turned out to be crucial to the species' survival. Just as crucial was Miller's reaction to the discovery.

When Miller got word he had the last known Tule elk, he immediately posted a $500 reward for any information about anyone attempting to molest them. In the atmosphere of Miller's ranches, the likelihood of an employee poaching the elk was remote and the tremendous size of the holding created an effective buffer for the elk.

At first the elk cost Miller nothing. By 1895, 21 years after Tibbits found the pair, they had grown to only 28 animals. By 1912, however, there were more than 400 and they devoured alfalfa and corn fields and broke down fences to the tune of $7,000 annually. Miller drew ridicule from neighboring ranchers and his own employees for not doing something about the elk. Although the state didn't have the capability to capture and house them, Miller could have pressed them to get the elk off his property. Or, he could have let it be known he'd ignore poaching, but he didn't.

At the time Miller took up the elks' cause it wasn't even known they were a distinct species, later characterized by greater mobility, lighter color smaller size, and an overbuilt jaw designed to chew acorns. It wasn't until the early 1900s, when scientists from the University of California at Berkeley took a look at "Henry Miller's pet elk," that the elks' differences from the more populous Roosevelt and Rocky Mountain elk were noted.

A conversation recorded by Edward Treadwell, Miller's attorney and biographer, reveals the wellspring of Miller's allegiance to an unprofitable animal. Upon passing the herd, Miller's driver commented, "Mr. Miller, those elk eat an awful lot of feed, break down an awful lot of fences, and cost the company lots of money."

"Yes," Miller replied, "but they were here before we were. It's against the law to destroy them, and some day we will give them away to public parks." So, before the age of conservation, endangered species lists, widespread public sympathy for preserving wildlife, and to a large degree the creation of public parks, Henry Miller proved to be a conservationist.

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Around the time of Miller's death, some of the elk were moved to different parts of the state. Most of them perished during transit or shortly after. One of the few successful herds was started in Del Monte Park in Monterey, near today's Naval Postgraduate School. The herd increased to 50. Then, in 1922, park boundaries gave way to golf courses, new homes, and hotels. The elk became a nuisance. Flower gardens disappeared overnight, and during the rut, only the most daring golfers ventured onto the links when a bull elk was rampaging about.

The Del Monte herd was successfully corraled. About half were sent to William Randolph Hearst's palatial San Simeon estate, where it is believed they hybridized with his herd of Rocky Mountain elk before disappearing after their release into the wild. The rest were shipped to marginal habitat on a large ranch in Colusa County near Clear Lake, where the herd is still hanging on despite recent land developments and poaching.

Shortly after Miller's death, his herd of over 400 in the Central Valley was quickly poached to only 70 animals. For a time it appeared they were bound for extinction again despite the reprieve Miller had given them. Public agencies hadn't developed the capacity to protect or manage endangered wildlife.

However, another private citizen, Walter Dow, from Lone Pine, came to their rescue. At his own expense he captured and dumped off 50 elk in the high desert in Owens Valley on the eastern side of the Sierras. This herd prospered to 600 animals and is today the chief source of Tule elk that have been systematically redistributed by the California Department of Fish and Game since 1971.

Tule elk are on the federal endangered species list and haven't been hunted since the early 1970s. As a species, their prognosis looks good though Fish and Game officials are finding it difficult to locate the wide open habitat they prefer, since most of what was once their home is occupied by 22 million humans. The elk occupied the prime grassland throughout California that is also the preferred land for farming and residential interests.

Locally, Tule elk are now grazing at Camp Roberts and Hunter Liggett, Concord Naval Weapons Station, the Mount Hamilton Range and Point Reyes where they were reintroduced from the herd in Owens Valley. Because there are no tracts of pristine landscape large enough to suit their needs, it is doubtful any elk will be released in the immediate Monterey Bay area where they were plentiful 200 years ago.

In Miller's time it took a great deal of personal power and wealth to ensure that Tule elk made it into the 20th century. At a time when the whims of tycoons and robber barons had more influence on the outcome of historical events than governmental bodies, Miller's ability to save Tule elk is a testimonial to his personal and financial power and, just as importantly, a testimonial to his steadfast view that a species has a right to exist.

It would seem that the plaque on Mount Madonna is all that is left of Miller's million-acre, million cattle empire. However, there is something remaining of Henry Miller's timeless legacy: Tule elk.