

# Ostrich farming in Southern California

*"...ounce for ounce, plumes were more precious than gold"*

By Donald Duke

*Ed. note: Our thanks to Donald Duke and Michael Patris of the Los Angeles Corral of The Westerners for the story and pictures on ostrich farming which we are reprinting from the Corral newsletter, The Branding Iron, Spring 2009.*

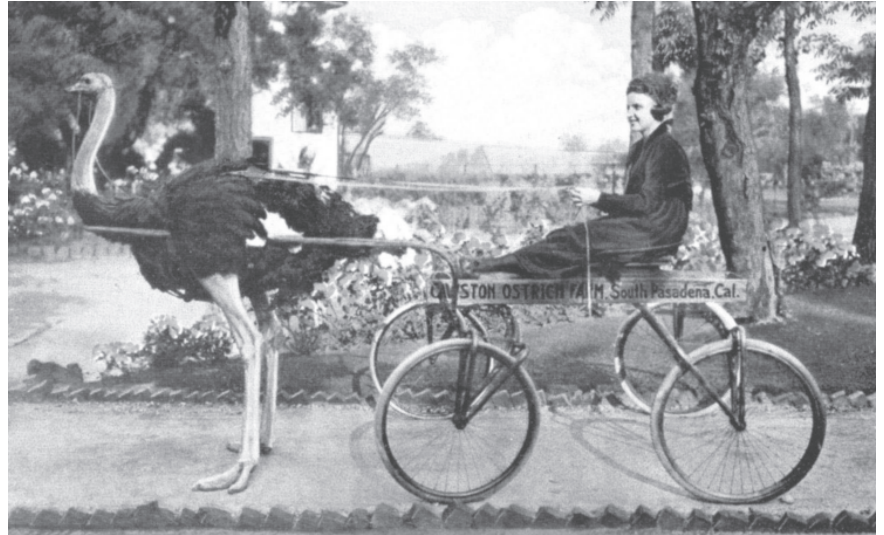
*We couldn't resist picking up the quote from Editor Phil Brigandi: "I am told it was especially interesting to feed the big birds oranges and watch the bulge slide down their long, long neck."*

Beginning in the early 1880s, in the United States, ostrich plumes were an accessory to style. They were cascading from hats, ladies used them on the neck as a boa, also as fans for a fan dancer, and they were used in military hats and for several other purposes. Within two years, plumes soared in value and, ounce for ounce, plumes were more precious than gold. From the 1880s until World War I, Southern California became a mecca for plume raising. Best known to historians was the Cawston Ostrich Farm.

While Cawston's was the largest and best-known ostrich farm, there was the Los Angeles Ostrich Farm alongside East Lake (Lincoln Park), and ostrich farms in Ocean Park, Pasadena, San Diego, San Jacinto and Santa Ana.

Cawston's Ostrich Farm was the only farm that had a park as part of its operation. It was officially known as Cawston's Ostrich Farm & Zoological Garden and was first located on the Los Feliz Ranch (Griffith Park). It was located where the Mulholland Fountain is today. To reach the park, visitors took the Los Angeles County Railroad which ran out Sunset Boulevard, and transferred to the Ostrich Farm Dummy Railroad which ran out Hyperion to what is now Griffith Park Boulevard to Los Feliz, then west with a zig-zag down the hill to the Ostrich Farm. The word dummy means that it was an enclosed steam locomotive in a box so as not to scare horses. Kids used to grease the zig-zag rails and locomotives often had a hard time climbing the grade.

Cawston's Ostrich Farm & Zoological Park had an admission charge of 25 cents which



*Cawston Farm charged 25 cents admission which included rides in carts drawn by the huge birds. (From Michael Patris collection.)*

included the picnic grounds, rides for the kids, and rides in carts drawn by ostriches. If you were game, you could ride an ostrich. The ostrich was hooded so as not to reach back and snap at the rider. I am told it was like riding a stagecoach or camel. The park was first established by Dr. Arthur Sketchley, who brought the first ostriches to Southern California. More on Dr. Sketchley later on.

Just what is an ostrich? It is a strange-looking member of the bird family that is unable to fly. It is also the largest living bird. Its original home was South Africa and western Asia. The ancients called them camel birds, because they looked more like a camel than a bird. Like a camel, the ostrich could travel days without water and wobbled like a camel.

A full-grown ostrich stands seven to eight feet high and weighs between 200 and 300 pounds. Its neck is about three feet long and the head has large eyes. To defend itself, the ostrich has an intense kick with lots of power from its thick legs. It kicks like a kangaroo. It has two toes which are



*Newly hatched chicks, one with its shell still stuck to its backside. (From Michael Patris collection.)*



*Cawston*

Ostrich Feather \$5<sup>00</sup>  
Hat Bands for 5<sup>—</sup>

This is unusual value. A 36-inch feather Band in any color, made of Cawston Feathers at the famous Cawston Farms. They are so easy to adjust and so charming and beautiful—they will be very much worn this spring.

**Plumes Remodeled**

Get out your old Ostrich Plumes and have them made over into new plumes. Costs very little—only a fraction of what you would pay for new plumes—and they will look like new.  
We can make you a feather Hat Band out of your old feathers for half what a new band would cost—\$2.50.

**A NEW SPRING MODEL**  
When in Southern California be sure to visit the Cawston Ostrich Farms in South Pasadena. The farms you have read about for twenty-five years.

**Cawston OSTRICH Shop**  
54 GEARY STREET  
SAN FRANCISCO

*Cawston ostrich feather ad in program of the Columbia Theatre, San Francisco.  
Program featured the comic opera "The Slim Princess" starring Elsie Janis. Circa 1915.*

spread wide, giving the bird great speed. Its weakness is its lack of sense. In fact it is dumb! An ancient belief is that the ostrich sticks its head in the sand when facing danger — a pure fable. It eats grass, leaves, seeds and fruit when it can find it. It lays eggs just like a bird or chicken, but the eggs are huge and weigh between three and four pounds each. The male sits on the eggs until they hatch in nearly 40 days.

Natives in South Africa plucked the feathers when they turned white and used them for decorative purposes. At what time they became popular in Europe is unknown. The French were the first to use the feathers or plumes for military hat decorations. The white plumes were dyed various colors depending on the rank of the soldier. The plucked plumes would grow back within a half year, and other feathers would turn white and were plucked. In the years that Cawston sold the plumes, he made millions and shipped most of them to New York and Europe. At one time Cawston had a retail store at 313 Broadway in downtown Los Angeles.

In April 1886, Dr. Arthur Sketchley, an English native and pioneer of ostrich farming in the United States, decided Southern California had the same weather as South Africa and was fine for ostrich raising. He arrived with two railroad

stock cars full of birds which had been shipped from Port Natal, South Africa, to Galveston, Texas. His Ostrich Farm & Zoological Park at Los Feliz Rancho was near completion for the storage of birds, but not yet ready for the public.

Edward H. Cawston was a gentleman rancher living in Norwalk. One day he read in the *Los Angeles Times* that ostriches had arrived in Los Angeles and were in pens at Los Feliz Rancho. Cawston wondered what it was all about and made his way to Los Feliz Rancho. He figured this was a growing business and something he should invest in. Ostrich eggs were selling for \$75 each and he put a down payment for several eggs.

In the meantime, several ostriches died soon after arrival due to the hardship in transportation from South Africa to Los Angeles, and several were lost to coyotes roaming in what is now Griffith Park.

Establishing the park and the loss of birds was trying to Sketchley. He wanted out of the Ostrich Farm & Zoological Park and decided it was easier to be a broker and importer of birds. Cawston made his move and decided to buy the park.

Before selling his interest in the Ostrich Farm, Sketchley designed and built a large incubator for the hatching of eggs.

He did not want to risk the loss of a single egg being crushed by the male sitting on the eggs for 40 days. Each female could lay as many as 10 eggs, but many were crushed. With the incubator, the Ostrich Farm became full of new chicks. Young birds were prone to colds and had to be watched at that tender age. Instead of eating grass and leaves, the ostriches were fed corn and alfalfa, and the young birds developed much quicker.

Under the management of Cawston, the Ostrich Farm & Zoological Park developed rapidly. A large pavilion was constructed, and large enclosed pens for ostrich viewing. A cafeteria was built, and all kinds of tables and benches for picnickers. The zoological gardens were a sight to behold.

Large buildings were built for the processing of plumes. There were drying vats for the coloring of the plumes, a sorting and storage building, and a shipping room. An ostrich was considered full grown after a year, when it had developed white plumes. For plucking, an ostrich was run into a V-shaped corral, hooded, and the white feathers plucked or cut off. From half to one pound of feathers could be plucked from a bird. The stub would fall out in a couple of months and a new feather or plume grew in its place.

Ostriches would mate once a year, and the male was mean and rough on the female. A male would service anywhere from 10 to 20 females. The male would roar like a lion when he had finished servicing a female. Females were not able to make a noise or bark.

Within four years, the Cawston Ostrich Farm had over 3,000 birds in its inventory. The Cawston showroom featured thousands of plumes for sale at various prices due to color, length, width, etc. Feathers were dyed in many colors from fine French dyes. In 1902 the farm received as many as 60,000 orders for plumes from its large catalog. Plumes were now shipped worldwide.

South Pasadena gained a world-class tourist attraction in 1896 — the Cawston Ostrich Farm. The farm had run out of space at Los Feliz Rancho (Griffith Park) and required more space. A huge parcel of land in then Lincoln Park (South Pasadena) was purchased. Before anything was built, Lincoln Park was merged into South Pasadena. After six months of construction, the new Cawston Ostrich Farm opened with a huge celebration on November 17, 1896. The property was bounded by Monterey Road and Pasadena Avenue, and it lay next to the Santa Fe Railway main line,



*In 2009, Michael Patris became the newly elected deputy sheriff of The West-erners, Los Angeles Corral.*

although trains did not stop for passengers. On the opposite side was the main line of the South Pasadena Line of the Pacific Electric Railway with service to the park every 20 minutes.

Admission fee was still 25 cents and the tourist could stroll in a setting advertised as “free from boisterous elements and strictly first class. Here one can see hundreds of ostriches, baby chicks, and ostrich eggs, as well as beautiful gardens.” The farm continued to do a huge mail order business, and the Cawston Ostrich Farm received more mail than any other site in Southern California.

This was the first time that everything was complete before moving in. The administration building contained the general offices, the feather sales room and the mail order depart-

ment. A large incubator building was heat-controlled so that the large eggs hatched in 40 days. The main factory building was where the plumes were brought in, sorted and dyed. It also contained a repair room for used plumes. The storehouse was a concrete building where feathers were stored for sale under ideal conditions. Most of the property was given to the outdoor ostrich pens and the gardens. The gardens were a sylvan dell and spread beneath giant oak trees and varied palm trees. The semi-tropical park was complete with flowerbeds, green lawns and a flowing fountain. Afternoon tea was taken in a Japanese tea garden.

In 1906 the Cawston Ostrich Farm was incorporated for \$1 million. What the stock sold for is unknown, or how many shareholders there were. One has to assume that Edward H. Cawston was the primary shareholder?

The year 1911 was the 25th anniversary of the Cawston Ostrich Farm. Edward H. Cawston was approached by a group of Los Angeles citizens to sell the farm. He was 46 years of age and looking forward to returning to his birthplace in England to enjoy his fortune. A syndicate was made up of bankers that gathered together to buy the farm. On November 2, 1911, the farm was sold. In due course, Cawston returned to his boyhood home in Cabham, Surrey, England.

Just after the sale, a full-page advertisement appeared in the South Pasadena Chamber of Commerce yearbook, which said, “The original, the pioneer, the greatest and largest of all its kind, the Cawston Ostrich Farm is one of the institutions in Southern California,

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*A full-grown bird is between seven and eight feet tall and weighs between 200 and 300 pounds. Its neck is about three feet long. Eggs weigh between three and four pounds. (From Michael Patris collection.)*