

From the Contra Costa Times

History, heritage of national parks star in film by Ken Burns

By Nanci L. Valcke
Correspondent

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Just as vistas of Yosemite National Park captivated John Muir, his grandson's stories fascinated those gathered for a momentous and unique preview of Ken Burns' film, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," which airs on PBS, beginning Sept. 27.

Ross Hanna stepped to the podium Saturday at Alhambra High School's Center for the Arts, introduced his wife Gladys, nephews, David Hanna and Robert Hanna "... and began talking.

"I could've listened to him all night," said Jimmy Hughes, 17, of Martinez.

Hanna confessed that whenever addressing audiences on the subject of his grandfather they "know more about him than I do. It's not because I didn't love him," Hanna continued, "but he died eight years before I was born."

Muir, a Scottish native, lived in Martinez with his wife, Louisa (Louie) Wanda Strentzel from 1890 until his death in 1914. His home, a National Historic Site, is located a stone's throw from the school where the special sneak peek of the documentary was held.

For the hometown event that featured Hanna as a guest speaker, he sought speaking advice from one of his sons, who told him to talk of his own memories growing up in Martinez and the Alhambra Valley.

So he did.

"I lived in a house about a mile from here," Hanna said. "I went to school here at Alhambra. I had the run of the valley."

The nuggets about the history of a small town and the home of a man known as the "Father of the National Parks" rolled off Hanna's tongue, enchanting the nearly 350 guests.

Hanna, the son of Muir's elder daughter Wanda and her husband Thomas Hanna, grew up in Martinez with his siblings. He told stories of two brothers leaving home on horseback one summer for Yosemite, and staying the entire

season, and of another brother, John, 7 at the time, who took his pony to an American Indian competition.

"My parents were broad-minded," he said. "They let me do what I wanted."

Hanna recalled the hardships of the Depression and World War II, as well as uplifting stories like that of Jose (Joe) Figureida, who saved his money to buy a ranch and planted pears, and for whom Hanna worked while attending school.

He wove that story with another about Japanese immigrants who were forced to leave their land in Figureida's care when they were sent to an internment camp, and who returned to Martinez to a prosperous operation.

Hearing Hanna's memories was topped only by viewing the magnificent images of the national parks captured on the screen.

The one-hour film preview version of Burns' 12-hour PBS series was edited to focus on John Muir's prodigious force in creating America's national parks.

"John Muir, considered 'Father of the National Parks' is a thread throughout the 12 hours," said Leslie Rule, director of KQED's Center for Community Media. "We have pulled together the parts specific to John Muir."

At the reception following the showing, residents praised the film.

"It's awesome," said Cheyanna Washburn, 15, of Martinez.

"It's fabulous, absolutely fabulous," said Nanette Voluntine of Pleasant Hill. "It's wonderful for the city of Martinez to bring interest into the city; it's a jewel."

Martinez resident Wendy Caldwell said, "Having the premiere in Martinez was very appropriate because Martinez is the home of John Muir."

JoAnne Dunec, president of the John Muir Association, said, "So many people in the Bay Area don't know he lived here."

Although some might not have known Muir lived in Martinez, within 48 hours of the free, reservations-only event being posted online, all the available tickets were reserved, and 122 people were put on a waiting list, said Cathy McCause, who worked with both the Martinez school district and Martinez Chamber of Commerce on the event.

"I am still just amazed," McCause said. "I did an analysis, and 60 percent (of attendees) were from beyond Martinez — people from Sacramento, Redwood City, Danville."

With no cancellations and more reservation requests, provisions were made for a simulcast in the Martinez Library to accommodate some of the overflow.

Cynthia Murdough, chamber executive director, said she had long wanted to bring the East Bay preview to Martinez. One day over lunch, she discussed the idea with Steve Leshner, public affairs manager of Shell Oil Products US.

Leshner, a Ken Burns enthusiast who has dined with him on several occasions and brought him to the Leshner Center for the Newsmakers Speaker Series, jumped on the idea. As a result, Shell's Martinez Refinery, which has had a presence in the city since 1915, became the underwriters of the event.

"More people get their history from Ken Burns than anywhere else," Leshner said.

Other sponsors were the John Muir Association, Martinez Chamber of Commerce, city of Martinez, Martinez Unified School District, KQED Public Media and the National Park Service.

McCause gave special kudos to school superintendent Rami Muth for making the evening possible.

Although Hanna and his family did not attend the reception, they lingered awhile to shake hands and talk of the school, Martinez and parks.

The discussion turned to the film and its importance to national parks, but it was the importance of state parks that was most on Gladys Hanna's mind.

The message in the film, she said, is the importance of having a beautiful place to go and be happy, to find peace or solace, that belongs to the people, all the people.

"I hope they think about that when they close (state parks)," she said. "It's much harder to open them."