

Building a Gem of a Park Just Because 'They Asked Me'



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Sam Hodgson

John Willett spends 35 hours a week as a volunteer leading clean-up crews in the Otay Valley Regional Park.



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By **ROB DAVIS**

Thursday, Feb. 26, 2009 | Serenading songbirds fill the morning air, buffeted by a brisk February breeze and the whine of weed wackers. Behind a new ranger station, along a freshly

cut trail, four middle-aged prisoners in fluorescent yellow jumpsuits tear into a patch of weeds in the Otay Valley Regional Park in southern Chula Vista.

A fifth man stands out. He's poking at weeds with a hoe. The man wears a dusty straw hat, a khaki-colored shirt and matching pants, his polished black boots are covered in grass clippings and dirt. He is trimmer and stands straighter than the others, even though he is a World War II veteran, a child of the Great Depression, and, today, suffering from a bad back. A black plastic tag pinned to his shirt blares his name: JOHN WILLETT.

"This dern grass is so high," Willett says. "It's hard to believe we were in here in May, and all this rain we've had."

For decades, the Otay River Valley — 11 miles of open space stretching from the Lower Otay Reservoir west to San Diego Bay's southern end — has been treated like an unwanted, out-of-sight garbage can. Transient camps, illegal dumps and thick stands of invasive weeds littered the valley separating Chula Vista from Otay Mesa. That's slowly changing, and Willett has been instrumental in its engineering.

The story of John Willett's success in reclaiming the Otay River Valley is a shared community story, a testament to neighborhood cooperation and the generosity of strangers. It's also a story of patience and dogged determination. The park is not complete, despite two decades of work.

Officials from Chula Vista, San Diego County and the city of San Diego first discussed creating the park in 1989. They envisioned a green belt wrapping around Chula Vista. A year later, the three jurisdictions formalized the idea and convened a residents' advisory group to provide input on the park's future.

Willett, a former U.S. Navy engineer, had retired three years earlier and spent his newfound free time volunteering in Chula Vista. He'd just lost his wife of 45 years to cancer. So in 1990, Willett joined the advisory group and has continued serving on it ever since. He is modest about why he began giving his time, an effort that now, 19 years later, has kept him busy for hundreds of hours.

"They asked me," he says.

Since the park was formally established, elected leaders and government agencies have worked to acquire land, to build the park itself. Willett, though, has helped build the *idea* of the park.

His efforts have focused on trash cleanups and rousting transients and drug dens. If the Otay Valley Regional Park is truly to become a hiking or bird-watching destination, residents need to feel safe there, to feel connected to the land, to feel invested in its upkeep. Then they won't dump there and the increased public presence will dissuade homeless from staying there. But the park must first have an identity, an essence. It must ditch its bad reputation.

And so Willett primes the pump. On Tuesday, while out tearing up weeds, a couple strolled through. "Lived here 25 years," the man told Willett. "This is the first time I've ever been down here."

That's where Willett's satisfaction comes from.

Willett has not worked alone, but he has helped engineer solutions. In 2006, with park staff working to develop the first phase of a trail system, Willett started tracking and mapping illegal dump sites. He provided a hand-marked map to San Diego County's parks and recreation department, which secured state funding for a cleanup.

John Barone, a San Diego park ranger stationed at Otay Valley, describes Willett like an ambassador, as part of a team working to convert open space — vacant land without an identity — into a park. "People see his passion and motivation to clean up," Barone says, "and it inspires them. That's been the mechanism he's used to get things cleaned out that would cost more money to do."

Willett convinced Allied Waste, which operates the nearby Otay Landfill, to waive dumping fees for trash collected in the park. When grant funding came for a cleanup, the waiver enabled more money to be spent on cleanup crews. Park rangers estimate that the savings allowed an extra 100 tons of waste to be removed during a 2006 cleanup. (Volunteers and hired crews have removed an estimated 1,210 tons of trash in the last nine years, Willett says.)

When Willett has encountered the homeless, he's tried to get them into treatment and work programs, not simply boot them off the land. The rangers who patrol the park speak with awe for his patience. So does Bob McElroy, executive director of the Alpha Project, a local nonprofit serving the homeless.

"Most people would rather just bulldoze them and push them on to the next guy," McElroy says. "He sees them as human beings, that they're redeemable, that they do have value."

Willett estimates that he spends 30 to 35 hours weekly in the park. He knows the park's canyons, how the river flows, where trash piles up, the likely spots for erosion. Monday through Wednesday, he works alongside prison cleanup crews, directing them and pitching in. On Thursdays, he scouts out locations for the next week's cleanup. He takes Friday for himself, cleaning up his own yard and then his daughter's. "She's not there," he says. "She's the mayor of Chula Vista."

Willett's son-in-law, county Supervisor Greg Cox, describes Willett as a walking encyclopedia, as a man who knows how to negotiate every issue that arises in the park. "If there's

mosquitoes, he knows who to call," Cox says. "If there's homeless, he knows who to call. If there's graffiti, he knows who to call. He's the consummate volunteer."

While he spends so much time working to clean up the environment, Willett doesn't subscribe to the environmental movement or describe himself as an environmentalist. His connection to the earth began as a child during the Great Depression, tending a garden of beets and onions. His interest in the park appears to derive less from a concern about the environment and more from a sense of community duty.

Mike McCoy, who at 67 is a generation younger than Willett, has spent almost four decades doing similar work in the Tijuana River Valley, which runs along the U.S.-Mexico border. McCoy, an Imperial Beach resident, says Willett's strength is in his tenacity, a requisite trait for someone building a park. You have to negotiate bureaucracies, McCoy says, cope with a lack of funding and sometimes a lack of interest. Setbacks are common. You build a trail, clean up litter, then watch a rain storm six months later wash away everything you've done.

"That's what's amazing about John," McCoy says. "It doesn't wear him down."

Barone, the park ranger, and Matt Sanford, another ranger, describe how passionately Willett feels for the place, the ownership he takes in it. Like many who know Willett, they marvel at his dedication. "This place is his baby," Barone says.

"This is probably the place he wants to be when he goes," Barone says. "Matt and I know that. You know that's how he feels."

Willett will turn 88 in June, and his work at the park keeps him active. Others he knows golf and watch TV. He wants to keep moving. A few years back, at his 60th high school reunion, Willett remembers standing out. "Hell," he says, "I was the only one who could get up and dance."

He wants to see the park completed. Today, 900 acres of the 8,500-acre park is publicly owned. The county and Chula Vista have an agreement to acquire much of the rest as the nearby Otay Ranch development expands. But Willett works knowing that the park will not likely be finished in his lifetime. He protests not a bit. "I understand it," he says. "Why put money into a park when you have so many people unemployed?"

Three weeks ago, he pulled his back, working a hefty twin-handled weed wacker. He's in physical therapy now, twice a week, surrounded by people he doesn't identify with. "Great big stomachs," he says.

His doctor has told him to lay off the heavy equipment. So there he was, Tuesday, with a hoe, standing in the sunlight with the prison crew, cutting weeds from the rocky soil behind the park's new ranger station.

"Look at it right now," Willett says, gesturing at the progress. "You can see how good it's going to look."

