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## Kastania Ranch is home to city kid Ellen Brians

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My earliest recollection of Kastania Ranch, with substantial help from my uncle's old home movies, is of an afternoon gathering of members of the Methodist Church playing ball, and running through the trees in the late 1950s. We were guests of the Brians family, owners of the property since 1919.

Ellen Brians, 84, who was raised on the ranch, and who was my Sunday school teacher back then, recently invited me back to the bucolic rural setting just south of town, to discuss its history.

The 168-acre parcel was originally owned by Daniel G. Heald, a farmer and dairyman who acquired the land from a government grant in 1857. James Sorensen purchased it from Heald in 1886 and named it Kastania, using the Scandinavian spelling, after the Castanea, a large, spreading chestnut tree that's abundant in Denmark.

Danish immigrants R.C. and Tillie Rasmussen bought the property, along with its 1890s farm house, from Sorensen in 1919 and started a poultry ranch which they later changed to a Jersey dairy farm. Their three children, Harry, Arnold, and Ellen were the first of four generations to be raised there.

Across the road from the ranch sits the picturesque Kastania Winery, owned by Hoot and Linda Smith, on property that's been in the Smith family since the 1860s.

Rasmussen hauled his milk to the Petaluma Co-op twice a day and the kids were bused to school. "That's where we met the country kids, we were city kids," said Ellen, a self-described "spoiled kid" who attended Lincoln Primary, Philip Sweed and Washington Grammar School.

A graduate of the Petaluma High School Class of 1941, she attended business school in Santa Rosa before taking a job at Mare Island Naval Shipyard. That's where she met serviceman Les Brians and they married in 1943. After the war, the couple returned to Kastania Ranch, where they operated the dairy and raised their kids, Keith, Kenneth and Kathleen.

They sold the dairy in 1964 and converted to beef stock. Through the church the family also raised goats for the Heifer Project. "That was really a good experience," noted Ellen.

Brians Realty opened on East Washington Street in 1968 and became an overnight success. "We were the first ones to be open on Sunday and people would come in with newspaper ads in their hands wanting to see



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