

The Ridge Route Rambler

We're nuts  about history.



"Panorama from Mill Potrero" by Albert Everett Wieslander, 1934 from digicoll.lib.berkeley.edu

A HISTORY OF THE MIL POTRERO

PART I abridged from our intern Katie Masuhara...

Mil Potrero Highway

Mil Potrero Highway (MPH) is the winding road that takes travelers and locals from the base of Mt. Pinos at the Y west of the intersection of Cuddy Valley Road and Mt. Pinos Road, down into the Los Padres National Forest. The S curves are the stretch of road hewn into the mountainside as it descends into the meadowed valley of Pine Mountain Club (PMC). PMC, surrounded by pine and chaparral forest, is located in the borderlands of the Transverse Mountain Range and the San Joaquin Valley, in the corridor of the San Andreas Fault. Leaving PMC to the west, the road travels through the National Forest before it reaches the junction of Hudson Ranch Road and Cerro Noroeste Road at Apache Saddle. MPH is the primary thoroughfare of the community, the only way in or out, and a scenic route that links Interstate 5 to Highways 33 and 166.

Tenneco West

MPH was constructed by Tenneco West, a subsidiary of the gas and oil giant Tenneco Inc., in 1971 as the access road for their 1,000 acre second-home and recreation community, Pine Mountain Club. Tenneco acquired the land in 1970 when they acquired the Kern County Land

Company (KCLC) in a 9-figure deal. While almost half of the road passes through the National Forest, the \$900,000 (over \$7 million today) project was funded entirely by Tenneco. A necessary investment for the company, as the existing road was a single lane dirt trail that wound through the the bottom of the pass below where the new road was cut. This old trail (the El Camino Viejo) was crisscrossed by the meandering San Emigdio Creek and forked to follow the course of the creek as it branched north into San Emigdio Canyon. And to the east, the trail skirted around hills and arrived at the wetland meadow, known as the Mill, or Mil, Potrero since the mid-1800s, from which the highway derives its name.

Thousand Pastures

Mil Potrero translates from Spanish to "Thousand Pastures", a likely name for a meadow that has been consistently used for grazing for much of its recent history, (the meadow has also been called "Sheep Camp" and later "Cow Camp" for the that reason), but this is deceptively simple. As California had more Spanish than English speakers in the 1800s, the meadow likely had already been used or known as a pasture during the Mexican period and even as early as the Spanish period (cattle was Spain's first industry in CA). The San Emigdio

Rancho, established in 1842, was an operating cattle ranch from the 1850s up until the 1990s, when it became the Wind Wolves Conservancy. The trail through San Emigdio Canyon, the El Camino Viejo, had fallen into disuse by wagons by the 1850s, but was still a viable trail for foot traffic and cattle. Vaqueros employed at the ranch in the early 1900s referred to the place as *Mil Potreros*.

Mil Or Mill?

Many early records use Mill Potrero, with the English word "Mill" and the Spanish word Potrero. This name referred to a sawmill that once existed in the general area, which is also how Sawmill Mountain derived its name. This mill on the meadow was established by Joseph Gale in the 1850s. Said to have been on the westernmost fork of San Emigdio Creek, near the head of the arroyo, his mill was reputed to be the first steam-powered sawmill in the region, and milled the timber for the construction of Fort Tejon and the early Anglo settlements. Maps from the period place the location of the Gale's mill either near the modern cul-de-sac of Nesthorn Way or closer to the intersection of Woodland Drive and MPH. The former is more likely, but the creek has likely changed its course since the 1850s, obscuring this historical site. The Snedden family, who leased the land around the 1920s for grazing, called it *Mill Potrero*. English resources most often use Mill Potrero when referring to the area or to the dirt road that preceded the highway. It was not until the land was developed that Mil Potrero was used in any official capacity.

Draining the Meadow

The Mil Potrero is a rare surviving example of a wetland meadow ecosystem. It is a biodiversity hotspot, dependent on both snowmelt and groundwater, that supports both wetland and riparian vegetation and a host of diverse species. However, a hundred or so years of constant cattle grazing accelerated erosion and dried out and disrupted the ecosystem. In the development of Pine Mountain Club in 1971, the meadow was drained and filled, adding to this disruption. This raised criticism over the effect it would have on the ecosystem, including the California Condor whose population had dwindled to around 60 at the time.

The destruction of the natural beauty of a popular public destination for a private community was also remarked upon. The development's location atop the San Andreas Fault raised the concern of a UCSB geologist, Dr. Arthur Sylvester, who asserted that *"the ground is unstable, like jelly. The fault is the reason the potrero was a wetland. The area is - or was - a sag pond. The earth had sunk down below the water table level"* (*Santa Barbara Newspress*, June 29, 1971). 55 years later, this remains to be seen. Over 90% of California's natural wetlands have been drained and what remains are now protected under both State and Federal law.



Cattle Kings

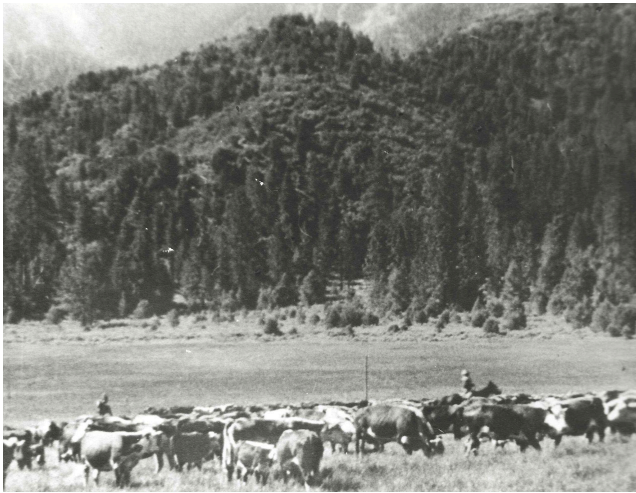
Across the Central San Joaquin Valley water rights were fought over, resulting in the vast majority of the land being monopolized by just a few owners. The cattle companies Miller & Lux relying on "riparian" water rights (that which was adjacent to their land) lost 10,000 of their herd in 1877, largely due to being downstream from the cattle baron J.B. Haggin who relied on "appropriative" rights (first come, first serve). Their battle over water rights eventually went to the CA Supreme Court (1884), which ruled in favor of Lux.

At the bottom of San Emigdio Canyon lay the large cattle operation of San Emigdio Ranch which was purchased by J.B. Haggin, in 1878. In 1890, Haggin and his partners, including prominent banker Lloyd Tevis, consolidated their holdings into the Kern County Land Company (KCLC), becoming the largest cattle ranch in Kern County.

Water Barons

Several homestead claims were established on the Mil Potrero in the 1870s-80s, but most of the lots

were bought up and later acquired by their downstream neighbors at the ranch. A writer



traveling through the area in 1889 wrote to the *Santa Maria Times* that “[the KCLC] have gobbled up all the springs for hundreds of miles, placing scrip on 40 acres or so about a spring thus controlling thousands of acres adjoining”. Furthermore, at San Emigdio Creek they “put in a dam at the mouth of the canyon to prevent the people from [...] getting it [...] one attempt was made to blow it up”. The settlers who predated the company in the area were being driven out and it was the “settled policy of this company to discourage everyone from coming into the country” (*Santa Maria Times* 16 Jan 1889). A decade later, they were still at it, as a *Fresno Weekly Republican* news article from August 10, 1899 reports that the KCLC asked the superior courts to prevent any settlers within the vicinity of the ranch from taking water from the neighboring Santiago Creek. The Sneddens, one of the first families of Lockwood Valley, leased 1500 acres of Mil Potrero meadow as pasture for decades from the KCLC, but that “the owners will not sell [because] they wish to keep the water rights from the big springs that rise in this valley” (Snedden 1947). As Kern County's landscape was engineered into fields of cattle, crops, and oil, water remained its most valuable resource, one that the KCLC would not lose control of even in the distant mountain meadows.

(to be continued next issue)

DECEMBER LIGHTS

Ever since the lockdowns for COVID in the winter of

2021 and people were staying home a lot, we have been bringing Christmas cheer by lighting and decorating the museum. Only that first year were we able to get someone with equipment to reach (nearly) to the top of our cedar tree and string lights on it. Unfortunately, either gnawing critters or the wind broke all the light strings and made it impossible to light up the cedar tree the following year. And we haven't been able to get equipment in subsequent years (including this one) to re-string the cedar tree.



This year we had the additional challenge of rodents chewing through the wiring on the big displays (like Santa's Workshop) that couldn't be protected by boxing them up. So only bits and pieces of Santa's Workshop lit up this year. (Any electricians out there that like a challenge? Rewiring Santa's workshop will be beyond a layman's ability, we fear.)



Nevertheless, we try each year to make our display just a little bit better. And, for the first time, Mountain Memories, which puts on the Holiday Faire, offered a contest for best lighting. And the Museum won! (for best business), despite our many challenges.



OUR EVENTS

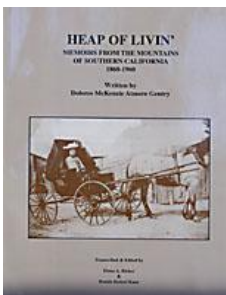
The first part of the year we generally don't have many events due to the uncertainty of the weather. Our first official event this year will be on **April 25**, the **Ridge Route Tour**. We will only be offering ONE in the spring and ONE in the fall, so make sure to make your reservations early, because they fill up fast. Of course, your group or family can always arrange a private tour; call 661-245-7747 to find out more. A donation of \$20 per person is encouraged.

On **May 16** we will be offering 2 rib basket weaving classes at 10 & at 1; \$20 includes all materials. Call for reservations.

Come meet us at our Ridge Route Run **Car Show booth** on Memorial Day Weekend, Saturday **May 23** on Mt. Pinos Way.

In **June** we will be holding our **Programs on the Patio, every Saturday** at 6. We have confirmed geologist Tim Elam, speaking on Roadside Geology & San Andreas Fault on **June 6**. Matt Schnittker of the Fort Tejon Historical Association will present a 19th century telegraph demonstration and lecture on **June 13**. Abby from California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife will speak on living with our local wildlife on **June 20**. We have not confirmed our 4th speaker.

One Saturday **July 4** we will Celebrate our country's 250th birthday.



On Saturday **July 18** at 7:00 p.m. we will once again present our Living History Theatre dramatic reading of **Heap of Livin'**. It tells some colorful stories from our mountains in the 1860s-1920s. **Admission** will be \$5 pre-sale, \$8 day-of event.

Based on the book of the same name by Dolores McKenzie Atmore Gentry, it is a true story of three generations of her family that starts on a wagon train from Texas to a homestead on Tejon Ranch in southern California. At age fifteen she unknowingly marries the leader of an outlaw gang of cowboys and is left to prove up his desert claim. For years her only friends are the Joshua trees and a cowboy on a neighboring ranch.

2025 VISITORS

We had 1296 visitors last year. They came from

many diverse states such as Minnesota, Oregon, Arizona, Texas and Michigan, even from countries as far away as Norway and Armenia. Inside California we had many from inside Kern County, but also from Tustin, Redding, Oxnard, Little Rock, Orange, Santa Maria, Visalia, Huntington Beach, San Luis Obispo and Carpinteria.

SIGNIFICANT DONORS

Jeff Robin and Jamie Crawford made good sized donations, while Judi Curtis Peterson made a \$1000 donation towards our ReHome the Bell project.

Dawn Burns is our most recent Lifetime Member.

OTHER LOCAL EVENTS

On the **first Saturday of October and November** this year the Fort Tejon State Historic Park will host **Frontier Army Days at Fort Tejon**. It's a living history event where you can talk to "soldiers" and "citizens" who lived and worked at Fort Tejon over 150 years ago. Call the Fort Park at 661-248-6692 for info on other scheduled events.

Like us, the Fort Tejon Historical Association (not the same as the park) is hurting for new members to help them put on future events such as the **Lost Trades/Civil War Technologies Fair** on **June 6**. You can contact them at info@forttejonca.org.

OUR BIG 3-0

This year the Ridge Route Communities Museum and Historical Society celebrates the 30th year since its inception in May 1996. It began as a group of people celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Lebec Post Office in 1995 that decided that there was a need for an historical society. By 1997 it was incorporated with the state of California, and in 1998 it was able to start displaying some of the many artifacts that Bonnie Kane had collected in a tiny storefront in Lake of the Woods.

BOARD CHANGES

We would like to welcome Vincent Dobradenka II to our Board, who is also our new Vice President! Kenna Mattox has chosen to retire from the Board; we would like to thank her for her years of service. She will still be helping out as a volunteer.

And we would like to wish Board Member Kevin Woten a speedy recovery.

PLEASE SUPPORT THE BUSINESS MEMBERS THAT SUPPORT US!!!!!!

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* Ridge Route Preservation Organization board member.

VISIT OR CONTACT US

Location: 3515 Park Drive
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Hours: Fri., Sat., Sun.: 12-4 pm

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Text: 661-245-7747

Website: ridgeroutemuseum.org
Email: info@ridgeroutemuseum.org

Historian/Curator: Bonnie Ketterl Kane

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!!

HELP!

We always need volunteers to help docent during the hours that we are open (Fri. Sat. Sun. 12-4). So if you have some free time, and are interested in history, please contact us. Training will be provided. Other skills, such as I.T., handyman, are also needed.

NEWSLETTER

Editor: Chandra Sargent Mead

Printing:



MANY THANKS TO
TEJON RANCH
C O M P A N Y

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