Kagel Canyon

Kagel Canyon is located about twenty-three miles northeast of Los Angeles Civic Center. It is at an elevation of 1,500 feet, with a difference of about 1,000 feet from the lowest to the highest point. The nearest city is Sunland, five miles away. San Fernando, which serves as it's post office, is seven miles distant.

Kagel Canyon is unique in that it is located within the boundary of the Angeles National Forest, which compromises approximately one-fourth of the area of Los Angeles County, or 691,000 acres.[1] The Canyon is policed by the County Sheriff's Department in Montrose. It is served by water wells located in the canyon (County District No. 21). Indeed, in many cases private wells supply their owners. Kagel has its own fire station, No.74, also a county function, but the trash pick-up is by a private party on contract. County flood control has also been active in the area. Southern California Edison Company supplies the electricity; General Telephone Company, the phone service; and Southern California Gas Company, the natural gas. The roads are owned and maintained by the county, but there are no sidewalks or sewers.

Indians were no doubt the first inhabitants. Attesting to this is the fact that there have been found artifacts such as obsidian and slate arrowheads, shards of pottery, and mortars. We have an area near Dexter Park known as "The Burial Ground." Many stands of California like oak and some blue oak are found in this and the adjacent canyons. The canyon today still has a full complement of Southern California wildlife, namely: deer (Columbian black tail), coyotes, raccoon, opossum, bobcat, fox, rabbit, quail (both mountain and valley), hawks (many species), wild pigeon, dove, owls, snakes, squirrel (tree and ground), horned toads and many other kinds of fauna. So, you see this area had to be the haunt of "yesterdays native." His bones have come to light in road excavations near here, too.

The Mediterranean vegetation could be termed climatic, as some of the trees and shrubs would be classed in the hundreds of years of age, especially the oaks.[2] Some of the hillsides are grown so thick with brush that a person can travel only downhill through it.

The canyon is, as with a large portion of western California, a sedimentary rock zone.[3] However many forms of metamorphic rocks are found here, also, such as gneiss, schist and slate. The layering of the various strata with their weaker bedding planes is clearly evident. We have varves visible on Kagel Canyon Road, where the road was cut in. As for minerals, we have garnet, graphite, mica, and a range of silicates. Granit is deposited in the form of large boulders in the stream bed. There are granite outcrops at the head of the canyon. All in all, it is an interesting area for study and speculation.

The profile of the canyon is one of steep mountains with angles of rise of forty-five degrees or less. There are fossils imbedded on a ridge overlooking the canyon, attesting to the fact that in some era this whole area was submerged beneath the sea. The elements of climate have left a marked alignment of the various ridges, saddles, and peaks. Tectonic forces are evident in their work on the sedimentary layers. We have deposits basically horizontally upended, to reveal a sandwich like appearance at an oblique angle to the observer. There are anti-clines in stages of compression and tension, signs of faulting and shearing of layers. In winter, if there is sufficient rain one can witness how mountain ridges are sharpened through the lubrication of underlying material and the force of gravity.

The first home in Kagel Canyon was built with adobe by Mr. Kagel, in about 1900. It is still occupied. (However, a used brick veneer and wooden siding, later added, disguise its true material. This is known as the "Burkhart Home".) No roads were in existence at this time, and travel was by horse, mule, or on foot. It was a picturesque place, though, as a meandering stream ran all year, down through oaks, holly, mountain laurel, and stream-related plants such as willow, alder, etc.

In 1915 a homesteader by the name of Richardson filed claim on the first water rights. He was located on a quarter section in the upper part of the canyon. In 1918 graphite was discovered in a schistic deposit at the head of the canyon, and the Los Angeles Graphite Company was formed. Ten thousand dollars was put up to build and start production at the mine. Large Timbers (about 12" x 12") of long lengths and much hardware (hand forged) was hauled in. Water was the deciding factor in the ultimate failure of this enterprise. The winters produced an ample amount for the mine force and production, but during the summers springs dried up and streams that high up in the canyon ceased to run. Mr. Maltman, the superintendent of the mine, had his work cut out for him. He had to find a market for his graphite. On the strength of a promise from a paint company in San Francisco, considerable tonnage was produced. However, when a sampling was tested, it was found that a white silicate impurity made the graphite unsuitable for the paint manufacturer.
Water!! Again, if enough were available, the graphite could be washed to render it pure enough for usage.[4]

Meanwhile, a road was constructed by Mr. Maltman with the aid of a Yuba tractor, whose agents were located on Second Street in Los Angeles. This road ran two miles in to the mine. Some parts of the road were so steep that the first auto to use it, a Packard bringing the mine owners up to see their investment, had to be assisted by the tractor. The excessive grades were never lessened, so part of the ritual of coming downhill was the attachment of the tractor to the back of a car or wagon and using it as a brake.

A forest fire in 1918 burned from the Pasadena foothills to Newhall in the short time of two and one-half days. Signs of this fire are visible today in the form of scarred native conifers; these are big-cone Douglas fir.[5] The graphite mine escaped damage and its rotting timbers and shoring exist today, although they are seen by hikers only, as the road to the mine is now only a fire road and would be too steep for cars, anyway.

In 1923 there were four houses in the canyon. One, if it could be termed a house, measured twelve feet by twelve feet. This house was actually a still and it had, at one time, "white whiskey from the floor to the ceiling and hog meat hanging from the rafters." Water was obtained directly from the creek. One homesteader by the name of Ernest White, with his wife Bertha, and tiny baby, Mildred Lee, built a house on his property at the head of the canyon. Four thousand board feet of lumber were purchased from the Vernon Lumber Company on Vernon Avenue in Los Angeles. It was loaded on a four-wheeled iron-tired wagon. It was then pulled by a Model "T" Ford to the bottom of Kagel Canyon, then a mule was added for traction and the load proceeded another two miles to the graphite mine. At this point the Ford was of no use, so the lumber was transferred to a wooden sled with steel runners, and at about eight hundred feet at a time, was then pulled by mule to the home-site, which was another mile away. This was accomplished in clear weather. Rain was another matter. No one moved around much until the rains were over and the washouts repaired. The mule and a Fresno scraper usually did this. The Yuba tractor was used, too, but was no match for the mule if the ground was very wet.

The house was completed the 18th. Of June, 1923. It boasted a built-in cooler for keeping fresh vegetables and goat's milk and, in Mrs. White's mind, this has no equal today. Lettuce could be kept a week and be as crisp as the day it was put in. This was accomplished by washing and wrapping a head in several layers of newspaper and placing it in the cooler, which was on the north side of the house. This house too still stands, but is no longer occupied, as the Whites decided living farther down the canyon was more convenient for work and living in general.

In 1923 a Mr. Peters arrived in the canyon. He came from Wall Street in New York City. With him was his secretary, whose name was Miss Rhodes. Mr. Peters dealt in mining claims, deeds, and other legal papers, and through manipulation he acquired about eighty acres of land. He formed the Peter Rhodes Corporation, and subdivided his land into lots about forty by sixty feet. He formed a club, built a swimming pool, a tennis court, and

a miniature golf course. Then he sold lots for the erection of weekend retreats. He also built a dance hall, which was a drawing card for the weekend merrymakers. One Sunday he attracted a crowd of 3,000 people for his promotion. Lighting for the night's dancing was accomplished with the use of generators and storage batteries.

Streets for this promotion were scraped in with the mule and the Fresno. Two large stone pillars were laid up as boundary markers and the streambed was contained by rock walls along its bank for a short distance. A check damn about six feet high was built of stone and mortar above the property. It had an overflow passage that needed constant attention because debris often stopped it up. This dam was a factor in a later lawsuit over the flooding of a home located below it.

At this time, in the year 1928, the canyon had a population of about fifteen permanent residents. The land was owned by the Peter Rhodes Corporation, Mr. Kagel, Mr. Banks, and Mr. Herrick, who had one hundred and sixty acres in citrus, olives and avocados, in the upper canyon, a quarter section now owned by the Glen Haven Mortuary.

In 1934 the canyon acquired the land for Dexter Park. A swap was made between the Department of Agriculture and the County of Los Angeles. For the area that now comprises Big Pines Recreation Area near Wrightwood, the county received the area for Dexter Park (about one square mile for fifteen square miles).

In 1930 the Kagel Canyon Improvement Association was formed. By 1936 they had acquired enough political influence to have a sixty-eight thousand dollar bond issued against the land, and with the W.P.A. assistance a water system was implemented. Two wells brought in in 1939 amply served until after World War II. One hundred and forty water meters was the "population" at this time. People weren't counted, because this was still a weekend retreat for most of the owners. So mist of the people were part-time residents. However, because of the depression in the 1930's some people found it more economical to live permanently in their weekend retreats than to maintain their homes in town.[6]

Construction and population influx were more or less at a standstill during the war

years 1941 through 1945. With war's end and the veterans' return, along with a mass migration from the eastern United States to the west coast, the canyon was rapidly populated.

At this time the inadequacies of the Peter Rhodes Corporation began to manifest themselves. Lots were too small to build on. Roads were too narrow and too light for normal traffic. Poor surveying had located some lots on streets rights of way, and in some cases houses were built on the street. However, these problems were minor compared with the water problem.

Each summer, beginning about the month of June, it became necessary for water to be rationed. At first the storage tanks were simply allowed to run dry. This meant there was no water for a day or two in succession. Later, and hourly system was put into effect. The water would be off from 6:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m., then on until about 9:00 a.m., then off again until about 2:00 p.m. Then it was on from 2:00 until 6:00 p.m. The hours varied from time to time, but in general this was the pattern in effect.

You can imagine what happened. While the water was on, people would water lawns, wash cars, and do anything that required water. They would fill every available container, including their bathtubs. This water in stored containers was seldom used, so when the time came for the water to be turned on again, all the containers were emptied and fresh water was again put in them. As a result, some residents at high elevations on the system received a combination of mud and air for water. Many remedial measures were tried in an effort to stop the waste, but none were very effective.

The first wells had a depth of about twenty-eight feet and pumped about three hundred gallons per minute into storage tanks of 50,000 gallons' capacity. Wells now have a depth approaching 250 feet, and are good producers at 150 gallons per minute.

In 1963 one mane I knew drilled four dry wells before striking a meager supply of water in the fifth well.

The first wells were hand-dug. One man dug like this: he placed a piece of concrete pipe, three feet in diameter, on end in a shallow hole. He then crawled inside and dug around the bottom edge, lowering the pipe as he dug. Another section was placed on top of the first when it reached ground level. As he got deeper he used a bucket and windlass. He came out the same way. In this manner he dug a well of over one hundred feet in depth. Since 1950, though most wells have been dug with machinery.

In addition to the water wells, we have a water tunnel. This is a tunnel driven in a hillside either at a spring or in a ledge where seepage and capillary action are such that a supply of water can be dammed up. The tunnel is used as a storage tank. A dam is built near the entrance and the water that is backed up is siphoned off into a water tank below the tunnel.

Upper Kagel is not supplied water by county wells. A few private wells supply some of the people, but others must haul in their water. This is usually done by the use of a tank of 500 to 1,000 gallons' capacity placed on the back of a pick-up truck. For this reason there is still much land in the native state. Also, the Southern California Gas Company does not as yet service this area, so cooking and heating must be done either by butane or some other fuel.

A lack of water is probably the greatest deterrent to the development of any faction of southern California, whether it be housing development, manufacturing, or agriculture. We slowly improve in increasing available supplies and improving distribution techniques, but, like our freeways or transportation systems, we are always behind the demands.

Flood control has been practiced in the canyon from time to time. In periods of brief heavy rainfall, the stream becomes a raging torrent of brown silt-laden muddy water. Boulders up to two feet in diameter which are being washed downstream raise a din that can be heard through-out the canyon. There is a loud clicking noise, along with a scraping, muffled roar. This lasts for several hours after the rain has stopped.

Residents do a great deal of sandbagging to protect their land and buildings from erosion and its effects. The county fire station has a supply of sandbags that are passed out to whoever needs them. I have spent more than one night filling and placing sandbags. This is usually a neighborhood effort, with women and children working too.

County Flood Control has been trying to clear and establish an effective channel in the streambed, but property lines, rights of way, and people—along with the lack of funds—make it a difficult task. However, much progress has been made.

Written by: Ralph Vradenburg in approximately 1969

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[1] Angeles National Forest. A Map. Forest Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, California.
[2] Glenn T. Trewartha, Elements of Geography, Fifth Edition, p. 436
[3] Pough, A Field Guide to Rocks and Minerals.
[4] This and the following eight paragraphs are from a personal interview with Mr. and Mrs. Ernest White, still residents of Kagel Canyon.
[5] G.W. Gause, Trees of the Angeles National Forest
[6] Dr. Eunice Stebbins, A Paper.