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A Sense of Place

The Real Canyon

Where everybody knows your dog
by Cary Baker

When I was growing up in Chicago, a city free of anything that might be called topography, I heard Joni Mitchell sing of a place called Laurel Canyon. I imagined it was someplace sublimely rustic, far away from the city. Which is why when I moved to Los Angeles and took my first drive up the hill from Crescent Heights, I laughed. Topanga Canyon, I soon discovered, was what I'd really had in mind. But not even that seemed to fulfill my vision of canyon living, what with its elite real-estate values and Malibu frontage. So I put my quest for the ideal everyman canyon hideaway out of my mind. Then I discovered Kagel Canyon by accident.

Still new to SoCal, I wondered what lurked beyond the "next" set of mountains, the San Gabriels. One day I shot up the 101 to the I-5 to Osborne Street. Heading due northeast through Pacoima, I viewed Ritchie Valens' junior high school and grave, explored the foothills of Lakeview Terrace where Van Nuys Boulevard inexplicably runs east-west, and found myself on Kagel Canyon Road. After a demarcating stop sign, followed by a welcoming kiosk/bulletin board visible from the road, the city disappeared and a little mountain village began. Now, here was a place out of a Joni Mitchell or CSN&Y song. It was a place that seemed altogether removed from the density of L.A. — yet within clear reception of *Kevin & Bean* and *Hal Fishman News at 10*.

On a recent Sunday, I took a drive up to the one business establishment in the unincorporated village of Kagel Canyon, Don & Cyn's Hideaway. The tap has been there since 1947 — its predecessor since 1921 — and remains one of only three bars in the county that permit equestrians to hitch their horses out front. Bartender Roger Landsberger often rides in from his home elsewhere in the Northeast Valley foothills. The wood-paneled tavern, occasionally featured in Westerns, sprawls over three rooms plus a patio where country and blues bands perform. The crowd on a Sunday afternoon is a lively mix of canyon residents, bikers, equestrians and those who come from considerable distances to bask in the friendly roadhouse vibe, watch NASCAR races and partake in weekend barbecues and jams. According to Landsberger, "If you're here more than two hours and don't know everyone in the room, we don't want you here."

Drive directly uphill from the Hideaway on labyrinthine streets with names like East Trail and West Trail, and you discover that Kagel is the epitome of a California canyon town. Wood cabins that might have come from Big Bear or Running Springs cohabit with horse ranches, homes that vary from rustic to right out of a Van Nuys subdivision, and the odd gated mansion. Kagel Canyon was reportedly settled by Cecil B. De Mille, who purchased the land to give his daughter a place to ride. When his family returned the parcel to Los Angeles County (in which it remains unincorporated), it was with the proviso that it remain horse country. The land was eventually subdivided into oblong lots along its hillside trails, but remains refreshingly free of mass development.

A group of Hideaway regulars revel in the lost art of knowing everyone in town — and their dogs. They help each other move a bale of hay. They look after each other's horses. They give each other rides to the Hideaway. They host some mean backyard barbecues. "Money doesn't work in this town," says

one. "There are people with money and people with limited money. But we really don't care whether you're a movie producer or a ditch digger. We're much more concerned with whether you have good behavior."

"Y'know, the gangbangers from the Valley really don't feel comfortable up here. Our crime rate is nearly zero," boasts a longtime resident. "They'll come up this way, maybe tag a sign or two and go back home, because they figure horse owners live here, and we probably have *guns!*"

"We really love what we have here," he adds, then pauses a moment. "But we don't brag about what we've got. We've got enough people here already."

Don & Cyn's Hideaway, 12122 N. Kagel Canyon Road, Kagel Canyon; (818) 890-1225.