

Historic Resources

Besides containing unique natural, geological, and archaeological resources, Topanga State Park includes a number of historic resources. Ranging from the ruins of a suspected Spanish/Mexican-era lime kiln, the site of once popular rodeos, and examples of an automobile court and "Gentleman's Ranch" from the 1930s and 1940s, respectively, they represent the area's historic growth and development from the early 18th to late 20th centuries. It is important to identify, locate, record, and evaluate these historic resources, as well as their present condition and threats, as part of the general plan process.

Historical Overview

The park unit has been witness to over 460 years of history dating from the days of Spanish nautical and terrestrial exploration, through various attempts by Spanish, Mexican and early American settlers to eke a living out of the area's coastal and mountainous regions. Strategically located between Santa Monica Bay and the San Fernando Valley, the area's rugged landscape has both helped and hindered development. In hindsight, the area's inaccessibility has led to the preservation of a unique open space for public recreational use. For the sake of expediency, the park's history is divided into several important historical eras that roughly correspond to its chronological development from 1542 to 2001.

During this time, the ships of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and Sebastian Vizcaíno sailed past the mouths of Topanga Creek in 1542 and 1602. Crashing waves, a narrow beach shelf, and towering palisades prevented the 1769 Portolá land expedition from traveling north via a coastal route along northern Santa Monica Bay. Eighteenth-century Spanish missionaries or Mexican rancheros may have been responsible for erecting and using a barrel-like stone masonry limestone kiln at Caballero Canyon. The names of several canyons cutting through the park, *Temescal*, *Las Pulgas*; and *Santa Ynez*, date from the area's historic Mexican rancho period.

The names of other locations throughout the park reflect a period of its history dominated by homesteaders seeking "the American dream" of land ownership and self-determination. These include the *Robison* and *Cheney Fire Road*. Unable to produce more than firewood and honey, some residents began to promote the area's scenic and recreational value. The Elkhorn Camp site in the Lower Topanga Canyon area was one of a number of tourist-oriented recreational camps as well as cabin homesteads sprung up along Topanga Canyon during the turn of the 20th century.

Early-to-mid-20th century road improvements through the canyon and along the coast highway brought additional automobile-oriented tourists and settlers into the region. Several historic park locations date from this period: the Topanga Ranch Motel (built on the site of the former Coopers Auto Camp), Trippet Ranch, and the Will Rogers Hideaway Cabin and Anatol Josepho Ranch sites.

Scarred limestone and sandstone cliffs along Quarry Canyon give testament to once-extensive, and controversial early to mid-20th century extractive industries associated with noted real estate developer Alphonzo Bell. Ironically, Bell's son, a local U.S. Congressman, assisted local land preservationists in lobbying the State of California to set aside land that would eventually become Topanga State Park.