

Past Present – Chatsworth Historical Society

Ann & Ray Vincent February 2017

History of Burro Flats, Rocketdyne, and the Santa Susana Field Lab

The presentation at our November meeting covered 4 areas:

Pre-history (Native Americans)

Ranching history

Movie history

Santa Susana Field Lab history

144-65 million years ago - The Chatsworth Formation is created, at 5,000 feet below sea level. Over the years the North Pacific Plate collided with the North American Plate, and now the formation is 1,000 feet above sea level. During that time ancient seashores eroded the sandstone boulders and created unique erosion features and caves.



1800 AD For over 5,000 years Chumash Indians paint elaborate colorful pictographs at the Burro Flats Painted Cave. Studies have shown that there are astro-archeological features to the paintings that tie to the Winter Solstice.

1795-1865 El Rancho Simí, 113,000 acres was granted to Santiago Pico.



1888 The Simi Land and Water Company subdivides all of the land of Rancho Simi. Subdivision A is

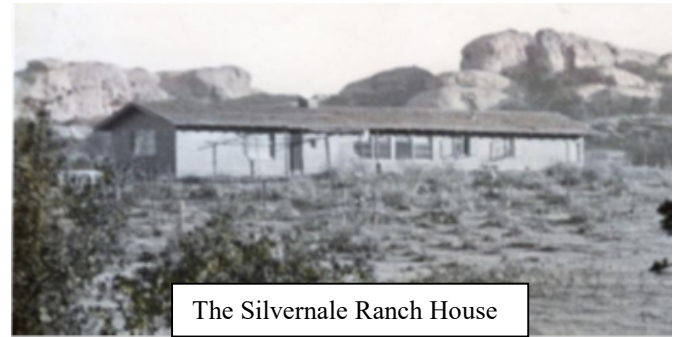
identified as Potrero del Burro, “Pasture of the Burro”.

1910 Eddie Maier, millionaire beer brewer in downtown Los Angeles, purchases Subdivision A, Rancho Potrero del Burro and the Canada Aliso.

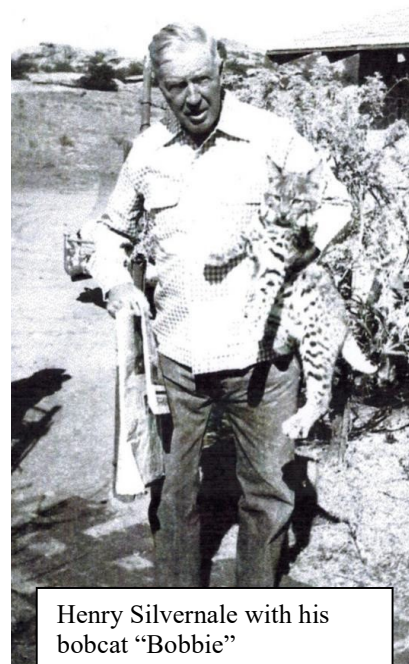


Eddie Maier is a strong supporter of the Elks Club and is best known for Brew 102 beer.

1939 Henry Silvernale, a 57 year old dentist in Santa Monica, his son Max and family friend Bill Hall purchase “Burro Flats” of Tract A. They will own Burro Flats for 15 years, until 1954. They call it “Sky Valley Ranch”.

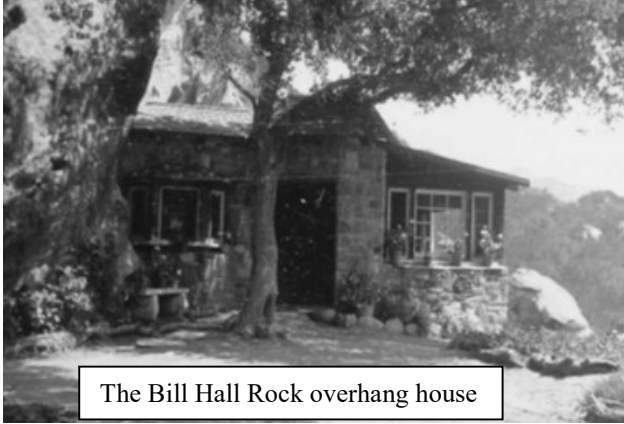


Sally Silvernale Ziegler shared a story (15 years old at the time): “Another exciting event in the last few



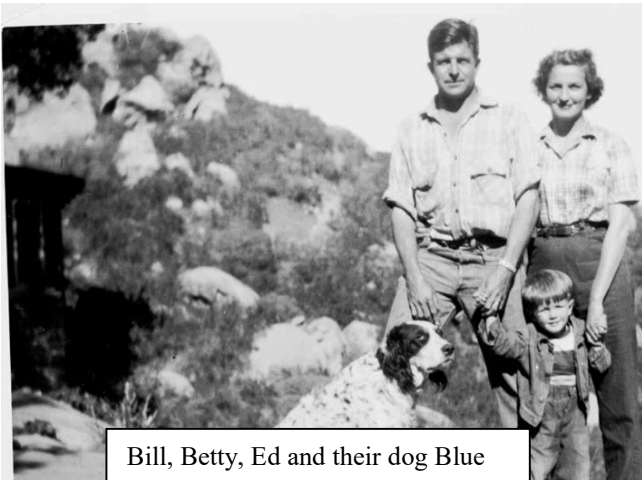
years was the addition of an orphaned female bobcat. We named her “Bobbie”. She was adorable. Grandma Mom would set up the dining table for all of the movie people, and Bobbie would hop up and clean off the table. She was a real character.”

Bill Hall and Betty Knapp lived in a house built into the side of a giant rock overhang, and raised



The Bill Hall Rock overhang house

two children there. Betty was an author of children's books and used the serene setting of Burro Flats as inspiration.



Bill, Betty, Ed and their dog Blue

From 1937 to 1954, a total of 43 movies were filmed at Burro Flats. Those movies include 1941 Robin Hood of the Pecos with Roy Rogers, 1947 California with Barbra Stanwyck and Ray Milland, and 1954 Apache with Burt Lancaster.



1947 The movie "California" is filmed at Burro Flats. It includes a classic wagon train scene with 15 covered wagons.

1945 During WWII, North American Aviation (NAA) built more than 42,000 aircraft, the most of any American company, with a plane coming off the production line every 15 minutes in Inglewood, California. At the end of the war, company employment dropped abruptly from 91,000 to 5,000. At that point the company decided to meet future military requirements as opposed to focusing on commercial aviation.

1947 NAA determines that their rocket propellant testing in Inglewood is too dangerous. They lease land in the Santa Susana Hills from the Dundas family.



1949 The first rocket test stand is completed in a natural, bowl-shaped depression in what is today referred to as Area I. "Santa Susana's Bowl Area" was the first liquid-fuel, high-thrust rocket engine test facility in the continental United States with multiple, permanent test stands.

In 1950, the first American-made large liquid propellant rocket engine was tested at Vertical Test Stand 1.

From 1954 and 1957, additional test stand complexes were built. The sites were given the sequential names Alfa, Bravo, Coca, and Delta.

Milestones soon followed as the site supported virtually every major space program in U.S. history, from men landing on the moon to the Space Shuttle.



Over the course of nearly 60 years, 17,000 rocket engine tests were conducted at Santa Susana, known by the employees as “The Hill”.

1957 President Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” initiative inspires the Sodium Reactor Experiment (SRE) conducted at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory. Edward R. Murrow televises the SRE's start on his program, “See It Now”, as it powered the nearby city of Moorpark.

1959 the SRE becomes the first civilian reactor to suffer a serious accident when more than a third of its fuel rods overheated and melted through their protective cladding. During the accident, coolant continued to circulate throughout the reactor core and the reactor vessel remained intact, preventing a meltdown. Following the accident, the SRE was

repaired and operations continued, without incident, until the end of the project in 1964.



Mayor Sam Yorty operates the nuclear power reactor in 1963

1967 North American Rockwell (Rockwell) becomes the corporate successor to NAA

1988 nuclear research ends.

1996 Rocketdyne sells their aerospace entities to Boeing.

2006 rocket engine testing ends.

2007 Boeing, NASA and the Department of Energy sign a cleanup agreement with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC).

Cleanup efforts to date:

Over 300 buildings have been demolished and removed from the site.

The building that housed the Sodium Nuclear Reactor Experiment (SRE) has been demolished, completely excavated, and removed.

Stormwater treatment systems are in place, with 270 groundwater monitoring wells.

900 acres have been restored with native plants to reinstate the watershed and habitat.



2017 Today, Boeing offers site tours of the Field Lab to explain the history of the site, and the progress of their continuing cleanup efforts.

There is also an ongoing debate as to what final level of cleanup should be required, cleanup to “background” or a “risk based” cleanup.

Concurrently, local community efforts are being pursued to preserve the 2,850 acre SSFL as a natural and historic area. Efforts include:

1. The area has been included in the Rim of the Valley Corridor Project.
2. Nomination of the area as a National Monument.
3. The Santa Ynez Chumash have established Sacred Site status to the area.
4. Discussions are underway at NASA to consider keeping a few of the test stands as a part of the historic resources of the site. As a part of the 2007 agreement all test stands were to be removed.
5. The Santa Susana Field Lab no longer exists. It is proposed that the site in the future be renamed “Sky Valley”.