

OTP Hike for 3/26/97
Host: N. Spotts
Starting time: 9:30 AM

39 Sierra Madre to Orchard Camp

9 miles round trip; 2000' elevation gain
Classification: Moderate
Season: November-May
Topo map: Mt. Wilson

FEATURES

Beautiful Little Santa Anita Canyon is steeped in history. Ages before the arrival of the white man, Gabrielino Indians forged a rough footpath up the canyon and on to Mt. Wilson. Benjamin Wilson, proprietor of the Lake Vineyard Rancho in what is now San Marino and a prominent Southern California citizen, built the first modern trail into the San Gabriels up this canyon in 1864 to obtain timber from the mountaintop that was subsequently named in his honor. In 1889 the Harvard University telescope was toted up this trail piece by piece, to occupy the first observatory on Mt. Wilson.

In a secluded glen, shaded by giant canyon oaks and big-cone spruce, near the head of the main canyon, "Don Benito"—as Wilson was known to his many California friends—built his "Halfway House" in 1864. This original Halfway House, so named because it was midway between Sierra Madre and Mt. Wilson, was a construction camp for the original Mt. Wilson Trail. Later it was homesteaded by two colorful mountaineers, George Aiken and George Islip, who planted a small grove of apple, cherry, plum and chestnut trees. With the maturing of these trees, the place became known as Orchard Camp. Around 1890 James McNally made Orchard Camp into a trail resort, and for fifty years this sylvan hostelry, under a succession of owners, was one of the most popular in the range. Its peak year was 1911, when over 40,000 persons signed the camp register. Orchard Camp was abandoned in 1940. Today the buildings and tents are gone. But the enchanting streamside spot still holds appeal for lovers of sylvan seclusion.

Today, most of Little Santa Anita Canyon lies within the Sierra Madre Historical Wilderness Area, owned by the city of Sierra Madre. For years, Ambrose Zaro, "the grand old man" of the trail, has almost singlehandedly

maintained it. Recent washouts have been repaired, but you still need to proceed with caution across some sections.

Our very pleasant trail trip follows this historic footpath from Sierra Madre to old Orchard Camp and back. Take along a picnic lunch and a camera; you'll be so delighted by the woody charm of Orchard Camp you'll want to stay awhile.

DESCRIPTION

Drive to the junction of Mira Monte Avenue and Mt. Wilson Trail Drive in Sierra Madre. Do not leave your car above the immediate area of the junction; Mt. Wilson Trail Drive is a private road.

Proceed about 150 yards up Mt. Wilson Trail Drive to the new beginning of the Mt. Wilson Trail, marked by a large wooden sign on the left. Follow the trail alongside some private homes up to the ridgetop road, where the main footpath begins. Pass the locked gate and continue up the trail as it climbs steadily along the west slope of the canyon, far above the stream. In 1½ miles you reach a junction. The main trail goes straight ahead, staying high above the stream, climbing steadily. The trail branching right drops to the creek (the site of old Quarterway House), then follows the stream up-canyon, fording the creek twice before climbing to rejoin the main trail in 1 mile. Go either way.

A short distance beyond where the trails rejoin, you round a ridge and enter the welcome shade of a live-oak forest. The trail climbs steadily for another mile, then drops to the small creek trickling down from Decker Spring. Beyond, you climb steeply, then contour ½ mile through cool forest to Orchard Camp, located on an oak- and spruce-shaded bench just above the sparkling creek. The huge canyon-oak tree here is one of the oldest and largest oaks in the range. (A core test places its age at 1,500 years.)

Return the way you came.

Closest freeway access is Baldwin Ave exit off of 210 Fwy.

Lunch @ Orchard Camp!