

Vicky's Hike – February 21, 2001

Mount Lowe Railway Loop Tour-Altadena to Mt. Lowe Trail Camp

12 miles round trip; 2800' elevation gain
Classification: Moderate
Topo maps: Pasadena, Mt. Wilson

*Millard Canyon from
Sunset Ridge Trail*



FEATURES

The old Mount Lowe Railway is long gone, remembered only by those who traveled in these mountains during the early decades of the century. Yet once it attracted tourists by the thousands. No visit to Southern California was complete without taking in the thrilling ride up the cable incline to Echo Mountain, then the twisting trolley trip to rustic Ye Alpine Tavern, nestled deep in a forest cove on the slopes of Mt. Lowe. When the mountain railway was built, it was considered one of the engineering wonders of the world.

The Mt. Lowe Railway and resort complex was the idea of two visionary Pasadenans-Civil War balloonist and inventor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, and engineer David J. Macpherson. With Lowe supplying the capital and Macpherson directing operations, the railway was hacked out of the mountainside in three stages during 1892 to 1895. First was a trolley line from Altadena into Rubio Canyon, where the first of Lowe's popular edifices -Rubio Pavilion - was located. Then an incline rail way climbed 1300' to Echo Mountain, where two hostleries - The Chalet and Echo Mountain House - were perched. Finally, a 4-mile winding trolley ride, past airy viewpoints such as Horseshoe Curve, Cape of Good Hope, Grand Circular Bridge and Granite Gate, carried awestruck visitors to Ye Alpine Tavern (later called Mt. Lowe Tavern). Lowe was bankrupted by the venture, and for most of the 43 years of its operation, the Pacific Electric Railway Company ran the complex. From its opening in 1893 until the burning of Mt. Lowe Tavern in 1936, an estimated 3,100,000 persons visited the renowned mountain railway and resort complex.

Above Echo mountain, the scars of the winding railway are clearly visible today, and it is possible to hike to the tavern site along its broken bed, the upper section of which is now part of the Sunset Ridge-Mt. Lowe fire road. At the old tavern site, under spreading oaks and spruces, the Forest Service has constructed the Mt. Lowe Trail Camp, with tables, stoves, rest rooms and a spring fed drinking fountain.

A half mile out from the trail camp, overlooking the San Gabriel Valley, are the foundations of old Inspiration Point, where tourists took in the view that was described in Mt. Lowe Railway days as "breathtaking, beautiful, inspiring." Today, sadly, no such claims can be made. Only on those days when winter storms wash the sky clean can you see clearly, the megalopolis below.

For those with vivid imaginations, it is possible to stand among the foundations of Professor Lowe's dream-come-true. The iron rails, the buildings, the holiday crowds are gone, but the scars on the mountain remain as slowly fading legacies to the man's creative talents. This loop trip is for those with such imaginations.

DESCRIPTION

Drive to the north end of Lake Avenue in Altadena and park alongside the road. To your right (east), marked by a sign painted on a stone pillar, is the beginning of the Sam Merrill Trail to Echo Mountain.

Follow the trail east, down across Las Flores Canyon, and up the slopes to Echo Mountain. From Echo Mountain, turn north and follow the broad, graded railway bed around the head of Las Flores Canyon to Sunset Ridge, where you pick up the Sunset Ridge-Mt. Lowe fire road. Within the next mile, you pass such viewpoints of yesteryear as the Cape of Good Hope, Horseshoe Curve, and the most famous of all, Grand Circular Bridge. There is no bridge here now, just a sharp hairpin turn of the road. After following the slope above Millard Canyon for a mile, you round the mountain and turn east high above Grand Canyon, passing through the remains of the rock outcropping once known as Granite Gate. Four miles from Echo Mountain, you finally reach Mt. Lowe Trail Camp, nestled in a grove of oak and spruce. The stone wall foundation just east of camp is all that remains of old Mt. Lowe Tavern.

From the trail camp, continue up the fire road, going right (southeast) at a road junction, one half mile to the cement foundation of Inspiration Point. Immediately east of the point is an unmarked trail dropping into Castle Canyon. Follow this narrow trail as it zigzags steeply down through spruce - and oak-shaded Castle Canyon, around the head of Rubio Canyon, where you cross a small creek (usually water), and over to Echo Mountain again, 2 miles. Then descend the Sam Merrill Trail to Altadena.

SPECIAL THANKS goes to ***Jim Carlin*** For Helping Me Find This Hike And Providing A Description As Well. Thanks Also To ***Dick Battin*** For His Support And Help On The Same Subject.