



7/2/91

Hike #82

Season: All Year

Silver Moccasin Trail

Chilao to Horse Flats Campground

2 miles round trip; 200-foot elevation gain

Chilao to Mount Hillyer

6 miles round trip; 1,000-foot elevation gain

Even on the Angeles National Forest map, the trail looks intriguing: a red dashed line zigs and zags through the heart of the San Gabriel Mountains and connects Chantry Flat and Shortcut Station, Chilao, Cloudburst and Cooper Canyon. Designed by the Los Angeles Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America, the 53-mile-long Silver Moccasin Trail, extends from Charlton Flat to the mountain named for the founder of the Boy Scouts, Lord Baden-Powell. Scouts who complete the week-long trek earn the prized Silver Moccasin award.

One pretty stretch of the Silver Moccasin Trail tours the Chilao country, a region of giant boulders and gentle, Jeffrey pine-covered slopes. Another path—Mount Hillyer Trail—leads to the top of 6,162-foot Mount Hillyer. From the top, you'll get great views to the north of the desert side of the San Gabriels.

During the early 1870s, stagecoach-robber/horse-and-cattle thief Tiburcio Vasquez and his gang hid out in the Chilao country. The stolen horses were pastured in secluded grassland we now call Horse Flats. Vasquez, last of a generation of bandits to operate out of the Southern California backcountry, was captured in 1874. Many reporters visited Vasquez in his Los Angeles jail cell, and the highwayman soon found himself quite a celebrity. He was not an ordinary criminal, he told the press but a patriotic Californio whose goal was to rid Southern California of the gringo influence. Southern Californians loved Vasquez's stories and knew that in a small way, he represented the end of the Wild West; never the less, he was sent to the gallows in 1875.



Tiburcio Vasquez

One exhibit at the Chilao Visitor Center answers a trivia question that perplexes all day hikers who depart from Chilao area trailheads: What exactly does Chilao mean? As the story goes, one of Vasquez's men, Jose Gonzales, lived in a log cabin in the area where the visitor center now stands. Gonzales guarded the hideout and horses. His battle with a huge bear, which he killed using only a knife, earned him the name Chillia—roughly translated as "hot stuff." The name over the last century of use evolved into Chilao.

Located just off Angeles Crest Highway near the trailhead, the Angeles National Forest Chilao Visitor Center is well-worth a visit for the latest in trail, road and weather information. Exhibits interpret flora, fauna and forest history; behind the station is a short nature trail.

Directions to trailhead: From the Foothill Freeway (210) in La Canada, exit on Angeles Crest Highway (2) and wind 27 miles up the mountain road to the signed turnoff for the Chilao Visitor Center. Turn left and follow the paved road past the visitor center a half-mile to signed Silver Moccasin Trail on your right. Parking at the trailhead is limited to a few cars, but there's a wide turnout located just up the road.

The Hike: The trail ascends a manzanita- and yucca-covered slope to the top of a minor ridge. A mile from the trailhead, the trail widens and you reach a signed junction. Here Silver Moccasin Trail swings southeast toward Angeles Crest Highway and Cooper Canyon, but you go right with a retiring dirt road one hundred yards to Horse Flat Campground. The camp, with plenty of pine-shaded picnic tables, is a good rest stop.

Just as you reach the gravel campground road, you head left with the signed Mount Hillyer Trail. The path switchbacks up slopes covered with pine, incense cedar and scrub oaks. Some big boulders suggest a perfect hideout, whether you're fleeing the sheriff or the stresses of modern life.

Up top, Mount Hillyer may remind you of what Gertrude Stein said of Oakland: "There's no there there." The summit is not a commanding pinnacle, but a forested flat. With all those trees in the way, you'll have to walk a few hundred yards along the ridgeline to get your view of the green bandito country to the south and the brown, wrinkled desert side of the San Gabriels to the north.

