

Snow Creek Camp – Oasis For Desert Travelers

Most people in the Pass identify Snowcreek as the small community at the bottom of Mt. San Jacinto, but during the 1940s, 50s and early 60s there was also a Snow Creek Camp at the location of the rest areas. Several people have contacted the library, remembering Snow Creek Camp as an important highway outpost for desert travelers.

Marian (Bryant) Schell was the first to visit the library and tell us about Snow Creek Camp. She provided us with contact information for the Secor family who had lived at Snow Creek Camp and developed the property through the years. The following history was provided by Kathi (Secor) Frisbie:

Kathi's father, Jack Secor, and her grandfather, Albert Secor, purchased the eight-acre Snow Creek Camp site on Highway 99 in 1946, after relocating to the area from Wisconsin by way of San Francisco. Jack and his wife, Margaret, were married in 1947. They began developing the property and soon had two children, Dean and Kathi Secor. Jack Secor was the one who named the compound "Snow Creek Camp." With hard work and a pioneer spirit the Secors began building Snow Creek Camp using the ample supply of rock readily available from the adjoining river beds.

All of the buildings were hand constructed out of the Whitewater river rock. Jack and Albert built a gas station, a beer bar, a small market, an outdoor freezer, bathrooms, several houses, a shower facility and wash house, several storage houses and fifteen spaces for overnight campers. A small creek ran behind the property that was dotted with shade trees. Kathi mentioned that some of the overnight stays turned into much longer ones as campers postponed leaving the comfort and beauty of the desert oasis the Secor's had created.

One of the reasons for the success of Snow Creek Camp was its locations as the first place to stop for water, gas and supplies after coming off of the long, hot desert. The gas station became a Union 76 station and the market was supplied with fresh meats by grandfather Albert. The gas station was mainly used to pump gas and provide emergency services for overheated engines and damaged tires. More serious repairs were sent on to Cabazon or Banning garages.

Kathi remembers Snow Creek Camp as being an idyllic place to grow up. Surrounded by incredible views of Mt. San Jacinto, their backyard was alive with wildlife from the hills and canyons and there were always horses available for rides up into Whitewater Canyon. Along with the natural beauty of rural life in Snow Creek Camp was the excitement created by travelers from all over the country, constantly coming and going. Families "heading west"

would pull off of the highway, rest after their long journeys across the desert, and continue on to their destinations. She also remembers numerous celebrities, especially Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas, stopping at Snow Creek Camp to get ice cream for their kids after visiting desert resorts.

Banning resident Virginia Mills lived at the Whitewater Trout Hatchery (now the Whitewater Preserve) during the 1950s and raised her family in the canyon before electricity or telephone service had been established. She remembers frequent visits with the Secor family at Snow Creek Camp. It was the closest location in the Whitewater area to get supplies and the neighboring families became friends through these years.

As the route of the I-10 freeway continued its path east from Banning in 1961, it made its way toward Snow Creek Camp. The family watched the approaching construction and knew it would mean the demise of their homestead and business. The State of California took their property by eminent domain and made no attempt to move or keep any of the hand-crafted buildings that had been a labor of love by Jack and Albert Secor. All that remains of Snow Creek Camp today are a few of the original trees still visible in the official rest area.

The Secor family relocated to Banning in 1964, regretfully leaving behind the home and life they had built at Snow Creek Camp. Kathi and her family have transferred some old home movies of Snow Creek Camp to dvds that will hopefully be made available at the Banning Public Library as part of our Local History Project. Thanks to Marian Schell, Kathi and Gary Frisbie, and Virginia Mills for their contributions to this article. (Banning Record Gazette, June 17, 2011, by Bill Bell)

Photograph Captions for Article:

Photo Caption #1:

“Secor family photograph of Snow Creek Camp gas station on Highway 99.”

Photo Caption #2:

“1946 Postcard of Snow Creek Camp.”