

Sisquoc Rangers and Pine Mountain Lodge

By David L. Magney

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Pine Mountain Lodge was built in the mid 1890s by a group of merchants and hunters from Ojai and San Buenaventura, who called themselves the Sisquoc Rangers. Pine Mountain Lodge is said to have contained twelve bunks, and made in the style of a typical log cabin from pine trees onsite. It had a stone fireplace at the north end and a gabled roof with wood-shake shingles.



Plate 1. Photograph of Pine Mountain Lodge circa 1900 with Tom Herbert (View northward)¹

The Sisquoc Rangers were a loosely associated group of men that had one commonality, they enjoyed hunting in the Ventura County backcountry. Just who made up the Sisquoc Rangers, and who built the lodge is not exactly known, as I have read of either Ojai or Ventura men comprising the group. However, based on photographs and notes at the Ventura Historical Society, the Sisquoc Rangers included the following individuals: W.H. Granger, George Johnson, J. Frank Newby, Mark van der Bogart, Fred Sheldon, M.D.L. Todd, and Tom Herbert. Other members included W.H. Sheldon and Gene Fordyce.

“Each summer the Rangers would head into the hills for two or three months of camping and hunting. Their escapades into the mountains were classified as hunting trips, but the Rangers would also explore, hunt for Indian artifacts, play games, drink, and ‘shoot at just about anything that moved’”, said Peter Bondurraga.

¹ Photographs courtesy of the Ventura County Historical Society.



Plate 2. Photograph of Sisquoc Rangers displaying group banner in the backcountry (probably on Piedra Blanca).



Plate 3. Photograph of Sisquoc Rangers in 1900. From left to right is W.H. Granger, George Johnson, J. Frank Newby, Mark van der Bogart, Frank Sheldon, and M.D.L. Todd.



Plate 5. Sisquoc Rangers drying meat for jerky while in the backcountry.



Plate 6. George Johnson portrait while mounted, in the backcountry.

During the twenties the Forest Service wanted to raze the lodge, stating that it was a fire hazard, but historical preservationists prevailed and the lodge was left intact but still in disrepair.

In about 1945, the Forest Service, in the form of Forest Supervisor Stephen A. Nash-Boulden was afraid that one of the pine trees in poor health next to the lodge would fall on the cabin and

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hurt or kill someone. Therefore, they sent a crew up to crop down the villainous tree. He sent a couple of fire technicians to the site in order to remove a dead pine tree threatening to fall on the lodge, creating a health hazard.

The technicians used block and tackle to help guide the tree away from the cabin as they chopped the tree down. However, as the tree was being lowered, the block and tackle somehow broke, causing the tree to fall against a neighboring tree from which it bounced and landed squarely on the lodge, destroying its roof. So much for the Forest Service saving this historic lodge. It has been suggested that when the two technicians reported to Nash-Boulden, there were snickers and laughter over the incident.

The remains of the lodge were allowed to remain, only to be dismantled and vandalized over the years. Photographs from 1960 show much of the log walls still intact and used by fire/trail crews by attaching a canvas roof to the walls. By 1961, portions of the walls began crumbling and finally by 1977 there was nothing left but a portion of the old sandstone chimney. Much of the chimney was used for fireplace rings by campers.

The remains of the lodge continued to be used by hunters and backpackers, as well as Forest Service crews, who sometimes rigged up a tent roof. Over the subsequent years the wood of the lodge was used for firewood and the chimney rocks were used for fire rings in the campground. I first saw what remained of the lodge in 1977 when only a portion of the chimney and a couple of the old logs of the lodge remained. Over the years nearly all evidence of these disappeared, as the remaining logs were cut up for firewood and the chimney rocks were used to rebuild the campground fire rings, sometimes at the hands of unknowing Forest Service trail crews. Each year the chimney shrinks due to theft of its stones from campfire rings. In August of 1981, I restacked the chimney to a facsimile of its 1977 condition, only to return in July of 1982 to a chimney dismantled even further. Thus, a bit of backcountry history was destroyed, only to be remembered through recountings such as this.

Do to bureaucratic red-tape, a litigious society, recent wilderness designation of the area, and apathy by those in charge, any ideas of rebuilding this part of our heritage will be nearly impossible. I think it would be wonderful if we could rebuild the old Pine Mountain Lodge on its original site, and put the chimney back together, for all those who may take the time and energy to hike or pack to the wilderness campground to enjoy and ponder the days when no roads crossed over Pine Mountain and the land was truly wild.

Today Pine Mountain Lodge is simply a Forest Service campground located in the Ojai District of the Los Padres National Forest along a National Recreation Trail (Piedra Blanca Trail) up on Pine Mountain. It is located in the heart of the northern part of Ventura County, just north of the Sespe Creek. To get there, say from Ventura, drive north on State Route 33 (formerly known as

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399) through Ojai for about 26 miles until you reach the Rose Valley/Piedra Blanca Recreational Area turnout. Follow the Rose Valley Road to the end (about 6 miles) at Lion's Campground on the Sespe Creek. The trail begins just across the creek and heads due north, with many deviations east and west, for 6.1 miles on the Piedra Blanca Recreation Trail. After 2.6 miles (Twin Forks Campground) you will be hiking nearly straight up, or so it feels. The trailhead at Lion's Camp is at 3,000 feet elevation and Pine Mountain Lodge is at 6,000 feet, a 3,000-foot elevation gain, 2,300 feet gain from Twin Forks. This a hike (overnight) for those in good physical shape. (There are three other ways to get there, from Reyes Creek, Thorn Meadows, and Reyes Peak Campground, but all are longer and almost as tough.) If you can make it, the rewards are plenty.

The best time to go is in the Spring and early Summer when temperatures are not unbearable, streams are still flowing, and the wildflowers are still out.

Besides the profusion of wildflowers, there are pine trees, sandstone rock formations with (small) caves to explore, and some magnificent scenery of the Ventura/Ojai backcountry. On a clear day, you can see the northern Channel Islands to the south, the San Gabriel Mountains to the east, and the southern Sierra Nevada to the northeast, not to mention more local mountains: Mt. Piños/Abel Mountain, Cobblestone, Big Pine/Madulce Peaks, Thorn Point, Topa Topa Mountains, Chief Peak, Hines Peak, Dry Lakes Ridge, White Ledge Peak on the eastern Santa Ynez Mountains, and more.

The campground is nestled under Jeffrey Pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*) and Sugar Pine (*P. lambertiana*), as well as White Fir (*Abies concolor*), Big-cone Spruce (*Pseudotsuga macrocarpa*), and Incense Cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), with wildflowers like Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja* spp.), Golden Yarrow (*Eriophyllum confertiflorum*), tarweeds (*Madia* spp.), Western Wallflower (*Erysimum capitatum*), manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.), Snow Plant (*Sarcodes sanguinea*), Lotus and lupines (*Lupinus* spp.), clovers (*Trifolium* spp.), Wild Heliotrope (*Phacelia ramosissima*), St. John's Wort (*Hypericum formosum* var. *scouleri*), lilies, Miner's Lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*), cinquefoil (*Potentilla* spp.), monkeyflowers (*Mimulus* spp.), penstemons/buglars (*Penstemon labrosus* and *P. centranthifolius*), nightshade (*Solanum* sp.), and many more.

Many interesting plants are found growing along the perennial brook flowing through camp fed by a small spring upstream which gurgles forth from a crack in the rocks barely big enough to put your fingers into.