

## Monrovia Canyon Park

On May 7, 1935, Lewis Buck, a local mining engineer and archeologist, presented an interesting program to the Monrovia Rotary Club, in which he claimed that prehistoric peoples had lived in Monrovia Canyon. Mr. Buck stated that he had conducted a quiet but intense personal investigation of Monrovia and the canyon above, and had located and collected hundreds of stone implements. These implements had been examined by a noted scientist, Roy Chapman Andrews, who verified their authenticity, as well as several reputable museums. Mr. Buck brought a number of the artifacts to the meeting, including hammers, skinners, axes, and a grinding stone he had located near the mouth of the canyon. Early peoples, he said, had found a safe haven in Monrovia Canyon, and had lived there for perhaps thousands of years.

At some point in time a little after the middle of the <sup>19</sup>th Century, an adventurous unknown settler discovered the area we now know as Emerson Flat, cleared the land, and made his home under the sheltering oak trees. While nothing is known about this settler, much more is known about the family that succeeded him, the Rankins.

Hibbard and Polly Rankins came to California from Lafayette County, Wisconsin, and discovered Monrovia Canyon in 1874. Monrovia would not come into being for another twelve years, so the canyon was probably known to the Rankins as Sawpit Canyon. Pasadena had just been established as the Indiana Colony. The closest settlement was on the Duarte, where several hundred people had taken up residence beginning in 1872. The Rankins made their home at Emerson Flat, taking advantage of the space that had already been cleared. They planted fruit trees, a garden, and several ornamental shrubs. For protection against the elements, they constructed two cabins under the sheltering oaks. Accounts vary as to the size of the Rankins family. One account says that there were eight children in the family; another states that there were five. While the size of the family is uncertain, one thing is clear--they were sturdy pioneers and they had to work hard to earn a living. Their principal source of income was from the sale of wood, which they gathered in the foothills and then laboriously hauled into Los Angeles by wagon to sell as fuel. The trip into Los Angeles and return took the better part of two days. The Rankins supplemented that income by establishing an apiary that generated many hundreds of pounds of sumac honey.

It is said that Hibbard and Polly Rankins were spiritualists, part of a movement that was prominent in their time. Their oldest daughter was a would-be medium, and the Rankins hosted frequent gatherings of like-minded people in their rustic mountain setting.

Tragedy struck the family in the spring of 1877. Nineteen-year-old Albert Rankins was apprenticed to a blacksmith in San Gabriel. He returned home one Sunday to visit his family, and shortly afterward became violently ill. His illness was diagnosed as typhoid fever, and he died despite the efforts of a young doctor who had taken up

residence nearby, hoping the mountain air would help cure his tuberculosis. Albert's sisters, sixteen-year-old Polly and thirteen-year-old Estella, contracted the disease from Albert and also died. The sorrowing parents buried their three children in an area of rising ground at the west end of Emerson Flat. Soon afterward the solitary setting and the ever-present reminder of their loss was more than Hibbard and Polly Rankins could bear; they left the canyon and returned to Wisconsin. The following year Ernest Rankins, the oldest son in the family, arranged for a triple gravestone to mark the resting place of his three siblings. He, too, then left the canyon. A fire in the canyon several years later destroyed the cabins, and the flood of 1882 further obliterated the site of the Rankins' home. Only the graves remained.

About the time Monrovia was established in the spring of 1886, Monrovia Canyon was discovered once again; this time by the man whose name Emerson Flat now bears--L.H. Emerson. Mr. Emerson settled in the canyon with his family, and brought several acres of land under cultivation. In addition to planting fruit trees around his house, Emerson planted strawberries on the plateau where the Nature Center stands today. A writer for the local newspaper described the view from Emerson Flat in the spring of 1887, "while in front is a grand view of the San Gabriel Valley, the ocean and the harbor at San Pedro, with vessels constantly moving to and fro." There was just one problem. Mr. Emerson decided to divert some of the water flowing in the canyon for his own purposes, and this water was the only water source for the new community of Monrovia! The first diversion, in the summer of 1887, created a water shortage in Monrovia and some hard feelings. The second diversion, the summer following the incorporation of Monrovia, resulted in a heated legal action. The judge ultimately ruled in favor of Monrovia and Mr. Emerson, realizing the truth of the old adage, "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em", left the canyon and moved his family to Monrovia.

Over twenty years passed, while Monrovia continued to enjoy the beauty of the canyon, hiking to the falls and picnicking along the way. But there was no road leading into the canyon itself. The suggestion was made that individual Monroviaans as volunteers address the issue, and the suggestion was met with an overwhelming civic response. July 28, 1911 was set as the day for the work party. Taylor Renaker, member of a pioneer family, was up before dawn, driving through the residential areas of the city and honking his horn to arouse the faithful. Soon a volunteer army had gathered and began the task at hand. Lunch was served to the crew by a group of civic-spirited women, and by the end of the day, to quote John Wiley, "thus was built the road to Emerson Flats." Two years later the road was completed from Emerson Flat to the mesa above, enabling Monroviaans and visitors alike to enjoy the grandeur of the panorama from the mountains to the sea.

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December 1, 2000

I am indebted to Estella Nelson, a member of the Class of 1913, Monrovia High School, for her account in the high school annual entitled "The Three Sequestered Graves". I am also indebted to my predecessor as Monrovia City Historian, Myron Hotchkiss, for his work in transcribing the copies of the "Monrovia Planet" and the "Monrovia Messenger", as well as for the file he compiled on the triple gravestones. Yetta Anson carefully saved the newspaper clipping reporting Lewis Buck's 1935 program for Monrovia Rotary. ( I would like to know what became of the artifacts he collected.) And finally I am indebted to John Wiley for his 1927 "History of Monrovia".