

Fast Break through Big Basin

By Robin Schlirmer

Henry David Thoreau wrote that he required a minimum "four hour jaunt through the woods" per day in order to preserve his health and spirits, exactly the length of time it took to hike the 11-mile Skyline to the Sea trail beginning at Big Basin State Park Headquarters and winding down to Rancho Del Oso across from Highway 1 and Waddell Beach. It was the first day of summer when we caught the last bus out of town, high on nature and anxious to return in time to catch the seventh Lakers-Pistons game. The bus dropped us at the parking lot in front of the Big Basin Sempervirens Room, a rustic wood-and-stone structure built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, FDR's solution to the Great Depression and the need for a national park system. In the adjoining office Ken Morris, supervising ranger for Big Basin State Park, addressed the criticism that the park has not increased its number of campsites in recent years to accommodate the growing public need for outdoor recreation.

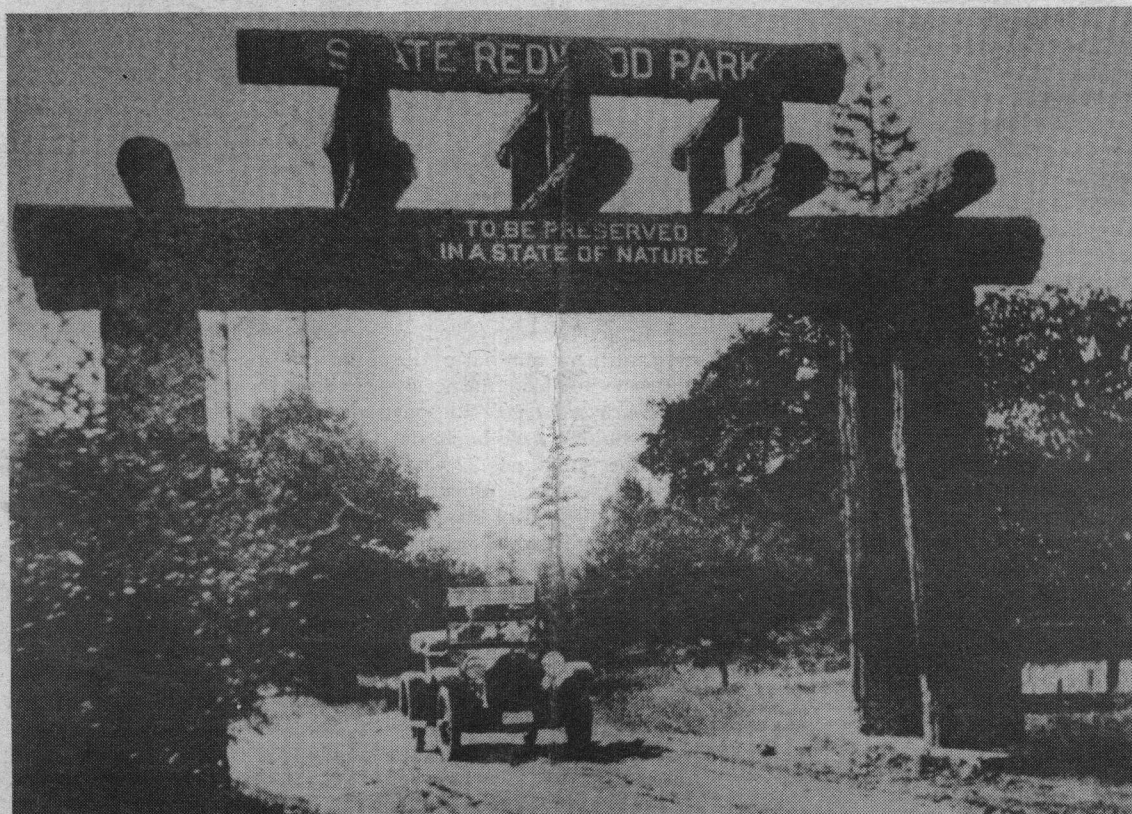
"There's been 180 campsites since before I got here 10 years ago," Morris acknowledged. "There's enough room out there for 1,000,

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if that's what the people want."

In the early 1970s, the state acquired Big Basin's most recent camps, the Wastihi and Huckleberry RV Camps, which provided an additional 100 sites. Although there were ample vacancies and few people on the day we visited, Big Basin receives over 1 million visitors annually, an excessive but normal headcount considering its proximity to the densely populated Bay Area and San Jose and the fact that California redwoods are considered one of the seven living wonders of the world.

Overcrowding occurs on weekends beginning in spring and the park receives its heaviest use in the



Turn-of-the-century visitors at Big Basin State Park

upcoming weeks from mid-July through August. Because of the impact of human use, foliage around camps does not receive the rest it requires to repair itself to a natural state. Ideally, park rangers would like to provide additional camps while closing down the two oldest, most preferred, and impacted camps at Sempervirens and Blooms Creek, in order to allow them to rejuvenate. The glitch is lack of state funds to pay for clearing the land, installing roads, water and sewer facilities, and maintenance. Although local rangers are trying to negotiate with the state department of parks and recreation, providing campsites for weekend and mid-summer overcrowding is not one of the state's priority items.

"It takes money," explained Morris. "If people want more campsites they should tell their legislators. This is a democracy. Know what I mean?"

Sure, I know. Like Page Stegner said: This is public land. We own it.

At 3 o'clock we hit the trail, beginning with a 15-minute climb up to High Hammond Road where the path drops down the ocean side of the ridge toward Waddell Canyon. The thin berms notched into the sides of mountain conjure up the image of Andrew Hill, the man who saved these redwoods, in the days prior to well-kept trails.

A painter and photographer, Hill's vocation as an artist drew him toward an even higher calling—the preservation of the Santa Cruz coastal redwood forest. While

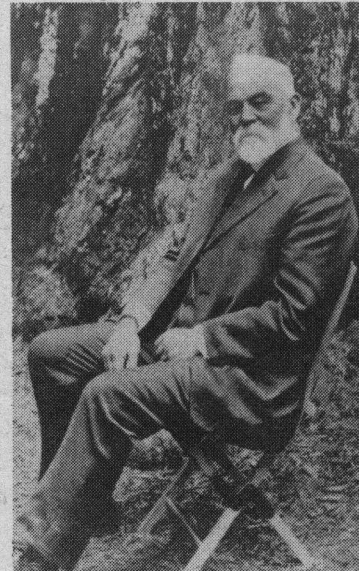
photographing first growth redwoods at Felton Big Trees Grove to accompany a magazine story, Hill had a run-in with the owner of that particular stand of trees, who stubbornly objected to Hill's presence on his land. He demanded Hill's photography plates, then informed him that the first-growth redwoods surrounding them were doomed for the blade. Hill's resulting anger fired up a lifelong crusade.

In May 1900, Hill led an expedition of men and women into the mountains of Big Basin, with the hope of instilling some of his high regard for the big trees into the conscience of his peers, H.C. Middleton in particular, the largest stockholder of Big Basin Lumber Company, a consolidation of 28 local sawmills. During that expedition, Middleton looked up at a 250-foot virgin redwood and saw the light. Meanwhile, Hill planted the idea of the Sempervirens Club of California for the purpose of preserving redwoods by purchasing the area as a public park.

The idea of creating national and state agencies for the purpose of preserving natural areas came as a "phenomenal breakthrough" to repair our plundered natural heritage. By the beginning of the 20th century, over three-quarters of national forest had been depleted, land was relentlessly stripmined for its minerals and natural waterways had begun to be exploited for private monetary gain. John Muir had founded the Sierra Club and succeeded in saving the forests of Yosemite through state, then federal ownership. Understanding the

urgency to conserve our forest resources, President Theodore Roosevelt would appoint the relatively enlightened Gifford Pinchot to the U.S. Forest Service in an effort to utilize his philosophy of controlled logging. But the idea of a national redwood park was not proposed until World War II, and did not materialize until 1965. Hill and his advocates, on the other hand, were destined to experience unprecedented success in their endeavor to preserve redwood forest at a local level.

With the backing of the press, prominent members of the Catholic Church, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, and a tremendous effort by Hill, a bill passed the state legislature allocating funds to buy the park. The



Andrew Putnam Hill, circa 1918

bill was not without influential opposition, however, from politicians who favored a measure for the establishment of a forestry and irrigation commission instead. Aware of the influence his adversaries had over then-California Governor Henry Gage, Hill activated a letter-writing campaign which succeeded in impressing the governor with the extent of public will. In a rare instance of environmental success, Gage put aside political aspirations and listened to the cause of preservation. In 1901, Big Basin became California's first state park.

"Take off your Hodel glasses," said my husband, referring to my shades.

I already had, in time to differentiate the wildflowers from the trees. In the upper section of this trail, redwoods dominate the forest, many of them hollowed and scarred goose pens, the charred reminder of forest fires. Termed *Sequoia sempervirens*, they serve as the canopy for area wildlife and the foundation of a healthy watershed. The depth of their root system stabilizes the soil, preventing erosion and siltation. Tall limbs that thrive in coastal fog break the force of heavy rains. Leaf litter retains moisture, slows runoff so that water finds its way into the ground's alternative channels, through worm holes, animal burrows, old root systems, gathering in subterranean streams and reemerging as springs, which feed into the area's numerous creeks, making up the Waddell watershed.

By the time we had reached the confluence of Kelly and Waddell Creeks below Berry Creek Falls, we'd pass several redwood groves with signs and benches bearing the names of preservation-minded donors. This is a result of the Sempervirens Fund, a volunteer organization whose purpose is raising funds to purchase additional regional parklands. Their objective for Big Basin is to incorporate the park's "proposed boundary" into its actual boundary, essentially to the entire Waddell drainage. They act as any buyer would, purchasing from a willing seller, with the addition of matching funds from the state.

Flanked by several holdings of privately owned timberland including Big Creek Lumber, Santa Cruz Lumber, and Gazos Creek Tree Farm (the owners of Gray Whale Ranch), the park has grown patchwork-style to 18,000 acres. Currently, the fund is concentrating its purchases in the Last Chance Road vicinity and is making a concerted effort to extend several regional state park holdings so that trails provide a continuum of

extended backpacking possibilities.

After two hours of power walking with one five-minute break, our legs ached. The thin Skyline to the Sea Trail converged with the Hihn Hammond Trail, a fire road utilized by equestrians and mountain bikes. I thought of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar while my husband threatened to abandon the fire road and travel along Waddell Creek. I possess a fear of getting lost, even in this tame wilderness. On the contrary, trails, especially hard-packed fire roads, offend his idea of what hiking is supposed to be.

"Lost is a state of mind," he reminded me.

Redwoods and evergreens gave way to dry, chaparral communities of manzanita and sage. Within another mile the canyon relaxed into a broad riparian woodland that included sycamore, maple trees and an abundance of wildflowers. As we neared the 1,700-acre Rancho Del Oso, recently acquired from the Hoover family, it wasn't difficult to imagine that the Ohlone prospered when they lived here, or why Captain Gaspar de Portola, who

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arrived in 1769 with a sickly expedition crew, named it Canada de la Salud—valley of health—after the healing effect its sweet water had on his men. Today, the water is not recommended for human consumption—pack your own or be prepared to treat it—and the valley has been renamed Waddell Creek, after the prosperous lumberman William Waddell who operated a mill here until he died in 1875 from the wounds inflicted by a grizzly bear.

At 7 o'clock we arrived at Rancho Del Oso Nature and History Center and called home. No answer. If you plan it correctly, you can catch the early bus from the downtown Metro Center, hike the trails at an easier pace, visit the first-growth redwoods on the Sunset Trail, eat lunch, listen to a nature talk and catch the 4:45 bus back into town.

We slam-dunked our aspirations of catching the last of the Lakers game, until a park ranger offered us a ride to town in the back of his pickup truck. He turned on the radio. The noise of the engine drowned out the game. I put on my Hodel glasses, stared out the back window and watched the sun set over our redwood-tipped edge of the continent. "Lakers up three. Third quarter," he yelled, and drove us home. ●