

Happy Trails in Happy Camp Park

By JOHN MCKINNEY

When viewed from the busy Simi Valley Freeway, the rapid suburbanization of Simi Valley can seem startling.

Not so, however, in the mountains bordering the north side of the valley. Here, working ranches and a rural lifestyle still prevail.

Preserved for horseback riders and hikers is Happy Camp Park—3,700 acres of rolling ranch land that looks much as it did 100 years ago. The park preserves a part of the old Strathern Ranch, a huge spread owned by a pioneering family.

The park was purchased by the state in the 1960s and is managed by the Eastern Ventura County Conservation Authority, a joint-powers agency of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and Ventura County.

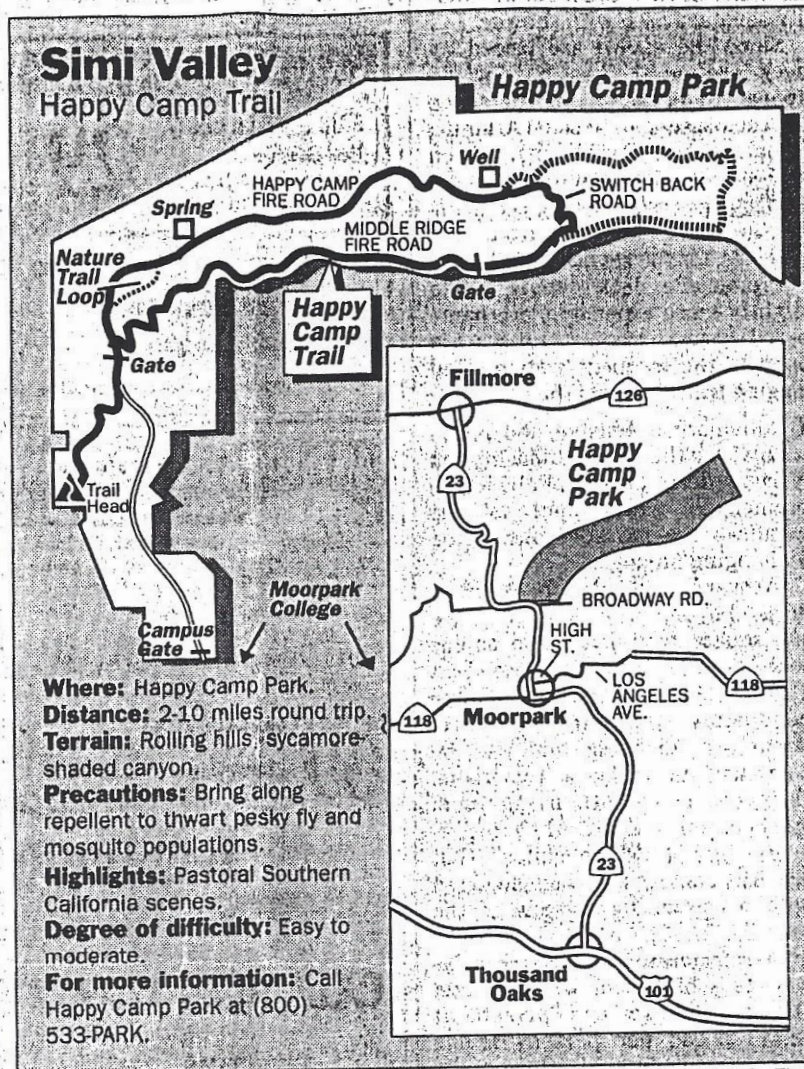
If you like your parks underdeveloped, you'll love Happy Camp: no campground, no picnic area, no water; just a faded bulletin board and an outhouse.

Questions about Happy Camp's natural beauty can be directed to the park's dedicated docents, who lead a variety of interpretive hikes including moonlight hikes and a historical hike that tells the story of Simi Valley's agricultural heritage.

Hikers can fashion a number of loop trips through the purple-sage-dotted slopes and along the bottom of oak- and sycamore-shaded Happy Camp Canyon.

Directions to trail head: To reach the city of Moorpark, exit the Ventura Freeway (U.S. 101) in Thousand Oaks on California 23 and travel 10 miles to its junction with California 118. Or you can head west across Simi Valley on the Simi Valley Freeway (118); the freeway ends short of Moorpark, but you continue on 118 into town and to its junction with 23.

From Moorpark, head north on 23 two miles to where the highway makes a very sharp left turn; continue straight ahead at this bend in the highway onto Happy Camp Road, then make an almost immediate right onto Broadway Road. Follow Broadway half a mile to its end at Happy Camp Park's dirt parking lot. The trail into



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Happy Camp Canyon begins near the bulletin board at the east end of the lot.

The hike: The footpath heads north along the canyon wall, then swings east and drops to the bottom of the canyon. One mile of easy walking brings you to Happy Camp Road, which you follow to a locked gate. You'll pass a junction with Middle Ridge Fire Road (a possible return route for a longer hike) on your right.

At a second junction, hikers have the chance to join the park's mile-long nature trail, which leads past yuccas, oaks and California walnut trees.

If you call it a day after the nature trail and return to the trail head, you'll have hiked four miles.

More energetic hikers will continue on Happy Camp Fire Road,

past a large oak grove and colorful red and yellowish rock outcroppings. You can turn around any time, or continue to a junction with a trail on your right that switchbacks steeply to Middle Ridge Fire Road on the canyon's south side.

Enjoy the great views of Big Mountain on the south side of the canyon, Oak Ridge to the north, and the Simi Valley below, as you hike three miles back to the gate. At the gate, retrace your steps a mile back to the trail head. Total distance: 10 miles.

Take a hike with John McKinney's guidebook, "Walk Los Angeles: Adventures on the Urban Edge" (\$14.95). Send check or money order to Los Angeles Times Syndicate, Dept. #1, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles 90053.

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