

Stroll & Roll Through History

Brief history of Niles Canyon

Washington Township Museum of Local History

www.museumoflocalhistory.org

This flyer covers some of the history in Niles Canyon. Read about and view the history of Niles Canyon as you stroll or roll through Niles Canyon. Some of the historical locations are demarcated by how many miles they are from the start of Niles Canyon Road at Mission Blvd.

Vallejo Mills

In 1841, Jose Vallejo built a flour mill near the entrance to Niles Canyon, where Vallejo Mills Historical Park is now located. The mill was run by water, so a dam was built upstream and an aqueduct was built to channel the water of Alameda Creek to the mill. The aqueduct was stone lined, two and a half feet wide and three feet deep. A second mill was built in 1853, with a stone foundation from locally quarried rocks. The mill closed in 1884. The foundation of the second mill is at the West end of Vallejo Mills Historical Park.

The Railroad

In 1866, the Western Pacific Railroad built a rail line through Niles Canyon, but due to financial problems, the rail line was not used. In 1869, the Central Pacific finished the line through Niles Canyon and it became part of the Transcontinental Railroad. The line was used until 1984 when it was abandoned and deeded to the County of Alameda. The Pacific Locomotive Association entered into an agreement with the County of Alameda and started running trains through the Niles Canyon in 1988. The old rail line is now part of the Niles Canyon Transcontinental Railroad Historic District.

The two railroad bridges over Alameda Creek were built of wood in 1866. Around 1900, the bridges were converted to steel construction, but the original concrete abutments were used. The first bridge is known as Dresser or Roseware and is at 0.8 miles. The second bridge, known as Farwell, is at 2.2 miles, just after the turn off for Palomares Canyon.

In 1910, a new Western Pacific Railroad built the second rail line through Niles Canyon, using mostly the southern side of the canyon and using a tunnel to make a more direct route. This line is still used for both freight and passenger rail (ACE Train). This line goes west of Sunol, through the canyon, then through a tunnel and straight on to Fremont. Niles Canyon Road has a large left turn as it goes over the train tunnel at 3.1 miles. A second tunnel can be seen at 3.5 miles.

The Niles Canyon Railway runs excursion trains over the same right-of-way as the original 1869 rail line through the canyon. They also have a maintenance yard at Brightside at mile 4.2.

Picnic in Niles Canyon

Alameda Creek was a popular place to cool off during the hottest days of the summer. In 1897, W. W. Dugan started a picnic ground in the canyon. A year later, J. B. Barnard developed his picnic ground which included a dancing pavilion, a bath house, and a restaurant, which became known as Fernbrook Park. Another picnic area was established at Brightside which had its own train station. Trains would run through the canyon, dropping off passengers at a number of picnic grounds. The day would be spent relaxing in the shade by the creek, having a lunch in the outdoors and even cooling off with a beer.

Fernbrook was located near the junction of Niles Canyon and Palomares Road. Brightside is further east at 4.2 miles.

The Aqueduct

In 1910 the Spring Valley Water Company built a concrete aqueduct to run water from the Water Temple in Sunol through Niles Canyon and on West, to quench the thirst of San Francisco. The aqueduct parallels Niles Canyon Road and can easily be seen through the canyon. The aqueduct is at about road level at mile 3.2. Where the aqueduct goes through the southern side of Niles Canyon it has picked up the name "Secret Sidewalk", as it is very exposed and a long section can be walked on.

The Spot

The Spot was a bar and campground on the banks of Alameda Creek separated from Niles Canyon Road by a line of Eucalyptus trees. The land was owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, who has owned the water rights along Alameda Creek for over 100 years. In 1994, The Spot was closed as the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission did not extend the lease on the property. The Spot was located at 3 miles into the canyon.

The Old Highway

About mile 3.5, there is a newer roadway bridge that goes over Alameda Creek. This bridge is relatively new. Just where the bridge starts, the old highway can be seen keeping to the right and following the hillside as it goes over the train tunnel from 1910. It is easy to see how narrow the roadway when it was first built. The old highway continues east and there are concrete abutments where a bridge used to be where the old highway crossed over Alameda Creek.

California Pressed Brick Company

In 1907, while building the second rail line through Niles Canyon, a large deposit of clay was found on the south side of the canyon, about a mile from Mission Blvd. This was the foundation for the California Pressed Brick Company. A factory was built with a couple of large smoke stacks from the firing kilns. The factory shutdown in the 1990's, and the factory was demolished, including the smoke stacks. Those that had grown up in the area can recall seeing the smoke stacks, partially hidden behind trees as they drove through Niles Canyon.