A Short History of the Santa Clarita Woodlands Proposed Park

By Don P Mullally

A larger, more accurate history of the park than this one could be written by using original papers written by people and government offices interested in the park. Approximately four large boxes of such papers were accepted and filed in federal government offices of the Santa Monica National Recreation Area by Margie Steigerwald, phone 805-370-2373. The historic files are open to the public. Another old version of Woodlands Park history is to be found in Mullally’s “Thirty-two Years in the Santa Susana Mountains of Los Angeles County- A History”.

During 1984 I was employed by the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks and assigned to work at O'Melveny City Park in Granada Hills. Work partially consisted of gathering paper and plastic trash which was carried southward by the wind from the Browning-Ferris Landfill into O'Melveny City Park. My work was appreciated by the local populace and a neighborhood organization named the North Valley Coalition, led and guided by Mary Edwards of Granada Hills. During 1986, I was asked to join this organization. I did so.

Within a year I suggested to Mary Edwards that the North Valley Coalition endeavor to lead an effort to preserve the wilderness of the Santa Susana Mountains consisting of dense forests, woodlands, other vegetation and animals in the countryside containing the BFI Landfill.

The Coalition voted affirmatively to do so. I was selected to lead the study of forest and mountains, do most of the work at preserving it, and help generate public support for the forest. However, Mary Edwards was the politically stronger person and well-known local leader. My strengths were environmental, botanical knowledge, and report writing on these subjects.

Most people living in the community supported our goals of closing the landfill and preserving the beautiful native trees, forests, landscapes, and animal life. The citizens complained about foul odors and poisonous gases emanating from the landfill. They worried about their health.

By 1987, I had composed at least two similar long articles to be sent by the North Valley Coalition to elected politicians and appropriate state offices requesting interest and cooperation in helping the Coalition preserve the forests and wilderness of the Santa Susana Mountains.

I also requested local public newspapers to show interest in our project and put stories about it in their newspapers. The strongest response to us came from the Newhall Signal. Gary Johanson, a reporter for the paper replied that he wanted to learn about it and do some
investigating. Ultimately he wrote a very helpful series of articles about the project. They were published by the Signal and another newspaper in the same valley.

Because of Gary Johanson, I coined the name of our proposed project: The Santa Clarita Woodlands. He used the name in his articles as did later state offices and politicians.

During 1987, I sent copies of our lengthy proposal to preserve the natural environment and trees covering hills and valleys of the Santa Susana Mountains to our State Senator Ed Davis, local California Representative Marian LaFollette, L A County Supervisor Michael Antonovich, California Department of Parks and Recreation, and other places and persons of environmental importance.

Senator Ed Davis liked the Coalition's proposal report but already loved the hills and forests of the Santa Susana Mountains. He learned to love them from flying over time and again on trips between Los Angeles and Sacramento. His aide, Hunt Braly also became an ally of ours. Davis went on to secure cooperation and benefits from Sacramento, local politicians, and offices. One of these was Joseph T. Edmiston, Chief Executive of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

On March 22, 1988, the California State Park Department provided the public a Preliminary State Park Evaluation of the Woodlands project. Both evaluation and an examination of the park project by the City of Santa Clarita received favorable marks. I was present during the work.

To gauge the strength of public support for the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park proposal and project, State Parks held a public meeting on the evening of March 15, 1989. Over 200 people filled a room of Woodlands park supporters. Public spirit was very high. I presided for the North Valley Coalition.

During 1988 and 1989 additional support for the Woodlands Park was obtained from Dr. Barry Prigge, UCLA botanist; Dr. Holland, Fish and Game Dept. botanist; Assemblywoman Marian LaFollette; John Fisher, Fish and Game biologist; Assemblywoman Cathy Wright; County Supervisor Michael Antonovich; L A Sierra Club; Audubon Club; California Native Plant Society; clubs of recreational runners; horseback riders; and others.

State government moved the Conservancy's northern park boundary from the north side of San Fernando Valley to the northern base of the Santa Susana Mountains located on county and Santa Clarita Valley land. Joe Edmiston could go to work acquiring parkland in the Santa Susana Mountains.

Joe Edmiston and State Parks used the Coalition's map of the proposed Santa Clarita Woodlands Park to seek appropriate land. State Park Dept. put on interesting events but acquired no park land except the Stagecoach Trail over the Simi Hills west of Chatsworth. Joe Edmiston acquired the land now known as Ed Davis Park in Towsley Canyon.
When I composed the boundary of the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park, great importance was placed on the borders of land having significant numbers of trees. Particularly Big-cone spruce, Valley oaks, Canyon (AKA Maul) oaks, Coast-live oaks, California bay laurels, and Flowering ash. Also, however, California walnuts, Interior live oak, Mexican elderberry, sycamores, cottonwoods, Toyon and Ceanothus of tree height, and riparian vegetation.

Large acreages of land grown to alien species of grass, common types of coastal sage scrub or chaparral were usually excluded from the inclusion in the proposed Santa Clarita Woodlands Park. This included most of the mountain range south-facing slopes.

On the east side of the mapped Santa Clarita Woodlands Park the proposed park boundary parallel Hwy 5 between Towsley Canyon in Newhall and San Fernando (Newhall) Pass. On the south side, the boundary rose to the crest of the Santa Susana Mtns. between Mission Peak and 2/3 of the western side of Oat Mtn. Land on the northern slope of the mountain range included most of the western branch of Towsley Canyon Creek up to Towsley Peak and down the north side to Towsley Canyon itself. Thereafter down Towsley Canyon including 100 ft. of land on the north side of the creek. Once to the Old it followed the road to East Canyon, then went up behind the shooting club and eastward along Coltrane Street to the overpass over Hwy 5. The Weldon Motorway on the west side of the landfill was also the eastern boundary of the proposed Woodlands park area, and the motorway is presently used as a trail.

Unfortunately, a large fir forest standing east of the Weldon Motorway was left out of the proposal because it has been owned by the landfill.

Before Ed Davis Park land was acquired in 1988-1989, the North Valley Coalition had contacted Laurene Weste of the city of Newhall, later Santa Clarita. The year was 1986 or 1987. Laurene was already a park oriented person. She was a friend of Carl Boyer, a Santa Clarita resident who had previously inquired about the Santa Susana Mountains and discovered they were not protected because they were not within a national forest. Boyer tried to save the forests but soon surrendered his papers on the subject to Jan Hingston of Chatsworth.

After Laurene Weste discovered the efforts of the North Valley Coalition, she worked with Don Mullally who was already doing Woodlands Park work in the city and area of Santa Clarita. Laurene worked mainly through the government of the City of Santa Clarita. She became Boyer’s park person after he became a city council member.

After the opening of a public park in Towsley Canyon, people began to use it in large numbers; and they began to roam widely in the unoccupied wilderness regardless of actual ownership.

Owners were rarely encountered, and land was seldom legally posted. For 25 years the situation hasn’t significantly changed except for a chain-link fence around the Southern Gas Field located between the Portor Ranch, Orcutt Ranch, and the Oat Mountain Motorway between the south end of East Canyon and Oat Mountain.
During the first couple of years of the proposed park I discovered old cattle trails and developed other trails throughout the area of the proposed Santa Clarita Woodlands and beyond into O'Melveny City Park and elsewhere. Many people hiked with me on these trails, and no one was hurt or injured by anything.

For 25 years, Santa Clarita Woodlands park boosters have hoped for the acquisition of the Orcutt Ranch for the park because of its phenomenal beauty, creeks, topography, and thousands of trees in various native plant communities.

Following the creation of Towsley Canyon Park, more than a decade of negotiations ensued between L A county, BFI Landfill, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the County Waste Management department, and the Chevron Oil Company. All these negotiations involved the future of land in the Santa Clarita Woodlands but outside of any other public or private park.

Ultimately, before 1995, to secure rights to have an operating landfill in Sunshine Canyon, BFI negotiated to surrender its land in East and Rice Canyons and Upper Bee Canyon to the county and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy for park making purposes.

The Chevron Oil Company sold 3,000 acres of land located in East, Rice, Towsley Canyons and Pico Canyon including the ghost oil town of Mentryville to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. In fact, the town may have been a gift. It was a greatly appreciated surprise.

Two twenty acre properties at the northern mouth of East and Rice Canyons had already been acquired by the Conservancy. Development of most of the Chevron land was thus prevented.

Lorene Weste, by now a member of the city council in Santa Clarita, joined with executives from Chevron on their land in East and Rice Canyons and was important in convincing Chevron to sell the land to public park makers rather than developers.

Lorene Weste also formed a group of experts who worked together to defeat an environmental impact report written to enable the placement of a huge landfill in the western sector of Towsley Canyon and the Santa Clarita Woodlands. The group had the backing of Supervisor Mike Antonovich, Senator Ed Davis, other powerful people, the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park Committee, North Valley Coalition, and probably the city of Santa Clarita. Plans to build the landfill in Towsley Canyon were cancelled.

For fifteen or more years the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park has not increased in size or improved in any significant way beyond road repairs and culverts. However, the city of Santa Clarita presented the public a free parking lot in Towsley Canyon near the Old Road.

The trees have survived the three year drought better than expected, apparently due to deep sedimentary soils, friable rocks and bedrock, and water absorbent clay in the soil and soft rocks.
Since 2000, plans have occasionally surfaced to make a Rim of the Valley Trail. Parts of this have already been made. The author of this idea was Marge Feinberg and she had her idea patented. Apparently laws enabling the creation of park of the Santa Clarita Woodlands Park would also apply to part of the Rim of the Valley Trail.

The United States Government has also studied the possibility of a Rim of the Valley Corridor around San Fernando and small connecting valleys. It would be partially composed of federal land and of private land agreed by the owners to be used according to federal standards. It would be administered by the staff of the National Recreation Area of the Santa Monica Mountains. The corridor would usually be located near the crests of mountain ranges.

An official valley corridor would benefit people of many different interests, native wild animals of all kinds, native plants of all kinds, especially the trees and various habitats. Only the abundant and destructive alien plants would diminish.