

Mt. McCoy Trail

THE TRAIL: Mt. McCoy is the hill with the large cross on it at the western end of Simi Valley. The Mt. McCoy Trail begins at the western end of Washburn Street. To get there, you take Royal Avenue west of Madera Road, take a right at the “T” intersection with Acapulco Avenue and an immediate left onto Washburn. The trail begins where Washburn curves and becomes Los Amigos Avenue.

Beginning at the open space on the outside of the curve, the trail extends to the south-southeast across grasslands along the base of the hills. After crossing a drainage bottom, the trail begins to climb via many switchbacks through coastal sage scrub and then through chaparral. Each northern switchback abuts up against a steep oak studded canyon. The trail comes to a saddle by a knoll and then climbs through nine more switchbacks, terminating just south of the cross. The trail is 1.3 miles long and climbs 500-600 feet to the cross.

Climbing the trail, there are magnificent views of Simi Valley. From the top, there are panoramic views in all directions, including views of the Presidential Library, the Channel Islands, Wood Ranch, and Old Boney Mountain.

HISTORY: Tradition suggests that a cross has existed atop Mt. McCoy since the early 1800s, when the cross served both as a religious symbol and as a beacon on the El Camino Real (King’s Highway). Travelers between San Fernando and San Buenaventura missions rested along their way at El Rancho Simi, as did Alfred Robinson as described by him in *Life in California*. A survey map (Norris, Washington and Hancock) from 1858-59 includes a note, “wooden cross”, at or near the location of the present-day cross. The Runkle family recalled a small stone cross on the hill when the family arrived in the valley in 1904. The stone cross was said to have been placed there by a shepherd. The discovery of the 1858-59 map, inspired R.E. Harrington, in 1921, to reestablish a cross on the hill. His Sunday school class of 12 year old boys carried the timbers for the cross up the hill. The main timber was 2 inches x 12 inches and 20 feet long. Easter sunrise services were held there for 47 years. The existing reinforced concrete cross is said to have been placed there in 1941. A large blowup of a 1947 Easter Sunday picture taken from atop of Mt. McCoy, complete with cars on the dirt access road and a steam engine on the railroad, hangs in City Hall.

Poor access led to the abandonment of sunrise services; however, today the Rotary Clubs in Simi Valley illuminate the cross during Easter week.

Mt. McCoy received its name from C.B. McCoy, who purchased the Canada Verde Ranch, about 5,000 acres, from the Simi Land and Water Company in about 1898. At that time the hill was still known as "Verde Hill", a name that had persisted from the Spanish-Mexican period. ("Verde means green in Spanish.)

The current trail to Mt. McCoy was cut, under the direction of the Rancho Simi Trail Blazers on National Trails Day, June 7, 1997.

GEOLOGY: The Mt. McCoy Trail begins in the non-marine upper Sespe Formation. The Sespe is made up of soft sandstones that, at this location, were laid down roughly 24 million years ago in a tropical forest environment. The formation has been carried northward as part of the North Pacific Plate, uplifted by compressional forces as part of the Transverse Ranges Physiographic Province, and rotated to the northwest by 14-15 degrees. The Sespe Formation continues along the trail until you get almost to the saddle by the first knoll, although colluvial examples of the Conejo Volcanics are present on the slope. Along the trail the Sespe Formation is directly and unconformably overlain by the Conejo Volcanics, although the Sespe Formation is thinly overlain by the Vaqueros Formation (20-23 million years old) just south of the saddle. (An "unconformity" indicates that millions of years of alluvial deposits were eroded away before the next geologic unit was deposited upon an eroded landscape.) The Vaqueros Formation is overlain by the Conejo Volcanics on the south- and southeast-facing slopes above Madera Road.

The Conejo Volcanics were deposited first as submarine lava flows between 16 and 13.6 million years ago, then emerged from the sea during the middle Miocene. The source of the lava was somewhere in the Conejo Hills southwest of Simi Valley. Total thickness of the formation is 13,000 feet in the western Santa Monica Mountains. However, near Mt. McCoy the total thickness is only about 200 feet.

From the saddle west of the isolated knoll below the ridgeline, the Conejo Volcanics unit is basaltic rock, gray to black to olive brown in color. It is vesicular, i.e., gas bubbles within the rock, in places. Closer to the top of the hill the unit is made up of andesitic-basaltic maroon-gray rocks, which were deposited as flows and flow breccia, i.e., a mixture of lava and rock fragments picked up by the flow - the volcanic equivalent of a conglomerate in sedimentary rocks. This unit dips 20-25 degrees to the northwest and can be best viewed in cross section in the north-facing roadway cut as you approach the Presidential Library.

PLANTS: The plant communities present along the trail transition from a degraded grassland, through coastal sage scrub and into chaparral as one moves up the hill, with some mixture of all three vegetative types in many areas. Grasses include exotics from the Mediterranean Basin, such as soft chess, wild oats, red and ripgut brome, foxtails (hare barley) and golden top. Needlegrass (*Achnatherum coronatum*), Purple needlegrass, hood canary grass and tripple-awned grass (*Aristida* sp.) are the dominant native bunch grasses, with giant rye in some limited areas. Coyote brush, golden fleece (*Ericameria arborescens*), goldenstar, yellow star thistle, blue dicks, black and Mediterranean mustards, blue eyed grass, common fiddleneck and Catalina mariposa lily are also present. Coastal sage scrub species include California sagebrush, purple and black sages, cudweed aster, bush sunflower, bush mallow, yerba santa, California buckwheat, prickly pear, sawtooth and coast goldenbush, yucca, lance-leaf live-forever, laurel sumac, deerweed, bush lupine, bladder pod, caterpillar phacelia, wishbone bush, golden yarrow, large-flowered popcorn flower, minute-flowered popcorn flower, purple nightshade and many others are present. The chaparral includes such plants as chamise, toyon, fuchsia-flowered gooseberry, mountain mahogany, hollyleaf redberry, lemonade berry, laurel sumac, white chaparral current, soap plant, bush monkey flower, hollyleaf cherry, scrub oak, and Mexican elderberry.

Poison oak is found on only one switchback about a third of the way up the hill next to the coast live oak studded canyon.

Of special note is the Yucca (or Spanish dagger). The Ventureño Chumash name for the yucca was *ta'apu*. The local Indians named the largest village in the area after the yucca. That village gave us the name Tapo, as in Tapo Canyon and Tapo Street. Within the acid soils formed by the chemical weathering of andesite in the Conejo Volcanics on top of the mountain can be found the Lyon's pentachaeta, a federal and state designated endangered species, the Conejo live-forever, a federally designated threatened species, red-skinned onions, chocolate lilies, coast goldfields and star lilies.

ANIMAL LIFE: Mammals that you may encounter or see the tracks of include the desert cottontail, brush rabbit, California meadow mouse, Botta's pocket gopher, California ground squirrels, striped skunks, bobcats, mountain lions, raccoons, dusky-footed woodrat, agile kangaroo rat, southern California weasel, coyote, mule deer, and various bats and myotis. Birds may include the mockingbird, grasshopper sparrow, lesser goldfinch, Anna's hummingbird, cliff and barn swallows, turkey vulture, red-tailed hawk, barn owls, burrowing owls, raven, crow, California towhee, meadowlark, horned lark, California quail, and road runner. Reptiles may include the western fence lizard, the side-blotched lizard, San Diego/California horned lizard, coachwhip, California kingsnake, San Diego gopher snake and southern Pacific rattlesnake. Please leave the animals alone.

