Malibu 90265

Chapter 4: Early Malibu as Others Knew It

by Taylor Coffman

LITTLE CAN BE TOLD about those who saw Rancho Malibu before the 1920s. Evidently there weren't many. Those witnesses or passers-by who didn't know the Rindges or other early owners would mostly have been trespassing, often at their peril. And yet the long rancho boundaries, wholly confined after Malibu's patenting to the ocean side of the mountains but averaging just a mile or two deep, left most of greater area wide open—to those, that is, with a means of getting there. Rugged individualism was one way. Frederick Rindge, in his book *Happy Days in Southern California*, recounted a harrowing incident from back in the 1850s, dating from before Matthew Keller arrived on the scene. Rindge told of how Andrew Sublett "had his arm broken by a grizzly bear."

In fact, it was much worse than that, this frightening encounter that took place in Malibu Canyon. Better known by the final *e* in his name (as was Bill Sublette, the more acclaimed mountain man who was one of Andrew's older brothers), this sad victim of a Malibu mauling died in agony the next day from what proved to be "gaping wounds."

Glen Dawson and his brother, Muir, heirs to the old Los Angeles cultural shrine called Dawson's Book Shop (late of Larchmont Village), published those telling words about the youngest Sublette in 1960. Earlier, Glen Dawson alone brought out the invaluable *Vancouver in California, 1792-1794*. Then, before publishing the Sublette book, Glen and Muir Dawson produced the Robinson-Powell number called *The*

Malibu. That item from 1958 became a rare book overnight; the reprint issued by The Ward Ritchie Press is scare enough. The Dawson brothers' newer work, entitled *Andrew Sublette: Rocky Mountain Prince, 1808-1853* and every bit as collectible as those previous books, was written by Doyce Blackman Nunis, Jr., local historian extraordinaire and devoted user of The Huntington Library. That later date of 1853, of course, is the one that saw the savage mauling of the middle-aged hunter in the remoteness of Malibu Canyon.

That's what Andrew Sublette was doing there on a December day: hoping to haul in some bear meat for hungry men in Los Angeles, where he was newly based after years of mountaineering and trail guiding in the American West. Before the Malibu incident, in 1852, Sublette had bagged a grizzly near Cahuenga Pass, between the future Hollywood and Universal City. "The 'varmit' was of sufficient dimensions to feed a regiment of boarders at the Bella Union Hotel, for three or four meals." So recounted Doyce Nunis in his Sublette book, quoting from an ancient issue of the *Los Angeles Star,* the oldest newspaper in the city. As for the Bella Union, that historic hotel on North Main Street is where the first Butterfield Overland Mail stage arrived in 1858, twenty-one days out of St. Louis. Those were gritty times still, the period between the Gold Rush and the Civil War.

Back on May 28, 1853, the *Star* told of another escapade involving Andrew Sublette, the "Rocky Mountain prince," as a rough-and-ready Angeleno named Horace Bell described him. It was Bell that Larry Powell of Malibu was writing about in *Westways* (as quoted earlier), while referring to "the toughest town in the West." This separate episode in the spring of 1853 preceded Sublette's fatal encounter with the bear in Malibu Canyon:

> Last Wednesday [May 25], Capt. Andrew Sublette, of this city, while on a hunting expedition, on the sea coast, was shockingly bitten and mutilated by a grizzly whom he had wounded. He was in company with

> another man & boy. They had wounded the bear, and were following its trail, when the animal darted upon them from a thicket, and gave chase. Capt. S. was ahead, the man next, and the boy behind. The former seeing that the bear was fast overhauling them and in a few more yards must reach the boy, generously stopped and waited for his bearship to come up, intending to shoot him again, and then run the risk of getting away himself.
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> By some mischance he stumbled and lost his rifle, and ere he could regain his feet, the bear was upon him. Capt. Sublette was badly bitten, and would have been killed probably, on the spot, had it not been for the timely interference of his dogs, who came up and engaged the bear's attention. We are happy to learn this morning that Capt. S. is considered out of danger, and hopes are entertained of his speedy recovery.

Sublette "recovered fully," Nunis said, but the incident "could have been fatal." Amen. The part about "the sea coast" is striking. Where was Sublette hunting? Near Temescal Canyon or Topanga Canyon? Or was he farther afield, maybe out toward distant Malibu itself? There's no ready way to know. In any event, it was in December 1853 that tragedy struck:

> While on a bear hunting trip in Malibu Canyon, so the only extant account relates [courtesy of Horace Bell], near present-day Santa Monica in company with his business partner, James Thompson, Sublette was mortally injured by a Grizzly. During the course of the hunt, Sublette and his friend became separated. A short while later, Thompson heard a shot echo through the canyon. Rushing back toward the sound, he came upon Sublette locked in hand-to-hand struggle with the ferocious animal.
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> To one side, partly covered by the cloud of dust stirred up from the contest between man and beast, lay the huddled corpse of the attacker's mate [a she-bear]. Apparently Sublette had slain one of the bears with his rifle, and then, before he could reload his weapon, was set upon by another. His knife flashing, his hunting dog, Old Buck,

adding his bite to the fray, Andrew finally dispatched his assailant with a mortal thrust. Falling near the crumpled carcass, Andrew lay bleeding and dying.

"Thompson hastily summoned help from some vaqueros in the valley below," Nunis continued, "and with their assistance carried his friend to a nearby wagon." The hunters rushed back to Los Angeles. There, Sublette "hung on tenaciously in a delirium between life and death." He died the next day—"penniless" and a "wretched failure," Nunis could only conclude.

Doyce Nunis based his account on the old newspaper, the *Star,* and especially on Horace Bell's *Reminiscences of a Ranger,* a book first published in 1881 and regarded by Larry Powell of *Westways* as a "California classic." Frederick Rindge must have been one of Bell's readers, hence his mention in *Happy Days* of Sublette's run-in with the grizzly—obviously worse than just a broken bone.

A HALF CENTURY'S PASSAGE was enough for Malibu to outgrow its frontier phase. The great drought of the early 1860s came and went in the meantime, sending shock waves through all the cow counties in the Southland and elsewhere in pastoral California. In Malibu's backcountry, its later shoot-'em-up theatrics (early Hollywood style through false-front movie sets) belonged to the 1920s at locales like Paramount Ranch.

Before that, back in 1900, the Crags Country Club got its start when "100 wealthy Los Angeles businessmen bought 2,000 acres along Malibu Creek." So recounted a postcard of times gone by. Crags, technically, was a mere five miles from the Rindge family's coastal home overlooking Malibu Creek. Yet the distance may as well have been far greater. Malibu Canyon Road wasn't finally blasted through the Santa Monicas until 1952, leaving an all but impassable divide

between the Crags Country Club and the shoreline during these early years of the twentieth century. It makes the old Tapia family's purported use of the grazing land in that back-forty area all the harder to believe. Just getting there from the coast would have been onerous, not to mention herding stock all the way out to Port Hueneme.

The Crags Club members who created Century Lake, now part of Malibu Creek State Park, came westward to the district through what was then the rural San Fernando Valley, using what was called the Ventura-Hollywood route. They went past the little crossroads of Girard (today's Woodland Hills), on through wild and rustic Calabasas, and finally down the long grade to Brent's Junction. So did those who made early use of Malibou Lake (the local spelling), starting in the 1920s, along with other parts of backwoods Cornell. Those lonely places were first connected with the coast in the thirties decade, by way of narrow and sinewy Latigo Canyon Road.

Some of this rugged, highly scenic country on the north side of Castro Crest—straight over the summits from coastal Malibu's Corral, Solstice, and Latigo canyons—had been homesteaded in the nineteenth century as part of the newly opened public domain, after the "perfecting" of former rancho boundaries. Other non-grant or, in some instances, non-homesteaded acreage was *sobrante* by name, once described as "small, title-less patches of land" that had fallen between the legal cracks and was up for grabs. Either way, that backcountry area was marked by dramatic formations like the Goat Buttes and Brent's Mountain. But the areas farther west on the coastal side, out past Trancas and Encinal canyons, Arroyo Sequit, and Little Sycamore Canyon, and all the way up toward Boney Ridge, were the real heartland of greater Malibu homesteading and open-range settlement.

As such, no family is more noteworthy than the Deckers, of which Marion Decker was the patriarch. He began his pioneering in 1885. Thus there's the original Decker School on Decker School Lane and of

course Decker Road itself (State Highway 23), which starts across from Broad Beach and heads up Los Alisos Canyon, where old man Decker had his 160 government-allotted acres. Yerba Buena School was also a one-roomer in that outback area (as distinct from the latter-day elementary school by the same name in Agoura Hills).

Decker Road goes on to connect with Mulholland Highway above Encinal Canyon, with its views down toward the Malibu Country Club and its verdant golf course in semi-arid surroundings. From the Encinal summit, the winding Decker route plunges down the awesomely steep north side of the Santa Monicas toward Westlake Village. Then it enters old Rancho El Conejo. Lake Sherwood, Hidden Valley, and the towns of Newbury Park and Thousand Oaks are all part of that land grant's former domain.

YEARS AGO, El Conejo was especially synonymous with the Russell Ranch, also called the Triunfo Ranch (before Westlake Village existed). This was prime cattle acreage, much of it once owned by William Randolph Hearst; and yet he held title for fewer than fifteen years (1925 to 1938) through the Hollywood branch of his Hearst Sunical real-estate dynasty, likewise the nominal owner of his huge San Simeon ranch. He's said to have bought his Russell property in hopes of striking oil. That doesn't sound much like the ultra-romantic Hearst, but it proves to be true. He also had property in upper Tuna Canyon, next to Malibu's southeastern Topanga-Fernwood boundary and closer to his Southland home base in Santa Monica. Always full of huge ideas, Hearst conceived an extraordinary plan for that ocean-view setting in what's now Tuna Canyon Park, perched on a lonely Malibu hilltop (to be described in Chapter 6). For now, suffice it to say that lack of water and late-Depression era financial woes, like those underlying his Russell-Triunfo sale, kept Hearst from erecting a rare offshoot of San Simeon up in Tuna Canyon.

Marion Decker and his fellow pioneers at the west end of greater Malibu led hard, risky lives—fire was as much a curse in these mountains then as it is now — and they also endured almost painful isolation. Their trips to the tiny Triunfo post office (near today's Westlake Village) were made a month apart; little did they know that decades later their outback area would get RFD service, Rural Free Delivery, under ZIP code 90265, a cadenced number in force from 1963 onward.

In the meantime, the homesteaders' children who reached high-school age had to get to Oxnard somehow, nearly twenty miles away. There'd been a time, earlier still, when downtown Los Angeles, twice as far removed, was the only high school anywhere around. The merchants in Oxnard and Camarillo provided a modicum of semi-urban relief, yet they were seldom patronized. As with the well-heeled lawyers and other tony gents of the Crags Country Club, the rustic folk relied on El Camino Real (the Ventura-Hollywood route) via the Girard-Calabasas-Brent's connection—the path of U.S. 101 nowadays—to reach the *real* city when they had to: Los Angeles, be it ever so distant, a trip requiring six to twelve hours, depending on the conveyance.

With rare exceptions the Rindges' stronghold of southside, coastal Malibu afforded no reliable access, insofar as the Santa Monica area might provide an alternative jumping-off point. The threat of fire was reason enough to keep scruffy people of Marion Decker's ilk locked out, a belief held strongly by May Rindge during her railroad days and also during the coast highway fight in the 1920s. Hobos and transients were said to roam the Malibu Mountains, as the range was then called. And yet squatterism never became a serious problem in the district, despite its remoteness.

Through it all, like the mouse that roared, the homesteaders and other plain and humble folk of outermost Malibu hadn't been heard from for the last time. Their day of reckoning would eventually come.

AN ENGLISH TRAVEL WRITER named J. Smeaton Chase passed through the Rindges' idyllic Rancho Malibu in 1911. His book *California Coast Trails: A Horseback Ride From Mexico to Oregon* appeared in 1913, exactly sixty years after Andrew Sublette's undoing in Malibu Canyon. Chase's book, like Horace Bell's, was another of Larry Powell's favorites; he saluted it in 1969 in his *Westways* column on California classics, written at UCLA and in Encinal Canyon. As the Chase narrative showed, that English gentleman took such matters as restricted access with calm nonchalance. Bound toward Malibu from Santa Monica on his faithful steed, Chino, and going past Topanga Point and Big Rock, he reached the mouth of Las Flores Creek:

> At the gate was posted a warning that Trespassing was Strictly Prohibited. I knew that public right of way through the ranch had long been contested by the owners, and I had been warned that I might find my way disputed by their myrmidons [loyal followers] with shotguns. But there was nothing except the passive placard to prevent my entering, and I passed in with little doubt of making an equally peaceable exit at the west end.

Chase exited *the Malibu* without incident. Before he did, he camped at the mouth of Trancas Canyon, under "a great tent-like sycamore" that long stood on the spot but that is no more:

> I was up at four o'clock and broke camp early. The breeze was strong and keen, and an inexhaustible freshness was in the air, as if the world had been created within the week.

So recounted Larry Powell in his *Westways* installment on Chase. Despite calling Chase a "minor writer," Powell said the Englishman's classic of 1913 was "one of the few California travel books to approach

Two Years Before the Mast as literature—the latter, of course, being the much more renowned work by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., originally dated 1840.

As far as trespassing went, May Rindge didn't clamp down harshly on free passage across her Malibu lands until 1917. The "west end" in 1911, when Chase rode through, proved to be Little Sycamore Canyon, just past Neptune's Net, the farthest reach of the elongated Rindge holdings. He had to turn inland at Little Sycamore to avoid the forbiddingly steep cliffs leading to Big Sycamore and Point Mugu, wending his way up toward Boney Ridge instead and finally down its west side onto "the rich farming land of the Guadalasca Ranch." Only the rascal Wilson Mizner could have "gone west of Point Mugu," as a biographer jokingly said of that infamous wag in 1975. Nothing lay in that direction but the Santa Barbara Channel and the blue Pacific beyond. For his more sober part in 1911, the detouring J. Smeaton Chase was now alongside the Oxnard Plain, not far from what's now the Cal State Channel Islands campus. Chase made a similar adjustment some two hundred miles up the coast, at the north end of San Luis Obispo County (having just traversed the Hearst San Simeon property).

There, at San Carpoforo Creek, he had to steer clear of the looming Big Sur cliffs. The Spanish government's "Sacred Expedition," led by Gaspar de Portola in search of Vizcaino's Monterey harbor, had been forced to make the same detour back in 1769. Chase's path wound through an uncommonly rugged mountain pass, long used by the old Spanish padres and their Indian charges at Mission San Antonio. It was the only way he and Chino (soon replaced by Anton) could continue toward Carmel and the Monterey peninsula.

Malibu thereby ranks as a petite Big Sur, especially in its last six westerly miles from Little Sycamore to Point Mugu. Chase couldn't get past those ramparts in 1911. Neither could anyone else, regardless of

their mode of travel. That is, not until the new State highway was boldly blasted through solid rock after World War I. Until then a secluded place like Big Sycamore Cove was little known even to the Rindge family and its saddle-bagged range riders. None of them may have known much about the Great Sand Dune, either. The remoteness of that outer district can't be overstated. Only a fishing boat or passing ship would ever have seen those landforms from offshore, weather permitting.

Any thought before the twenties decade that dynamite would soon connect such distant places with "Malibu proper"—and ultimately make them their own part of 90265—would have seemed far-fetched, even ludicrous. It was truly a no-man's land out there, as noted in the Introduction. In some ways it still is, never mind ZIP codes and other reminders of modern life.