Big Pines – History

"Playground for Angelinos"

c. 1925

c. 1930

Photos: From the Collection of Terry Graham

Be sure to visit the Grassy Hollow Visitor Center if you haven't done so. The knowledgeable staff of volunteers can answer any questions you have about the rich history of the area.

Hours:
Weekends and Holidays
10 am – 4 pm

Davidson Arch at Big Pines c. 1926
Postcard: Courtesy of the Wrightwood Historical Society

Big Pines, CA – The San Gabriel Mountains suffered a lot of damage due to carelessness in the nineteenth century. Thus the California Board of Forestry was established in 1885. Several organizations of environmentalists, including John Muir, banded together to save the mountains and they were successful. The San Gabriels Timberland Reserve was created on December 20th, 1892. This was the first timberland reserve in California and second in the nation, Yellowstone being the first.

Benjamin Franklin Allen was appointed the first supervisor of the San Gabriel Timberland Reserve in 1897. Several disastrous fires occurred during this period and the mountain's resources were wasted and exploited. Allen had only voluntary civilian help until 1908. Upon request he received permission to select twenty Rangers at a salary of fifty dollars a month. These were the very first Forest Rangers in the nation. Ranger Frank Allen patrolled the eastern end of the Reserve and paid all his expenses including maintenance of his horse out of his fifty dollar salary.

On March 4th, 1907 the Reserve's name was changed to the San Gabriel National Forest. On July 1st, 1908 the San Bernardino and San Gabriel National Forests were combined under a single administration and called the Angeles National Forest.

At the turn of the 20th century Jackson Lake was nothing more than a small "swampy lake" or "sag pond" created by the San Andreas Fault. It was a natural collecting pool for rain and snow melt and was also fed by underground springs. Many feel that in 1919 this marshy body was dammed up by the Llano Del Rio Colony to be used as a water source but documented references and interviews reveal that their water source came from the lower drainage of Big Rock Creek. Apparently it was the creation of a road that would later become Big Pines Hwy that actually increased the size of the lake.

In the early 1920's R. F. McClellan, chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors dreamed that the children of Los Angeles should have a place to enjoy the outdoors. He encouraged the board to purchase land in the Swarthout Valley for the purpose of building a County Park.

In 1923 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors purchased from Harry Heath and several others, seven hundred and sixty acres at Big Pines for a reported sixty thousand dollars. In the same year the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation began construction of major improvements.

The Davidson Arch, a pedestrian overpass crossing the highway at Big Pines Divide, was designed and erected by William Davidson and presented by him and his associates to Los Angeles County. The arch remained until Highway 2 was completed and half of it was removed to allow the larger trucks to traverse the Big Pines Divide and in anticipation of a widening of the road which never happened. While it is rumored that the Arch housed a jail cell in the north tower to incarcerate law breakers as evidenced by steel bars still visible today, the facts are those bars were installed after the dismantling of the South tower and bridge to keep people from falling through the opening. It did have a "holding room".

Big Pines Park became so popular, to the extent that it was necessary to expand the facilities. The county wished to purchase an additional thirty five hundred acres extending westward from Big Pines through Mescal Canyon and to the western end of Jackson Lake. The United States Forest Service felt it would set a dangerous precedent to grant title of national forest lands to individual governments, opting rather to issue a special use permit and recommending that they use five hundred acres for free public campgrounds. A special use permit for thirty five hundred acres adjacent to Big Pines including Prairie Fork was signed on December 29th, 1925.

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"Playground for Angelinos"

Los Angeles County Big Pines Recreational Camp 1930
Postcard: Courtesy of the Wrightwood Historical Society

Continued – Dorothy Hiltabrand Swift became the first lady Ranger in 1926. She related in 1978; "Having been brought up with horses and being a Physical Education Major at UCLA were my qualifications for the Ranger job". During this period Buford Wright was the Chief Ranger at Big Pines. Men from the Honor Camp did all the park maintenance. Mr. Wadsworth was the Superintendent with Mr. Baker as his Assistant and Jo Plummer their Secretary.

By 1930 the Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Department had under construction or completed the major buildings of fourteen camps later used by various organizations. They also completed an ice rink, a lodge for the Big Pines Ski Club, an animal park, several ski jumps and various campgrounds. They improved the beaches and raised the level of Jackson Lake, built a twelve mile road from Big Pines Park Headquarters to Valyermo and had begun various improvements at Prairie Fork.

Other construction included numerous service roads, a complete water system, an electrical power transmission system and distribution plant, a telephone system with switchboard, numerous maintenance buildings, administration buildings, a lodge, swimming pool, numerous resort cabins, tennis courts, six organizational camps and a trash incineration plant. Other improvements were a sewage disposal system at Big Pines, playgrounds, shelter houses, a garage and residences for employees.

McClellan Flat was originally a pen for bison (commonly known as *buffalo*). This flat was used by Los Angeles County Supervisors for vacation cabins, at Los Angeles County expense. Now it is a special use permit area under the USFS. The cabins are now occupied on weekends or for vacations only. The roof of the garage of cabin #8, formerly occupied by William Davidson, is the form that was used for pouring the concrete on the Davidson Arch.

County officials were later embarrassed because no accurate record of the total capital spent on these improvements was ever kept. Estimates of several million dollars were made in addition to the tens of thousands of dollars annually spent for administration and maintenance.

In 1932 the county ran into financial difficulties at Big Pines Park with the depression-ridden supervisors unable to supply adequate funds to finance the operation of the park. The "Los Angeles Examiner" ran an article stating that the county would save sixty thousand dollars annually by returning control of Big Pines Park to the Forest Service, with the county supplying twenty five thousand dollars annually to defray maintenance costs. The USFS granted permission to the county to close Prairie Fork in 1934, since the road to this area had never been completed. The people of Los Angeles who had enjoyed their mountain playground opposed its return to the Forest Service and negotiations dragged on for years with various legal points being raised. Eventually, by July of 1941 the USFS had taken over full control of Big Pines Park.

On November 8th, 1956 the Angeles Crest Highway (State Highway 2) across the San Gabriel Mountains was opened to the public. This was after nearly one-half century of cooperative effort and expenditures totaling some ten million dollars. To this day it still provides easier access to the playground known as "Big Pines" which was designed for the folks of Los Angeles.

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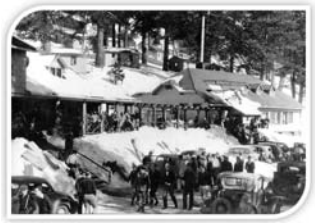
Dorothy Hiltabrand Swift
First Lady Ranger (1926)
(Photo: From the Swift Collection; Wrightwood History Museum)

Big Pines Park (1930)
(Postcard: From the Jody Lopez Collection; Wrightwood History Museum)



Big Pines Park (1930)
(Postcard: From the Jody Lopez Collection; Wrightwood History Museum)

Wrightwood Roots
April 2000