San Timoteo Canyon: The Dust Never Settles

A few stories of notable events in the history of San Timoteo Canyon, Redlands and environs

By Sherli Leonard for the Redlands Conservancy
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San Timoteo Canyon, the fourteen-mile natural gateway between Southern California’s inland valleys and its arid eastern deserts, rests quietly and serenely today between the hubbub of Highway 60 and Interstate 10. A wise and patient reminder of the indomitable strength and giving nature of land, the Canyon has played a major role in the peopling of the lands east of Los Angeles, and it has witnessed the gamut of human behavior.

The Stage Coach Holdup

January mornings in the Canyon can prickle with icy cold dew. Moisture ekes up from the creek bottom, and, before roads were paved, would lay evenly on the dirt road, forming a sort of natural macadam.

Before the dawn on January 22, 1876, only the creaks and groans of the rolling stage coach and the rhythmic beat of sixteen horse-hoofs rustled the stillness of the damp air. Dust refused to awaken and rise from the wet dirt. Illuminated by the late glow of a full moon, the team of numbly focused horses pulled the Wells Fargo and Co. stage along the San Timoteo Canyon Road. The driver, too, focused on the stretch ahead, letting his mind wander to the anticipated end—now only ten minutes away at the old Covington Ranch—of the Arizona to California journey.

“Halt!” barked a harsh voice out of the darkness from the side of the road. The driver jolted to attention. Crashing through the brush, two figures charged on foot in front of the stage.
The driver peered intently, trying to discern the source of the noise. The lead off horse threw up his head and snorted to the right side, pulling the others along. One of the figures grabbed the bridle and snatched the team to a stop, a jerky stop that almost pitched the driver from his perch.

“I told you to halt!” one of the figures shouted.

The driver could tell they wore neckerchiefs pulled up over their noses so only their eyes peered beneath the brims of their hats into the moonlit morning sky. Puffs of steamy breath blew through their neckerchiefs in rapid spurts.

“Throw it out!” the small man demanded. “Throw out the box!” He pointed with jerky motions, using his rifle in his right hand to give directions.

“There’s nothin’ in it,” the driver shouted back, as loudly as he could. He had a thought that if he made enough noise, the hostlers at the ranch a quarter of a mile away might hear him in the quiet of the early morning and muster up some help.

“I don’t care,” hollered back the small man in a full length coat, clearly agitated, bouncing his rifle about like a bad conductor with a baton. “Throw it out anyway.”

The driver reached into the boot with his trembling left hand, and awakened Mr. Van Slyke, a passenger, who had been asleep on top of the box. Van Slyke crawled up onto the seat next to the driver, and together, the two men hoisted the hefty box and lobbed it to the ground next to the stage. The pull horses startled and jumped forward, knocking down the man who had grabbed the bridle.

“Get on out of here,” the robbers shouted too late, for the driver had jumped on the opportunity to take off.

“Hhyyaahhh!” he shouted to the horses, who gathered speed and jolted the stage away from the scene.

“Thomas!” hollered the driver as he cursed at the horses to move faster. “Thomas, wake up.”
Mr. Thomas, Division Agent of Wells Fargo and Co., had already roused from his shallow snooze. He pulled his head and shoulders through the stage window and craned his neck to see the driver.

“Stop this coach,” he ordered, barely louder than a harsh whisper.

The driver pulled hard to slow and stop the horses who tossed their heads in confused frustration, jumbling up into a rattling pile of horse flesh, hoofs, leather, and iron.

“Get your pistols out and come with me,” Thomas hissed at the passengers.

Huddled together, the four men slipped through the early dawn toward the scene of the robbery, half crouching, half running the two hundred yards back through the brush next to the road.

The robbers had moved the box about forty yards to the south of the crime scene, and were engrossed in their efforts to carry the heavy chest when Thomas and the stage coach “posse” rushed toward them. Quickly assessing their imminent peril, they dropped the box like a snake and ran as hard as they could into the darkness.

The box that had “nothin’ in it” actually carried $1,500, saved from the hands of robbers by the persistent action of Mr. Thomas.

The Shoot-Out

The stage robbery was not the first incident to rattle the nerves of the Canyon residents. Twenty-five years earlier, in 1851, a small band of cutthroats ran out of luck after a wrong turn into a box canyon.

A series of misdeeds, including suspected arson in San Francisco, had led John Irving, a convict from Australia—even they didn’t want him—and thirty-some heavily-armed, trouble-making bullies to the Los Angeles area. Intent on getting
something for nothing, Irving tried to harass rancher Don Lugo into paying him big money to break Lugo’s imprisoned grandsons out of jail.

The honorable Lugo refused to consort with the thugs, working instead with a lawyer who managed to secure freedom for the boys.

Incensed by the rebuff, Irving vowed revenge. A complicated plan evolved.

“Harrison!” Irving barked at his second in command. “We’re gonna head to Mexico. I’ve heard there’s silver trains that travel from Chihuahua to Mazatlan. We’re gonna take one of those trains, then hit off to Texas. But first, we have a little pay-back.”

Harrison spit out a wad of tobacco, wiped the dark drips from his mustache with his right cuff, and propped his booted left foot on the step of the Los Angeles court house where they had just witnessed Lugo’s lawyer at work. He glanced darkly at the crowed of suited men who were discussing the details of the bail arrangement for the young Lugo boys.

“They won’t say no to me again,” Irving snarled, rubbing his freckled and whiskered face with his gloved left hand while his right hand twitched near the handle of his revolver.

“I’m listenin’,” Harrison mumbled.

On their way to Mexico, Irving plotted, they would stop at the Lugo Rancho in the San Bernardino Valley, steal their gentle saddle horses, and kidnap the young Lugos to hold them for $10,000 ransom. With that money in hand, they would continue unbothered south to Mexico.

Irving and his band left Los Angeles and headed toward Mexico via the Temecula route. On the first day out, they arrived at Laguna Rancho in Elsinore, where Irving left several men in charge of most of the rifles with orders to proceed to Warner Ranch, about thirty miles away, and wait for him
The Serrano people followed there. Irving took eleven men with him to San Bernardino to execute his plan.

Lucky for Don Lugo, a friend had overhead Irving’s plan and warned Lugo to evacuate his rancho. By the time Irving made it to the Lugo Rancho on the third day, the grounds were empty—even the servants had disappeared.

Irving stomped back to his weary horse, and leapt on his back with one bounce. He jerked the reins so hard the horse almost threw himself over backwards. Irving regained his seat, and put his spurs into the side of the horse. Followed by Harrison and the others, Irving raced on to the next rancho, belonging to Jose del Carmen, where he broke down the doors to the house and stole anything he could get his hands on.

A vigilante posse now in hot pursuit, Irving and his gang charged across the brush-covered valley where Redlands now presides, scurried through the narrow and shallow Reservoir Canyon, and stopped their horses on a hill overlooking Sepulveda Adobe in present day Yucaipa.

Harrison, whose light grey gelding was thoroughly spent, pointed to the adobe ranch house and cultivated grounds.

“Let’s get some water there,” he said, shifting his seat to make his horse stand up straight. “The horses ain’t gonna make it much further.”

Led by Chief Juan Antonio, the posse with forty of the Cahuilla Indians from neighboring villages cleared the top of the hill just in time to see the Irving bunch dismount at the adobe ranch house.

Harrison spotted them, and the gang quickly remounted. Searching for a likely escape route, they found Uucipa Canon, today’s Live Oak Canyon, and followed the passable road down the creek.
“This looks like it’s in the direction of the Warner Ranch,” Irving shouted to his men. “We’ll get past this canyon and then those Indians will bail out.”

Two miles of the canyon road led to an intersection with another dirt road, the one which traced through San Timoteo Canyon. Irving hadn’t anticipated this. He had figured he was already on the road that would lead them out of this dilemma.

Antonio’s men were armed with only bows and arrows, yet their numbers had increased so as they pressed closer to Irving, with dust swirling and thickening the air, they became an ominous force.

Irving felt the pressure. He wasn’t sure where to go. Straight ahead of him, going south in the direction of Warner Ranch, a wide, green meadow spread out into a promising route, seeming to be wide enough to carry all the way through the hills that lay beyond. He could hear the war whoops from the Indians as their dust billowed to the right and left of him and the outlaws. Even the road up San Timoteo Canyon filled with dust as more Indians came to the fray. His only escape lay in the canyon ahead.

The canyon had deceived him. It boxed out, a gut-sinking fact which became obvious to Irving with each anxious stride within less than a mile.

Antonio and the Indians, now numbering 100, rode behind the gang and up the hills on either side of the canyon, and began to rain arrows on the twelve bandits as their escape ran out of canyon.

Irving looked furiously up to the ridges, now filled with Indians. He managed to leap off his horse and fire his pistol at the pursuers, wounding a few, before his body filled with arrows. Within a matter of minutes, the outlaws’ guns silenced and the dust began to settle.
Juan Antonio, who had followed Irving up the box canyon, rode to where eleven men, now eerily draped over bushes and rocks, lay dead. The sweating and heaving horses stood stock still near by, with reins dangling and saddles pulled askew off to their sides. Antonio found Irving’s body in a bloody heap, between two boulders where he had tried to hide. The five arrows piercing his body made a mockery out of his pitiful attempts.

But where was the twelfth man?

The Indians pulled the arrows from the bodies and stripped the dead men of their clothes. It all would belong to the Indians, now: the horses, the tack, the stolen money and the loot. The Indians, however, eventually returned nine of the horses to their original owners.

General J.H. Bean, the local military commander who had been searching for Irving, arrived at the scene later in the afternoon, finding the ghostly bodies scattered and naked.

“Well,” he grumbled to a crusty older soldier who was helping him search the site, “they didn’t get too far. This ol’ canyon will be all the box they need for their burials.” They laughed, as the other soldiers pulled the bodies into shallow graves.

Bean spotted a flash of color in a thicket nearby. He paused and peered closely without moving, noting the twelfth man, hiding in breathless silence. For a long second, Bean’s eyes met the outlaw’s eyes, then Bean snorted in disgust and walked away.

The man, Evans by name, hid motionless until dark, then slid past the soldiers’ camps and stumbled back to the Sepulveda adobe in Yucaipa where he stole a mule. Exhausted and terrified, Evans kept riding through the night. Eventually, he found the men Irving had left behind, and continued on with them.
Held to be justified in their killing of the eleven white men, the Cahuilla Indians received $100 in food and clothing. The lovely and sleepy box canyon, so rudely aroused, returned to its knowing silence, enveloping the dead men in eternity.

**The Travelers and Settlers**

San Timoteo Canyon has hosted the footprints of more than just stage robbers and hooligans. The Cahuilla Indians, the mission fathers, the miners, the Spanish, the Chinese, the bandits, the ranchers, the outlaws, and the lawmen—they all used it, and left their footprints deep in the sandy river beds and rich bottom land of the San Timoteo Creek, a tributary to the vast Santa Ana River system.

They trod across, camped upon, plowed up, fought over, worked on, and built up the land that formed the main route from the inland valleys to the desert areas.

The Serrano people used the land first. Following the creek, the wide canyon eases up from the valley of the San Bernardino area to reach the Banning bench in the San Gorgonio Pass, providing a safe and gentle route for the Native American people. The Canyon land became part of the vast life-way systems of the Serrano peoples, known today by the official title of San Manuel Band of Serrano Mission Indians of the San Manuel Reservation. The Serrano people followed and lived on the canyon route, leaving behind many habitation sights.

According to Wil Jensen of the San Manuel Reservations, ethnographic records show that the Serrano people had constant ties with the canyon region. In fact, it was a focus point, and the Cahuilla people converged here. Many of their habitation sights have already been destroyed, but many still exist.

The Spaniards arrived in the area in the early 1800s with their Mexican land grants in hand. With its flowing
With that money in hand, they would find a suitable spot for raising livestock and planting truck gardens. Several Mexican and Spanish families settled down the canyon, according to William Frink in a 1936 article of the Redlands Daily Facts. These people held Saturday night “bailes” where they danced to the music of the violin and guitar, and consumed large amounts of hot tamales.

**Brookside Winery**

Less than a mile down-canyon from the scene of the 1876 stagecoach robbery, second-generation Californian Emile Vache purchased a large chunk of land north of the creek and below the bluff on which members of Redlands’ upper crust would live someday.

Vache planted grape vines on his property, acquiring many of his vines from Dr. Barton who had, in turn, acquired them from the mission fathers who managed the Mission San Gabriel Estancia, an outpost of the Mission San Gabriel. Beginning his Brookside Winery operations along San Timoteo Creek in 1884, Vache built a large distillery and bottling facility right on the edge of the road. He hired a crew of local Indians to build the adobe cellar, using bricks they made on the property.

An 1890s incident strained relations between the Vache family and the Indians. A young Indian had rebelled against his local band. He fled their anger, and ran down the canyon until he reached Brookside Winery where he sought refuge. The ranch employees hid him in the cupola of the adobe wine cellar. There he crouched for three days and nights.

In the meantime, representatives from the local band of Indians came to the winery and demanded his return. The
winy personnel refused, so the Indians surrounded the ranch and would not let anyone in or out.

One of the ranch hands braved the siege-lines and escaped, racing five miles away to San Bernardino to fetch the sheriff who dispatched assistance.

The incident soon ended, and the Indian came down out of the cupola, appearing naked at the door of the main house. Mrs. Vache provided him with a blanket to cover himself, and he vanished into the night.

Situated next to the creek, the winery several times fell victim to the floods when the rain-swollen creek rolled over its banks and swelled across the vineyards. The flood of 1905 invaded one of the adobe houses and drove the residents, sixth-month-old infant daughter in their arms, from the building. That flood washed out the creek bridge and a large reservoir, also used as a boating pond.

**Automobiles in the Canyon**

With a grade gentle enough for the Southern Pacific Railroad, San Timoteo Canyon became the preferred route from the inland towns to the Banning Pass and the towns of Beaumont and Banning.

Even though it was the main route for car and horse traffic to the desert, the road remained paved with only dirt well into the 1900s. It also became a popular road race course for automobiles. The Mile High Road Race took drivers from Los Angeles to Beaumont and back via the canyon. Although the cars were no more than cut-down autos with small engines, they raced at 55 to 60 miles per hour on the dirt road. The race took 24 hours, so ranch hands stationed themselves along the San Timoteo Canyon Road and built bonfires to help racers find their way at night. In 1912, famous race car drivers Barney Oldfield and Ralph Hamlin led the pack of racers as
they roared through the canyon on the Los Angeles to Phoenix race.

The Past-to-Present Connection

The twenty-first century finds San Timoteo Canyon still much as it existed a hundred years earlier. Except that long caravans of commuters have discovered the now-paved road, the canyon remains much the same, hosting small ranches and farms which sparsely dot the land along the road. The train still chugs slowly up the tracks, and the hawks still soar off the bluffs.

Stand among the sky-tall eucalyptus trees that line the road in places and listen to the gracious voice of the winds: it's the same voice the Serrano peoples listened to as they built their campfires three hundred years ago. Take in the brazen scent of the grasses growing wild in the fields: it's the same scent the Mexican ranchers knew as they tended their sheep and cattle. Gaze at the ruggedly rolling hills lining the canyon: those are the ones the outlaws couldn't get past. See the two red-tailed hawks softly surfing the wind currents above the citrus trees: hawks like those patrolled the vineyards of the Brookside winery.

In San Timoteo Canyon, the past connects to the present and gives direction to the future, and the dust has yet to settle.
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Wil Jensen of the San Manuel Indians consulted on the history of the Serrano peoples in the San Timoteo Canyon.

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