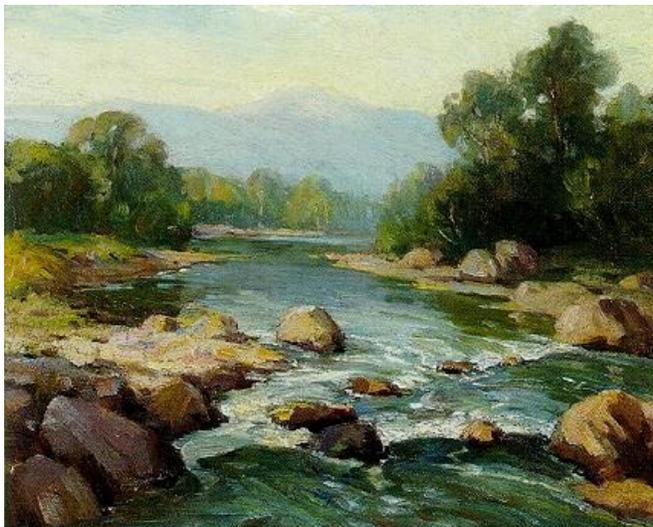


# The Nature of the Arroyo Seco

By Tim Brick

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What was the special magic that has drawn people to Pasadena and the west San Gabriel Valley? And how we can preserve and cultivate that magic?

It's the richness of nature in our region. It's those grand mountains out the window and our glorious climate. California's pioneers found gold, but those who really struck it rich discovered water, and in this region they found the Arroyo Seco. The Tongva or Gabrielino Native Americans referred to the region between the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers as *Hahamongna*, "the land of flowing waters, fruitful valley," a wonderful concept appropriately linking the prosperity of our region with the nature that makes it possible. They settled on bluffs overlooking the stream that linked the San Gabriel Mountains to the Los Angeles River. At the mouth of Millard Canyon and along the rim of the Arroyo they built their settlements. The Spaniards got there in the late summer, because they gave our grand canyon the name "Arroyo Seco," dry riverbed.

In 1873 Eaton gave Daniel Berry, representative of the California Colony of Indiana in Indianapolis, the grand tour of Rancho San Pasqual. Berry wrote back enthusiastically to his

backers: "Found tract of 2,800 acres at \$10 an acre . . . (*here he describes the Arroyo*) . . . about 500 acres, a wooded and watered canyon, suitable for wood and cattle grazing. The wood is plenty, the water delicious and cool, leaping out of the rocks on the side in little cascades."

When the settlers came here they crowded the banks of the Arroyo Seco and created a culture and lifestyle that was vigorous and alluring. Gardens, craftsman bungalows, hand-printed books, tile, outdoor competition, athletic events enriched the lives of our early settlers with an enthusiasm they trumpeted across the county.

Let me offer the testimony of Charles Holder, the renowned sportsman, outdoorsman, hunter and fisher of Southern California, one of the founders of the Tournament of Roses.

In a delightful little book published in 1893, "All About Pasadena," he wrote:

"To the west of Pasadena extends the cañon of the Arroyo Seco, which means literally, a dry river. In the summer there is in the bed a little stream which now and then disappears, really forming a good body of water, though out of sight,

and in the winter, after a rain, bearing in its torturous channel a rushing torrent of great power, the drainage of the great cañon of the Arroyo that extends a third of the way across the Sierra Madre range.

At Pasadena the Arroyo forms a complete jungle, a most attractive resort for the walker or equestrian. Tall sycamore trees rear their graceful forms, while over the limbs and branches are festoons of the wild grape, clematis, and other vines, so luxuriant that they form a complete bower in many places. Live oaks, the willow, alder, and a variety of trees grow here, with vines and flowering plants innumerable, so that in the winter season the Arroyo becomes a literal garden.

In and out among the trees, a trail has been worn, often leading down to the bed of the brook; and here one can wander for hours at Christmas time in this leafy retreat, with the birds singing all about, and trout darting from the horse's feet. Between the point known as Park Place and that a mile or two south, the Arroyo is thickly wooded; but to the north it branches out, becomes wider and low brush, cacti and the yucca are the principal forms of vegetation. Here there is a good carriage road reached from Park Place, which can be followed to Devil's Gate, where, or near by, a road leads out of the Arroyo. Equestrians can keep on and pass Devil's Gate, fording the stream; but carriages take the road referred to, finding another a little farther on, leading down into the Arroyo again, where a cross road is found. One to the left passes over into La Cañada Valley, while that to the right carries you on up the Arroyo into the mountains and to Switzer's. The La Cañada drive may be continued for two or three miles, then returning by Verdugo Cañon, a pleasant valley, well wooded and attractive. A shorter ride, and particularly pleasant for

equestrians, is to follow down the La Cañada road for a mile or so, then turn to the left, and return to Pasadena through the hills.

“By following the Arroyo road north we are brought to the mouth of the cañon, hung with wild grape and ivy; and for three miles when the water is not high, the ride, especially for those on horseback, is a continual delight; the road winding between the high walls of the cañon, skirted by rich vegetation and abounding in flows and ferns.”

Hiram Reid in his 1895 History of Pasadena states that in the early days of Los Angeles, the area between Devil's Gate and the mouth of Arroyo Seco Canyon was a favorite hunting ground for big game and that several of the bears used in the very popular bear and bull fights at the plaza in downtown Los Angeles were taken there alive. From about 1780 to 1855 wild cats, mountain lions and bears were captured in Hahamongna by groups of expert horsemen, who would lasso the grizzlies by two legs, sometimes by all four, and lead or drive them into the city. There they would be pitted against the wildest bull to be found on the vast ranges that then covered most of Southern California. These bear and bull fights were the biggest sports events of that period. Reid also states that the last grizzly killed near Pasadena was shot in Millard Canyon by an uncle of the Giddings family who lived near where La Viña Sanatorium was located.

Lloyd B. Austin, the proprietor of Switzer's resort in a 1936 talk to the Pasadena Historical Society said, “At a distance ‘Arroyo Seco’ may be only soft Spanish for ‘Dry gulch,’ but from the first day of the Pasadena colony, every hunter or fisherman who ventured beyond the granite gateway a mile above Devil's Gate brought back tantalizing stories of trout pools, foaming cascades and groves of live oaks, sycamore and spruce hemmed in by imposing cliff walls . . .

One morning three anglers reported a catch of 240 trout below the site of the ranger station.”

As the Arroyo Seco emerges from the San Gabriel Mountains, its steep descent slows and the waters cut through an alluvial plain. Beneath this region, which includes La Cañada-Flintridge, Altadena, Pasadena, Sierra Madre and part of Arcadia, lies the Raymond Basin – a massive bowl of alluvial sand and gravel filled with water. The south rim of the basin is the Raymond Dyke, a geological fault that runs from Highland Park to Raymond Hill at Pasadena’s southern boundary with South Pasadena and then through San Marino just north of Huntington Drive to Santa Anita Canyon on the east side of Arcadia.

This flowing water and rich soil conditions has endowed the Arroyo Seco communities with a rich natural heritage. Theodore Roosevelt saw it in 1911 when he rode through the Arroyo and proclaimed, *“This Arroyo would make one of the greatest parks in the world.”*

But how have we treated the Arroyo Seco, which has contributed so much to our region, since 1911? We’ve wrung the water and wildlife out of it. We have dammed it and paved it. We’ve even built a freeway through it. We have contaminated it with toxic chemicals that have knocked out 9 of Pasadena’s 13 wells. The fish and frogs that frolicked in the Arroyo are gone. The alders and willows have been replaced by parking lots. We’ve buried the stream in a concrete tomb.

Still, through all this, the Arroyo has retained a great deal of its grandeur and attractiveness. Today the Arroyo is “the most celebrated canyon in Southern California.” The Arroyo Is Our Link with the Nature of Southern California. Like any great river, the Arroyo leads us all to new and exciting places – the mountains to the north and downtown Los Angeles to the south.

In Hahamongna, at the foot of the mountains, in the basin behind Devil’s Gate Dam, are unique environments that still exist in only a few select canyons in all of Southern California. These rare habitats have provided shelter and sustenance for the endangered Arroyo toad, and for the trout and steelhead that once frolicked in this area, and for birds too numerous to mention. Riparian streamzone habitat, riversidian alluvial sage scrub habitat . . . rare, irreplaceable resources. In the Central Arroyo is a playground for participatory sports unparalleled in Southern California. And in Pasadena’s Lower Arroyo we can find peace and tranquility . . . we can touch nature.

And so we come to today, March 2003, and Pasadena has prepared a Master Plan for the Arroyo Seco. The plan has been in the works for many years, but the final version has just been released less than 40 hours ago. Dozens of community meetings . . . hundreds of people participating . . . with a consistent message . . . a plea . . . a mandate to the planners and city officials: Preserve and Protect our Arroyo; save our last remaining patches of wildness and wildlife in this region.

Now a Master Plan sets the vision for the future. What would Pasadena’s Master Plan do? Search through the thousands of pages of the environmental review and the sense is inescapable that this is a plan to engineer our last precious natural spaces into what can be described most optimistically as an “urban park.” This plan would further the process of urbanizing this great natural resource called the Arroyo Seco. It would bring more parking and pavement and roads and facilities to a unique natural area, until the nature is wrung out of the Arroyo.

Understandably people want more recreation space, but nature is the most wholesome form of recreation, full of lessons for young and old

alike. In our region these rare places where we can have frogs and fish must be protected.

### Leave Hahamongna Natural

While Pasadena has been preparing its Master Plan, another plan have been preparation. It's the Arroyo Seco Watershed Restoration Study, put together by the Arroyo Seco Foundation and North East Trees working with 15 governmental agencies on a plan that is more comprehensive and protects the natural environment. It sets as the goal: to protect and restore ecologic function and the natural beauty of the Arroyo Seco for ourselves and for future generations.

What would a restored Arroyo Be Like?

- Clean water flowing in a safe natural stream
- A series of continuous trails and paths from the mountains to the sea
- Healthy habitat for critters and people

The Arroyo Seco Should Be A Model for Southern California characterized by:

- A sense of place shared and enhanced by many cultures and
- Stream restoration in an urban setting
- Parks that serve the needs of both people and wildlife.
- A sense of place shared and enhanced by many cultures and passed on from one generation to the next

*A bit of wilderness flowing through our communities*

Watershed planning is the key to open space preservation

*Now is the time. The conditions are present.*

- Watershed-consciousness
- Available funding
- Local coordination
- Available technical expertise

- Political will
- Economic benefit
- Compliance with Clean Water regulations

We have an historic opportunity to renew and restore the natural vitality of the Arroyo Seco. If missed, that opportunity could be lost forever.

How you can participate

- Stay in touch – join *Arroyo\_Seco\_News* [www.arroyoseco.org](http://www.arroyoseco.org)
- Plant a tree
- Help cleanup the Arroyo
- Arrange for a speaker for your neighborhood association or club
- Participate in local planning efforts
- Attend Watershed U

Let me close with the words of two great Presidents:

“To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified . . . ” Theodore Roosevelt

“It is our task in our time and in our generation, to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours.” John F. Kennedy

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