

# Downhill in Carbon Canyon

## A reporter takes a road trip to the ski slope that time forgot

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Part one of two parts

It was the kind of day that had Road Trip written all over it.

A light breeze with a warm edge was blowing, the sky was a faded blue and I had about five bucks in my pocket. And it was Sunday. I couldn't think of a better reason to hop in the Ford, crank all the windows down, turn up the stereo and head out for wherever.

I took Reservoir Boulevard through Pomona's southside, knowing the gangbangers day rarely starts before 3 p.m., especially after a Saturday night. As I cruised south, I started considering some loose possibilities for a destination.

Newport sounded good. Maybe make the run along PCH to Laguna, stopping at the Crystal Cove for a date malt and a chat with the brunette behind the counter.

I stuck to Reservoir, passing under the Pomona Freeway and heading toward the Corona Expressway, deciding to take a drive down memory lane and trace the old route my mom used to take when she drove us to the beach back in the late 1960s and early '70s.

Reservoir to the expressway to Carbon Canyon Road to Imperial Highway to Harbor Boulevard.

But the bad news Sunday, late April, 1992, was that memory lane was gone.

Well, the primary roads were still there and under the same names, but as I turned on to the two lane blacktop that makes the run from Chino Hills down to Brea, I knew even a vivid imagination would have a hard time conjuring up what used to be in Carbon Canyon.

Which wasn't much, a few homes around Sleepy Hollow, a great hairpin turn and a lot of horses and cows scattered across the hillsides.

But there were new sights on the hillsides now. The kind with names like Coral Ridge, Villa de Lago, Gordon Ranch, Summit Ranch and Carriage Homes.

Laguna Canyon come north.

I started looking for the signs that read "Homes from a Million Up."

As I rounded one smooth turn I noticed one relic from my own recollections still stood in the canyon, undisturbed and out of place.

A vast stretch of concrete running down the east side of a hill, it looked like a white lava flow that was stopped before it could hit the canyon highway. I remember everytime we would drive by it my mom would tell us that's where people used to ski.

I would always try and imagine what the people used to look like zooming down a white stretch of pavement, in the middle of the summer, surrounded by dry brown hills. The real mountains



TIME MOVES ON — Like the Statue of Liberty that confronted Charleston Heston at the end of Planet of the Apes, a long-

(Star-Progress photo by Jack Hancock) deserted, vast stretch of cement is all that remains of the ill-fated attempt to bring year round skiing to Carbon Canyon.

— and skiing — obscured in the distance by a veil of smog.

Yet as the '70s wore into the '80s I forgot about the old slope, probably because by the time I got my license I gave up the scenic drives in lieu of the freeways to the beach.

But there it was.

Of course now I was a professional reporter, and I realized there was an opportunity here, if not a story.

I wheeled the Ford off the highway and onto a smaller access road that leads up to the old ski slope, pulling over in front of a small cluster of homes that looked like they had been part of the original complex.

There was a chain link fence around the slope, blocking it off from the road, but I didn't see anyone watching as I slipped under it, camera bag in hand, and figured no one would mind even if they did see me.

Standing at the bottom, the slope appears much bigger than it looks from the road. I got the feeling it must have been a rather treacherous run from the top. Fast and terrifying.

As I started to make my way toward the top, I tried to remember what it had looked like before, but I could only recall how the brightness of the white cement stuck out on the hillside.

It's now overgrown with weeds that have sprouted up in neat square sections all across the slope. At its base the cement surface, which apparently was little more than an inch thick, has collapsed into a gorge now filled trees and run-off from the hill-sides.

The rubber tiles that were used to carpet the slope — which were covered with small pointed cones meant to accommodate skis —

## CARBON CANYON

were still scattered all over the place, some patches of which were still stuck to the slope in their original patterns, now petrified into place.

I started snapping shots as I climbed toward the summit, earning a healthy respect for how steep the hill really is. The remains of the tow line that used to move skiers up the hill can still be seen, with some of the old mechanical gear rusted out but still attached to old wooden poles that were torched during the 1990 fires that swept the canyon.

There is only a small level area at the top, which is now marked with the ultimate sign of our times, gang graffiti. Behind the slope a lush wild area opens up, along with the remains of an old access road that is still partly paved.

I made it back down quickly, and apparently just in time.

As I crossed the street and made my way over to the homes across from the slope, a rent-a-

cop pulled up and called me over to his car.

"You sellin' something?" he asked, giving me a look that said "I know you're Kevin Cooper and don't deny it."

I explained I was just a reporter wallowing in the past and trying to figure out why anyone with a full deck thought people would pay to ski down a cement slope from hell in Carbon Canyon.

He seemed to understand.

"Well, some people called in and said there was a man with a camera running up and down the hill, we just had to check it out."

I understood. We live in dangerous times.

After the hired gun drove away a guy named Sage ambled down from one of the old homes and offered to give the Whole Story on the Lost Ski Slope of Carbon Canyon.

His buddy, Grant, produced an old ticket, or slope pass, which boasted "Ski year round!" and re-

minded potential travelers the resort did have "auto parking."

Built in the mid-1960s and dubbed "Ski Villa" by its creators, the slope and the several small units across the road from it were meant to be something of a year-round, mini-Aspen, Sage said.

"I know it was open in '65, I used to go up there with my friends and drink Thunderbird at the top," Sage recalled.

Though a hit with high school partiers, the slope apparently never caught on enough to survive, which Sage figured had something to do with the pain involved when one falls at high speed on cement.

"Too many people got hurt. Opening day they hired a pro to go down it, for publicity purposes, and he broke his leg."

There was no "shut off pool" either, Sage noted, no open area at the bottom that allowed skiers to slow down before coming to a stop.

"People were smashing into each other and piling up at the bottom," he said.

Sage himself never made the run.

"I went up to the top one night, took a look and said 'No Way.' Snow is a lot more forgiving to the human body than concrete."

Despite the potential for some serious pain, Sage said the slope had a beautiful feel to it, especially at night, when the hill was bathed in the eerie glow of flood lights.

"It looked just like snow at night, just like something out of Colorado," he said.

After Ski Villa closed, which Sage said was after little more than a season in operation, the slope was essentially just left to rot. Most of the tiled surface was bulldozed up to the top and left in piles.

Curiosity used to draw a lot of gawkers off the highway, but not so much anymore.