

The Banning Bench

The Banning Bench is a rural area just north of Banning, reached by San Gorgonio Avenue on its east side and Sunset Avenue on its west. The Bench was originally developed for agriculture by Pass pioneer C. O. Barker and was known in the early history of Banning as the Barker Bench.

In 1907 a party of engineers and promoters explored the headwaters of Whitewater River to determine the feasibility of bringing water from Whitewater Canyon to the Barker Bench. Prior to this time the Bench was used for dry farming (principally Texas Red Oats) but with irrigation made available the prime land could be used for deciduous fruit orchards. Once a water system was designed and constructed the Barker Bench, now becoming known as Banning Heights, was subdivided and put on the market in August of 1913. The first orchards were planted with apples and prunes and it was soon discovered that the soil, elevation and climate created the perfect combination for planting peach and later nectarine orchards. According to Bob Rutherford, one time president of the Water Board of the Banning Heights Mutual Water Company, there was no domestic water available for residences until the 1940s. Before the 1940s, water to houses used gravity flow systems from the irrigation water.

Mr. Lindy Seymour has lived on the Bench since 1932. His parents and siblings all worked in the various orchards on the Bench. According to Mr. Seymour peaches were the most successful orchards and at one time there were 600 acres in peaches. There were also walnuts, almonds, cherries and apples at the higher elevations. The elevation of the Bench reaches 4200 ft. at the end of Bluff Road. Some of the apple orchards were owned by Ted Silverwood who also owned Parrish Ranch in Oak Glen. The Rutherford family cultivated large portions of the Bench with peach orchards

Lindy Seymour grew up on property near the old Strauss place which was owned at the time by an Agnes Wild from New York and along with his orchard work Lindy spent a lot of time working in the Banning Water Canyon. His father often maintained the water flume at the source of the water far up into the canyon and would stay several days at a time after hiking up to that area. Both Lindy and Bench resident Mary Sartin remember the original dirt road, a steep, curving wagon road that rose from the Water Canyon floor just north of today's hairpin curved road and entered the Bench at the approximate intersection of Bluff Road and Mesa Street. Remnants of this road can be seen today looking up to the base of the Bench from the Water Canyon.

During WWII the San Gorgonio Pass had several "plane spotting" stations between Beaumont and Cabazon. According to a January 12, 1942, article in the Record Gazette, 14 people living on the Bench operated a plane spotting station 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The people of

Banning Heights (as it was called at the time) also purchased all the materials and built the station themselves.

Lindy Seymour remembers the plane spotter's station on the Bench. It was located near the intersection of Bluff Road and Gilman. The station was a wooden structure with a telephone. The telephone was used to relay a message when a plane could be heard but not seen. Lindy volunteered there when he was 14 or 15 years old and served around 500 hours. He remembered Milo Morse who supervised the plane spotters. Milo Morse was listed as "Chief Supervisor" of the aircraft warning service on the Banning Heights.

Lindy Seymour and his family have enjoyed the peace and quiet of the Banning Bench and often see wildlife; deer, coyotes, and bears. There were times when flocks of Turkey Buzzards would spend a day or two in the tops of some of the pine trees. In past times the migrations of these birds were more common as were the heavier and more frequent snows. Most Banning Bench residents express their agreement with Lindy's positive assessment of living on the Bench.

Thanks to all who participated in our Banning Bench question of the week. Special thanks to Lindy Seymour, Lewis Robertson, Bob and Ruth Rutherford, Alan and Marianne Hamdorf and Mary Sartin for their contributions to this article. (Banning Record Gazette, March 25, 2011, by Bill Bell)

Photograph Caption For Article:

"The old grade to the Bench, north of today's road. Men, horses and scythes ready to start the harvest."