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Tour One – Highway 79

ON THE ROAD IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

SAN DIEGO COUNTY
PARKS AND RECREATION

ON THE ROAD IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

A Guide to Historic and Scenic Tours

TOUR ONE – HIGHWAY 79

County of San Diego
Parks and Recreation Department
5201 Ruffin Road
San Diego, California 92123

printed on recycled paper
1990

FOREWORD

Southern Californians drive everywhere. They endure bumper-to-bumper traffic twice a day during the so-called rush hour; they drive two blocks to the grocery store for a loaf of bread. And they jump in their cars on the weekends and during vacations, searching for recreation near and far.

But this love affair with the automobile is not a new step in the evolution of human life in California. For example, there is the Federal Writers Project driving tour, *California, A Guide to the Golden State*. This book, published in 1939, outlined an exhaustive (and exhausting) journey down most of the highways and byways in the state at the time.

Much has changed since then, however. Countless miles of roadway have been added to the system, providing access to previously unknown corners of the state. At the same time, much of the landscape, manmade and natural, has changed.

Surprisingly few driving tours have been published since the Writers Project guide. The San Diego County Parks and Recreation Department proposes to fill that void. The following is the first in a projected series of driving tours in San Diego County. Some of the tours will be short, one to two hours in length; others will take at least a day to complete, perhaps more if the traveler is thorough. All of the tours are designed to highlight little known corners of the county as well as the nationally famous features, with the goal of revealing the almost limitless natural and historic resources of our portion of the Golden State.

Each route is divided into main and side tours. The main tour follows a major paved road (for this tour, Highway 79). Side tours

are differentiated in the text by additional indentation; these generally follow narrower roads, some of which are not paved. Directions are indicated by L (left) and R (right). All distances are given in miles rounded to the nearest tenth. Within the main tours, these mileages are set in boldface (**25.6**); figures on the side tours are given in italic *(25.6)*. Places of interest are set in capital letters. Selected points of interest are also indicated by a circled number ((22)) for easy reference to the map on pages 12 and 13.

HIGHWAY 79

This tour presents an exceptional mixture of past and present. Historical sites abound, most from the fascinating and sometimes turbulent mission and pioneer days, but they are constantly competing with some of the most beautiful scenery to be found anywhere in Southern California. Beginning in the lush Temecula Valley, the route retraces a portion of the path forged by the Butterfield Stage more than 130 years ago. After crossing several valleys and a mountain pass, it swings south through yet more fertile valleys into a famous pioneer gold mining district. From there it winds through dense forests and verdant mountain meadows, finally descending through rolling foothills to its junction with Interstate 8.

Along the way, several side routes pass through areas of the county even native San Diegans know little about. If the reader decides to take all these side trips and see all the sights, the complete tour could take two days. A pleasant overnight halfway stop would be William Heise County Park *(discussed below)*. Or there are numerous hotels and bed-and-breakfast establishments in the Julian area.

STARTING THE TOUR

At **0** miles on this tour, sixty-two miles from San Diego, State Highway 79 heads eastward from Interstate 15 near Temecula. It follows the Temecula River through ranch and farm lands that formerly belonged to the largest of the California missions, Mission San Luis Rey. Much of this valley is still used for agriculture (though methods have changed in 200 years), but housing tracts are beginning to surface.

At **5.5** is a junction with Anza Road.

> Turn L on this road and go *3.5* miles to Rancho California Road. Turn L again to the TEMECULA VALLEY WINE COUNTRY. Many of the wineries along these roads offer tours and wine tastings. Some of the better wines produced in the state come from these vineyards. Continue west to the intersection with 15, then south *2* miles to rejoin 79.

DRIPPING SPRINGS CAMPGROUND, R **8.8**, offers the camper or hiker access to the vast and rugged Agua Tibia Wilderness. As with the other national forest campgrounds on this route, the visitor will find campsites, picnic tables, pit toilets, and water. Vail Lake can be reached by taking the road L at **10.0**. If open, this privately operated, seasonal lake provides family water recreation. Continuing on 79, look to the north to see Southern California's highest peaks: Old Baldy, San Gorgonio, and San Jacinto.

The small fenced (1) CEMETERY, L **14.6**, just off the highway is the final resting place of Jacob Bergman and his family. Though most histories claim Bergman drove the first Butterfield stage through this valley in 1858, his great grandson says family documents prove that Bergman was serving in the Union army in San Francisco at the time. Bergman did, however, help lay out the stage route, and he did drive a stage between Julian and Warner Springs.

The ruins of the (2) AGUANGA STAGE STATION lie south across the highway, next to the cottonwood-lined Temecula Creek. Between 1858 and 1861 stages traveled from Tipton, Missouri to San Francisco, stopping at this station twice a week. All that remains of the original building is the wooden east wing. The original adobe was about three times this size. Local residents claim that this structure is occupied by a ghost named Jim. By all

accounts, he's a friendly specter. Unfortunately for Jim, though, his stage station is now on private land, so he gets few visitors.

AGUANGA, **16.8**, is a small community with post office, service station, and store. It lies at the junction of two old roads: the San Bernardino-Sonora Road (which heads northeast through the San Gorgonio Pass) and the Colorado Road (which goes northwest to Temecula). State Highway 371, **16.9**, heads north toward the resort town of Palm Springs.

> Turn L at this highway and drive 5 miles. The BERGMAN MUSEUM, L, includes a diner, gift shop, and exhibit room. Jacob Bergman's grandson seems to have collected anything and everything, and the evidence is housed here. The exhibits lack any historical context, but interesting artifacts can be found among the hat pins, watches, long-dead butterflies, and skulls of various creatures.

A private membership campground is at **17.1**.

The Riverside-San Diego county line crosses the highway at **20.6**. When San Diego County was created in 1850, it included most of Riverside County, as well as Imperial County and much of San Bernardino and Inyo counties. The original 37,400 square miles would have made San Diego County larger than 13 states.

The (3) OAK GROVE STAGE STATION, R **24.3**, is one of the few remaining stations on the Butterfield Overland Mail route. The marker commemorating this site is maintained by the San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation. A second historical marker, R **24.4**, designates the location of (4) CAMP WRIGHT, which was established here in 1861 to "guard the line of communication between California and Arizona." When not guarding this "line," Union soldiers stationed here also patrolled

the nearby mountains, searching for Southern sympathizers on the way to Texas and the Confederate Army. It is also said the only military action in California between Union and Confederate troops took place near this site.

OAK GROVE NATIONAL FOREST CAMPGROUND, L **24.5**, is a picturesque stopover for campers and hikers interested in the Palomar and Aguanga mountains.

At **28.8** is a junction with Chihuahua Valley Road. (This 11.1-mile route will bypass Sunshine Summit, Deadman's Hole, the glider port, and views of Aguanga Mountain. It rejoins Highway 79 at Warner Springs.)

Turn L. This narrow paved road climbs quickly up through chaparral-covered hillsides, presenting dramatic views back

Stonewall Peak

toward the Dodge Valley and the surrounding mountains. Within several miles it enters the broad and secluded (5) CHIHUAHUA VALLEY, which was named by goat-herder Jose Melandras after his home state in Mexico.

A dirt road bisects Chihuahua Valley Road at *4.4* miles. Turn right (south) and head down into the Cleveland National Forest. This side tour features some of the most spectacular scenery to be found in the county. The first five miles is moderately steep and rough in places, but it can be driven in the average two-wheel drive vehicle. Soaring cliffs and granite outcroppings surround deep canyons and tree-lined creeks. Coulter pines dot the higher peaks; below are live and scrub oaks and chaparral. In spring the hills are blanketed with the white and blue blooms of mountain lilac (ceanothus).

The national forest campground at (6) INDIAN FLATS, R *4.9*, provides a shaded retreat in which to enjoy the solitude. Below the campground the road improves; it descends six miles toward the main highway just north of Warner Springs. Look to the east to see Hot Springs Mountain, the highest peak in the county. The Pacific Crest Trail approaches the road in several places, offering more hiking opportunities.

Sunshine Summit, **31.2**, a mountain pass at 3282 feet, consists of a small group of stores and a restaurant (where adventurous diners may want to try the buffalo burger). Just south of the town, at **32.4**, beyond the green milage sign, is (7) DEADMAN'S HOLE. This boggy meadow on either side of the road could tell a colorful tale. The conventional explanation for the origin of its name is that a Butterfield stage driver found a dead body beside the spring. Lovers of suspense and mystery prefer a more sinister tale. From generation to generation among the local inhabitants, stories were told of people disappearing and of bodies that turned up with

alarming regularity at the spring. Then, in 1888, a wealthy visitor was found strangled – but not robbed of his considerable cash and jewelry. As reported in the *San Diego Union* of that year, his friends offered a reward, and soon two hunters came back with exciting news. They had tracked the footprints of some creature – it couldn't be human, since the prints were 22 inches long – and discovered a hairy being, "half human, half beast," running up Dark Canyon. They shot the creature. In his nearby lair the hunters found five human skulls, which accounted for some of the people who had vanished at Deadman's Hole. The body of the creature (today we might call it Sasquatch or Bigfoot) was to be brought to the city for exhibit. No record of such an exhibit exists today, but Dark Canyon still bears its gloomy name, and Deadman's Hole still evokes chilling legends.

(8) WARNER RANCH lies to the west of 79 between Deadman's Hole and Warner Springs. The area has played an important role in the history of San Diego. When Spanish padres made their first visit to the valley in the late 1700s, they found 10 Indian villages scattered throughout the area. Two missions, San Luis Rey and San Diego, shared the valley's rich grazing and farm lands, but after secularization in 1836 the property was granted to Silvestre de la Portilla. Eight years later a "Connecticut Yankee" named Jonathan Trumbull Warner received the 44,000-acre parcel as a land grant. Warner's relationship with the local Indians was shaky. He allowed them to live at the hot springs (where they often lay in the water and mud through the cold nights), but he often supplemented their $3 monthly wages with blows from a lash. In 1851 Warner and some companions were attacked by the Indians; Warner escaped, but his livestock was stolen and the house set afire. He never returned to the ranch.

Warner Ranch was the first civilized stop on the wearying journey westward out of the desert. Stephen Kearny and his army rested

here on their way to join Commodore Stockton in San Diego in 1846. (The crucial Battle of San Pasqual was fought nearby.) Over the years the ranch land has had many owners, including the San Diego Water District and private cattle ranchers *(see below)*.

At **38.2** on the R is a glider port, which offers glider rides to the public.

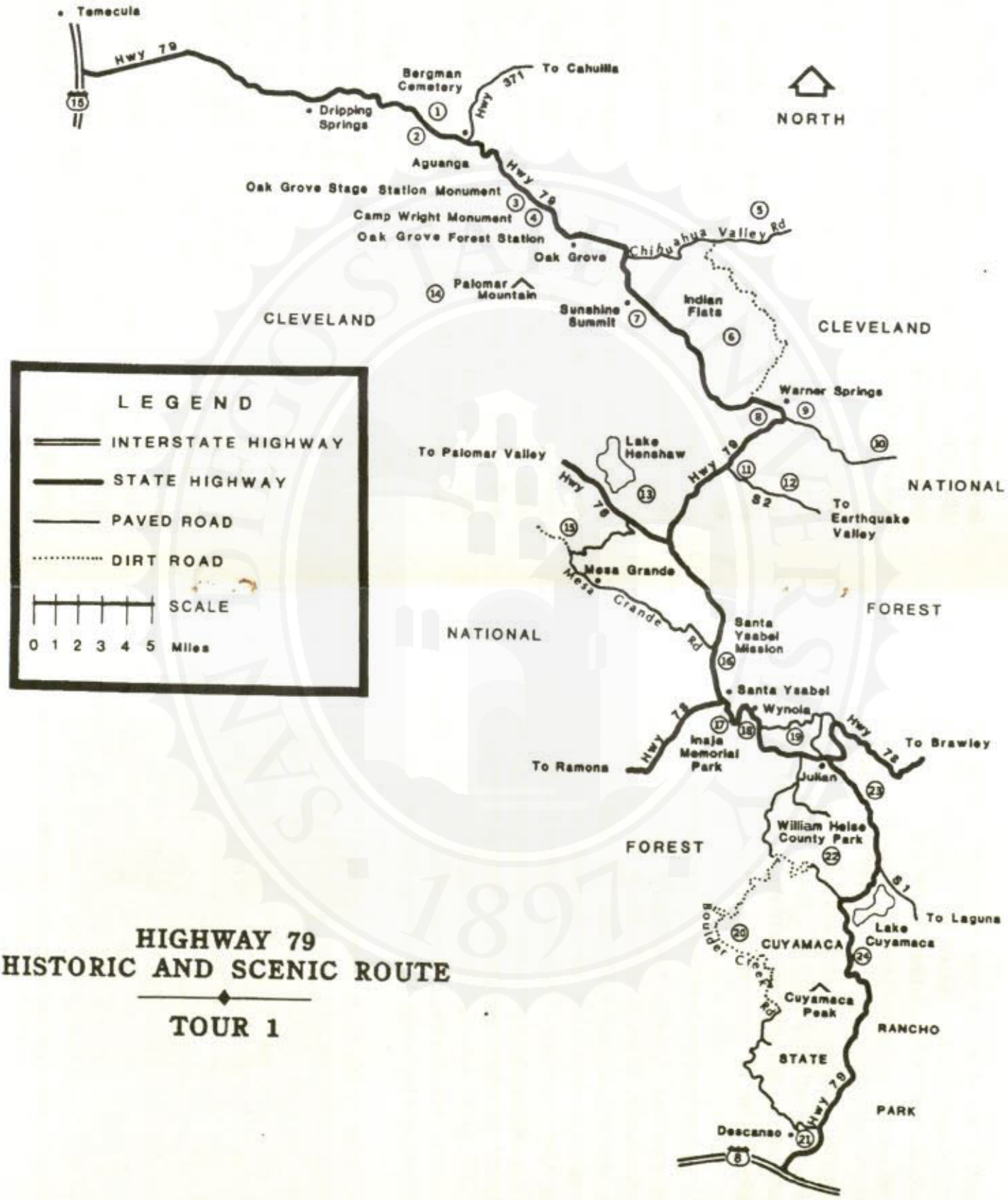
Left at **39.2** is a short road leading to the (9) CHAPEL OF ST. FRANCIS, which has been in service since 1830. The original adobe was probably part of the Indian village called Kupa; though the adobe was restored years ago, it is once again decomposing.

WARNER HOT SPRINGS, L **39.9**, is now a privately owned resort. Early stage travelers refreshed themselves in the hot springs and at a trading store, which is said to have been the only supply station between Arizona and Los Angeles. Some of the buildings in the resort were built by Indians more than 100 years ago. At **40.6** is Camino San Ignacio, which leads to the (10) LOS COYOTES INDIAN RESERVATION.

> Turn left on this road. Six miles eastward, as the road leaves the grassy foothills and enters the oak forests, is the largest of the reservations in the county. It is also one of the least populated. The Los Coyotes band has built facilities that offer weekend campers a chance to enjoy the beauty and solitude of their reservation. Wildlife is abundant here; for example, the only nesting pair of zone-tailed hawks in the state has resided on Hot Springs Mountain since the late 1980s.

Highway 79 continues southwest from Warner Springs. At **43.9** is the junction with County Route S-2.

The original (11) WARNER RANCH HOUSE is *0.7* from the



HIGHWAY 79
HISTORIC AND SCENIC ROUTE

TOUR 1

junction on the left. A state historical marker explains its significance. Continue east on S-2 to a (12) BUTTERFIELD STAGE STATION, *2.2*, best seen from the north side of the road looking northwest into the valley. The 1939 Federal Writer's Project called this structure "well-preserved," but that's hardly an appropriate description 50 years later. Its roof and walls are falling in; only fragments of the wooden slat eaves remain. S-2 continues southeast into the historic Earthquake Valley.

LAKE HENSHAW lies in the distance to the west of 79 across rolling grassland. A dam across the San Luis Rey River was completed in December of 1922, forming the reservoir. Water levels have varied considerably since. (13) MONKEY HILL (a permutation of Monk's Hill, from the padres' practice of climbing the hill to pray) rises a few hundred feet on the east side of the lake. It has also appeared occasionally on maps as Monkey Island, a poignant reminder of the ephemeral water conditions in Southern California. Despite these fluctuations, the lake remains a vital habitat to waterfowl, especially in winter. It is the most dependable location in the county for viewing wintering bald eagles.

Also visible at this point from Highway 79 are mysterious structures north of the lake. These are SOLAR COLLECTORS, used in converting solar energy to electricity. The approximately 700 structures were erected in 1984 and for a time provided energy to the San Diego Gas and Electric Company.

At **48.2** is the intersection of Highways 76 and 79. Highway 76 heads northwest past Lake Henshaw and south of Palomar Mountain. The famed (14) PALOMAR OBSERVATORY attracts thousands of visitors each year. In 1986 the flyby of Halley's Comet drew large crowds to view the once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. A state park and a small county park are packed with

wildlife and scenery.

Turn R on Highway 76. A narrow paved road, L at *1.8*, passes a general store then swings sharply uphill. Mesa Grande Road is a portal to a different San Diego, almost to a different century. It winds steeply up through thickly forested slopes and emerges on a broad, gently rolling mesa. Dairy farms are interspersed with ancient oak groves. The mesa has changed little since this description was written by T.S. Van Dyke in 1885:

> Here too you find plenty of springs and running brooks. The farms are still more like eastern farms...a scarcity of rain is unknown, all crops and fruits are a certainty.... The

Cuyamaca Mountains

whole area now looks like an eastern country with no resemblance whatever to the land thirty miles west.

At *4.1* a dirt road plunges downhill L several hundred yards. At the bottom is the (15) MESA GRANDE MISSION and a cemetery. The mission was built in 1898 by Indians who probably remembered the original Santa Ysabel Mission *(see below)*. This mission differed from most of the others in that Indians conducted their own services. The store at Mesa Grande *5.2* has been abandoned. Continue southeast on Mesa Grande Road. As it descends from the mesa, you will have a spectacular view of the Santa Ysabel Valley below.

The current (16) SANTA YSABEL MISSION, L **53.4**, is on the site of the original adobe *asistencia* (sub-mission), built in 1822 by the padres of Mission San Diego. Secularization and time eventually caused the obliteration of the mission, though its bells continued to be rung from a wooden foundation. Around the turn of the century the bells mysteriously disappeared, and they have never been recovered. A room adjacent to the chapel houses a small but informative museum; it depicts the life history of the natives of the region and the church's effect on that culture.

At the intersection of Highways 78 and 79, **55.3**, is the town of SANTA YSABEL. Food and gas are available, and commercial establishments seem to be increasing at this time. Perhaps the best known is Dudley's bakery, whose many varieties of freshly-baked bread attract people from all over the region.

Highway 79 turns to the east at this junction, and the two highways run as one between Santa Ysabel and Julian.

The (17) INAJA MEMORIAL PARK, L **56.4**, features one of only four National Recreation Trails in the county. The picnic

ground and trail were established to honor the memory of 11 firefighters who died fighting the Inaja forest fire in 1956. The well-marked self-guided trail is a pleasant way to learn about the live oak-chaparral vegetation typical of this elevation. Look below the trail for the headwaters of the San Diego River.

Highway 79 continues eastward, generally following the original road that connected the pioneer mining town of Julian *(see below)* with Santa Ysabel, a major supply stop for miners. Fruit stands line this portion of the road. At L **58.4** is the (18) SPENCER VALLEY SCHOOL, built in 1876. This structure served as the last operating one-room schoolhouse in the county, though it lost that status when three rooms were added in 1986.

At **58.6**, as you enter the community of Wynola, is (19) WYNOLA ROAD. (This 5.7-mile route bypasses the Pine Hills and Boulder Creek alternate drives. To reach these tours, backtrack north 1 mile on 79 from Julian.)

> Turn left on Wynola Road. This route is a less trafficked, more scenic way to the town of Julian. Though most of the land is private, the road passes through meadows, oak-covered hills, and fertile ranchland. Many of the orchards sell pick-your-own fruit in season. Volcan Mountain, a rugged wilderness recently added to the park system, rises straight ahead when you reach Farmers Road. Turn right, *3.3* to Julian.

Some of the most scenic landscapes in the vicinity can be reached from Pine Hills Road, **61.0**. (The following side tours bypass the historic town of Julian.)

> Turn R at Pine Hills Road. At *1.5* turn R on Eagle Peak Road. Five species of oak occur along this drive: black, scrub, Englemann, coast live, and c anyon live oak. Though the

acorns of the canyon live oak are the largest of the local oaks, the Native Americans preferred the deciduous black oak for its tasty acorns.

At *1.4* turn L on Boulder Creek Road. Follow that road for *3.2* to Engineer Road and turn L. This (20) backcountry route between Pine Hills and Cuyamaca is a welcome alternative to busy Highway 79 during weekends and holidays. Though several miles of the route are unpaved, the road is well maintained and should be passable to most vehicles. It winds through groves of incense cedar, coulter pine, oaks, and manzanita. Wildlife, especially mule deer, is readily glimpsed from the road. At L *5.8*, the Kelly Ditch Trail runs 5 miles from Engineer Road to Heise County Park. The thick forests create a sense of isolation for hikers, even though humans are never far away.

As an alternative to the Engineer Road loop, continue south on Boulder Creek at its intersection with Engineer Road. (This 20-mile route will bypass the entire Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, including the lake, Stonewall Mine, and the campgrounds and picnic areas.) Though more rugged than Highway 79 – it is paved for less than half its length – this graded route offers scenic panoramas that won't be found on the more traveled highway. The higher elevations at the beginning are dominated by wide grassy meadows, ranchland, rolling hills, and pine-oak forest. As the road descends, it passes through the different plant communities typical of this part of the county. One advantage of this route is the contrast it presents to the more uniform vegetation along 79. A dramatic and seldom-seen view of the south face of Cuyamaca Peak enhances the latter half of the ride, which traverses hilly chaparral. At the bottom of the grade is the town of (21) DESCANSO.

Descanso ("rest" in Spanish) derives its name from the lunchtime visits of the land-grant engineers who stopped in the shady oak groves here 100 years ago. The smallest public library in the county is in Descanso, all 192 square feet of it. If you plan to visit the library, get there early: its parking lot will accommodate one car. To return to Highway 79, turn L on Oak Grove Drive through town *1.6* to Viejas Boulevard. Go L *1.3* to the intersection of 79 and Old Highway 80.

Yet another side trip from Pine Hills Road and Highway 79 takes you to the most scenic and unspoiled of all the county parks.

Two miles south of the intersection with 79, at the intersection of Pine Hills Road and Frisius Road, is Pine Hills Lodge. It is currently a dinner theater and lodge, but was built in 1926 as

Julian Library

a training camp for heavyweight boxing champ Jack Dempsey. Turn L on Frisius Road to (22) WILLIAM HEISE COUNTY PARK. This 1000-acre park is set amid a beautiful forest of pines and oaks. Its many trails cross some of the last undeveloped land in the Julian area. Even a picnicker will come away with a sense of marvel at the beauty of nature. Among the park's many amenities are picnic areas, play equipment, campsites, water, flush toilets, and hot showers. William Heise, who donated the land to the county in 1967, was an inventor; one of his claims to fame was a mechanical coffin lift.

The historic town of JULIAN is at **62.0**. The town was born during the gold fever of the 1870s, when this area yielded millions of dollars worth of gold. As with most fevers, though, it was of short duration; prospectors moved on to Arizona and other dreams, but farmers found the region provided different kinds of riches. Its fruit orchards produced many a wealthy man, and the town began to rival San Diego in importance. In fact, an election to declare Julian the county seat, instead of the coastal town, barely came out in favor of San Diego. Farming has continued to prosper, but tourism has now become the town's lifeblood.

Julian was named by Drury Bailey, a Georgian who visited the area with his brother and cousins in 1869. The four homesteaded the area, and as gold swelled the population, Drury plotted a town site. He named it after his cousin, Mike Julian. Asked why he didn't name the town Bailey, after himself, the pragmatic (and honest) Drury replied, "Mike was the best looking."

The discovery in 1870 of the Washington Mine started the stampede to Julian. Two histories of the mine's discovery are often proposed. The first says that two miners found a promising quartz ledge on Sunday, February 21, 1870. One of the men was

a preacher, however, and so they waited until Monday to stake their claim – Monday, February 22, George Washington's birthday. The more appealing version has a youngster, Billy Gorman, being sent to gather firewood. He picked up a rock to toss at a wayward mule, and noticed yellow flakes in the rock. He took the glittering prize home, and the next day, February 22, the Gorman family staked out a claim on the mine.

The town still boasts many historical attractions. Several abandoned mines are nearby, and the Julian Pioneer Museum in town has a well-curated and extensive array of exhibits. The nearby county library was the Witch Creek schoolhouse from 1888 until 1954. Visitors will also enjoy the many restaurants and shops in town. During the fall harvest, thousands flock to celebrate the annual Apple Days Festival. Those making the hour-long drive from San Diego will appreciate modern paved roads; during the Gold Rush era, the same journey took four days.

Highway 79 leaves Highway 78 just east of town and heads south toward Cuyamaca.

Turn R on Highway 79. At **64.9** is a turnout to the left. (23) INSPIRATION POINT overlooks Earthquake Valley (referred to as Shelter Valley by some of the more sensitive residents) and Highway 78 to the east. If there is no haze, the blue Salton Sea shimmers against the distant brown desert sands.

Several private campgrounds are scattered along the highway for the next 6 miles.

At **68.2** the SUNRISE HIGHWAY bears left.

This road, which may soon be declared a National Scenic Byway, follows the ridges along the Laguna Mountains. This

mountain range receives slightly less rainfall than the Cuyamaca Mountains to the west; its forests are primarily Jeffrey pines and black oaks. The area is especially popular during winter, when its snow-covered meadows are teeming with the usually sun-drenched flatlanders.

Engineer Road intersects the highway at **70.7**.

The Cuyamaca Resort overlooks the shores of LAKE CUYAMACA, **71.6**. Prior to World War II, this reservoir – the oldest in the county – was a prized fishing spot. Following the war, much of its water was diverted to El Capitan Reservoir downslope to the west, but despite the lowered water levels, the lake is still heavily used by hunters and fishermen.

CUYAMACA RANCHO STATE PARK, **73.0**, is the most popular destination for hikers in the county. Dense forests of incense cedar, white fir, and coulter, sugar, ponderosa, and Jeffrey pines blanket its slopes. This is one of the few places in San Diego where seasonal changes are dramatic. Almost half the park's 25,000 acres have been classified as wilderness.

The historic (24) STONEWALL MINE, L **73.4**, was one of the richest and best known of the many mines here 100 years ago. A tiny museum features fascinating photographs of life here during Julian's first heyday. Two state-operated horse camps are reached from the access road to the mine.

The favorite campground in the state park is PASO PICACHO, R **75.2**. An interpretive center, picnic and camping areas, and a trail to a spectacular view from Cuyamaca Peak are among its attractions.

PARK HEADQUARTERS are on the left at **78.3**. A small museum offers literature on local wildlife as well as exhibits of

Indian and natural history. GREEN VALLEY CAMPGROUND is on the right at **80.3** Within a mile, the habitat changes noticeably, opening up to chaparral-covered hillsides as the highway quickly drops in elevation.

A private membership campground is at **81.7**.

At R 86.5, Highway 79 intersects Old Highway 80 where the roadway serves both routes. The tour ends at **88.4** where it joins Interstate 8. A right turn here takes the driver west toward San Diego fifty-one miles away.

Cuyamaca Peak

The Parks and Recreation Department welcomes your participation in improving this and future tour guides. Perhaps you know of an interesting historical anecdote or a little-known but noteworthy side road. Let us know. Do you have any suggestions about tours you would like to see written? Please write or call us at:

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