

The GRIDLEY WAVE

CONTACTING THE WORLDS OF EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

BURROUGHS MEMORIAL PARK!



Emma, ERB, Jack, Hulbert, and Joan in Mariposa Grove of Big Trees, California, August 30, 1919.

This Paradise Won't Be Paved

By JON D. MARKMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The rain forest ecologist, the famously grumpy novelist, the state park executive and the board members of an exclusive private school have never met in the same room.

But working the levers of love and obsession independently over the past 20 years, they have fashioned a remarkable deal to preserve the beauty and beasts of a wooded Sherman Oaks canyon.

And strangely enough, one of the ultimate winners may be Tarzan.

You remember: loincloth, Lord of the Jungle, "you Jane"? That one.

Tonight, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy

board will consider a land swap in which the state of California would trade several acres of a gorgeous grove of oaks to the private school for 12 sylvan acres that include graded but empty home sites.

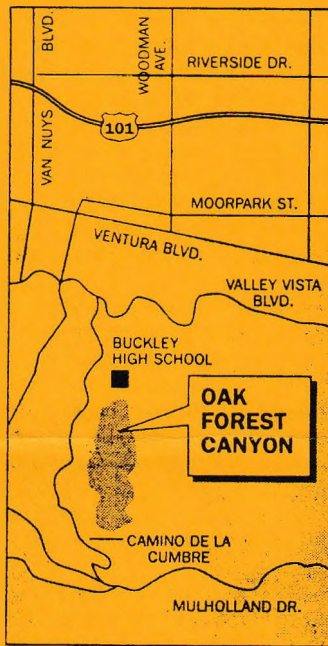
While the math is a little strange, it's actually a good deal for Southern California nature lovers—the culmination of efforts to preserve a largely pristine glen that one of its admirers, author Harlan Ellison, calls "our sparkling little gem."

The tale of Oak Forest Canyon begins in the late Miocene era about 10 million years ago, when a red tide in the deep seas that covered Southern California killed off billions and billions of diatoms, the favorite one-celled luncheon meat of many fish.

Now skip ahead 5 million years to when convulsive
Please see SWAP

Oak Forest Canyon

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and Buckley School are teaming up to create a 24-acre park in a wooded Sherman Oaks canyon that may ultimately be dedicated to the memory of Edgar Rice Burroughs. The creator of Tarzan is said to have picnicked in the glen in the 1920s.



The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has set up a trust account for private donations to help create the Edgar Rice Burroughs Memorial Park. To contribute, send a check to the ERB Memorial Fund at the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, 2600 Franklin Canyon Drive, Beverly Hills 90210.

SWAP: Deal to Preserve Sherman Oaks Canyon

plate tectonics created the Santa Monica Mountains and pushed the final resting spot of millions of fossilized herring, lantern fish and shark to the surface of the Earth in Sherman Oaks.

Another 5 million years later, in the early 1920s, historians say Edgar Rice Burroughs—creator of Tarzan, the inspiration for Tarzana—discovered a creek shaded by giant oaks in a little canyon beside that fossil-covered ridge.

According to Ellison, Burroughs would ride up on horseback along a path that became Stansbury Street, wearing jodhpurs and a safari hat. He'd picnic with his family and pals like city engineer William Mulholland, oil baron Edward L. Doheny and leading man Errol Flynn. And more than likely he'd daydream about his characters—the Lord of the Jungle and Capt. Jack Carter of Mars—while watching deer and rabbits romp through the black-sage chaparral.

Ellison said his own ferocious imagination, the source of best-selling fantasies, screenplays and TV dramas, was lit by reading Burroughs' books as a youth in Painesville, Ohio. And he has wondered ever since why Burroughs has never been honored with so much as a postage stamp.

"There might be children in Somalia or the Arctic who have never heard of Hamlet or the Great Gatsby or Sam Spade," Ellison said. "But you can bet they know Tarzan."

In the 1940s, a developer clawed down the upper part of Oak Forest Canyon to string houses along Coy Drive and Camino de la Cumbre. Ellison eventually bought one of those houses in 1963, but several lots behind him were never sold—and have lain fallow ever since.

As in Burroughs' day, the land remains a refuge for man and animal.

"Living here is a delight—it is a mountaintop in heaven," said Ellison, who threatened to break both my legs "so bad your dead grandmother will scream" if I described him as a science-fiction writer, which is the way much of the world outside the emergency room knows him.

"We live virtually on 200 acres of watershed. We have wild lemon trees and loquats. Families of deer wander into my backyard to nibble on cactus," he mused. When the pressures of the world grow unbearable, "you can come up here and hear nothing but the sound of your soul beating."

About 15 years ago, though, Ellison's reveries were almost ruined when a developer threatened to cut down the fossil-filled hill behind his house for another tract of homes.

Enter naturalist Arnold Newman. Known locally as the former host of a television science show and internationally as an expert on the preservation of tropical rain forests, the lanky Sherman Oaks resident recruited Ellison to lead a coalition to beat the builder back.

"I'm real tall when I stand on my charisma," said the diminutive Ellison, laughing. "I told all the neighbors, 'One day you're gonna look up and see 65-year-old ladies with varicose veins sunning themselves on a porch.' I told them, 'Let's buy it.'"

Instead, in a complicated deal with the developer in 1991, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy obtained the 109-acre hillside and turned it into Fossil Ridge Park. The acquisition included the lovely grove of oaks that reportedly hosted Burroughs' weekend dining. But much of the overgrown terrain to the south was still in private hands.

The last owner of the lion's share of the property rebuffed the conservancy for years—never returning phone calls or letters to discuss a deal, state parkland officials say. But he lost the land to his bank recently, and the environmentalists saw their chance.

The Buckley School, which rests at the foot of the canyon, picked it up last month in a federal Resolution Trust Corp. auction for about \$400,000. Two weeks ago, the school's directors offered the property to the conservancy in exchange for the oak grove.

Buckley Headmaster Walter Baumhoff said he wants the dense stand of oaks as a buffer for his football stadium and a nature reserve for his students. He said he would leave it open for hikers on trails to be built by the conservancy, and restrict its deed to prevent development or fencing.

That gives the grove to the neighborhood, and the rest of humanity, for the foreseeable future.

The purchase also would create a long wildlife corridor in North Benedict Canyon almost from Mulholland Drive to the Valley floor, said John A. Diaz, the conservancy's land acquisition chief who helped broker the deal.

And how does Tarzan fit in?

Ellison said he would soon turn to Burroughs enthusiasts on the Internet to seek donations as small as \$5 to \$10 to help build a docent's station at the top of Oak Forest Canyon. The station would include panels illustrating the paleontological history of Fossil Ridge and a small museum of Edgar Rice Burroughs' work.

If he raises enough money, Ellison said, he'd like to erect a life-size statue of Burroughs in the park on a black marble pedestal, with another of Tarzan alongside.

While Ellison admits to being "deeply conflicted" about outsiders popping up in the little Eden currently enjoyed by his neighborhood, he hopes to find "a golden mean between pragmatism and idealism."

That is Newman's goal as well.

The 54-year-old author of "Tropical Rainforest: A World Survey of Our Most Valuable and Endangered Habitat With a Blueprint for Its Survival" discovered the world's largest species of flower in a Sumatran forest and claims a raft of other discoveries.

Driving up to the Sherman Oaks forest recently in his ancient Bentley convertible, Newman said he lives in the Valley instead of some equatorial Valhalla because he feels the equal obligation to preserve the urban environment.

"I would feel guilty retiring from causes like this one," he said. "How much can you enjoy your piece of paradise if the world is crumbling around you?"

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