

ALUM ROCK PARK

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Introduction

I do not know how many people that have visited Alum Rock Park have noticed or know how much it has changed since 1872 when it was designed as a public park. Most people that go up to the park probably just see the Penitencia Creek, the beautiful trees, and the trails. But what many people do not know is that Alum Rock Park at some point had several attractions such as large swimming pools, mineral springs, and a large rock that was thought to be a meteor rock. These attractions among others brought many visitors, many from outside San Jose. All of these attractions have disappeared; the only remainder of this attraction is the Log Cabin, which many people some times do not even care to notice. I write this history of Alum Rock Park as a chapter to a book I'm currently working on. This book will be regarding the history of San Jose. I was not interested in history until last year when I attended a history class in Evergreen Valley Community College. After the class ended I was determined to write a book on San Jose's history. I hope I can inform people on San Jose's Alum Rock Park, California's first public park.

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ALUM ROCK PARK

Alum Rock Pre-history to 1872

Alum Rock Park dates all the way back to 1872, it used to cover an area of about 1,000 acres, and it is a well-known recreation area of San Jose. Today the city's urban area has expanded well into the park's original border and it has been reduced to 720 acres. The park is about seven miles east of downtown in the foothills. The Alum Rock name was given by a local farmer. He chose that name because of the white powdery coating on the rocks near the mineral springs. Unfortunately his assumption that the powder was aluminum was wrong, and the Alum Rock designation is particularly inappropriate because there isn't even a speck of aluminum in the park. The true name of the white coating is thenardite.

Before the Europeans came to California that area that covers the park had been home to the Native American people who called it "Shistuk" and when the Spanish discovered that area they in turn called it "Aguage" or watering place¹. The Native American people of the **Ohlone Nation**, the **Taunens tribe**, is believed to have lived in the area of the Alum Rock Canyon through artifacts for as long as several thousand years before the arrival of the first white explorers.

Ask yourself weren't the Taunens living in the area already, didn't they own the land already before the Europeans arrived? The answer is yes, but the Europeans had two reasons not to leave the land to the natives. One reason is that the Europeans believed that only wealthy white people could own land and they didn't believe that the land owned by the people as Native Americans did. The Alum Rock area was included under an Act of Congress in 1851 in the settlement of land claims. A provision in the original grant said that if a square tract of land were not possible, then the tract would extend to the summit of the first range of hills. Thus, the City of San Jose's eastern edge included "The

¹ Note that the word agua in Aguage means water in Spanish.

Reservation" as the canyon was called. The "reservation" name was given do to the fact that it was actually an Indian reservation for a while.

Although the area around Alum Rock belongs to San Jose by the Act of Congress of 1851 this didn't stop a private developer. In the late 1850's Woolsey Shaw acquired a little more than 700 acres of what was known at that time as the Alum Rock Ranch. Obviously the city brought suit against Shaw, claiming that 450 of Shaw's acres were part of the pueblo lands belonging to San Jose. By the time the Shaw had received the lawsuit he had already built a hotel on the property, and while the suit was still in process he sold the section of the ranch in court battle to J. O. Stratton. Stratton added mineral baths and several other buildings giving the area a resort status. But the suit was decided in favor of San Jose

Alum Rock, The City Reservation or The Penitencia Reservation, as the park were known as was designated as a public park by the California State Legislature in 1872 after all the Native Americans either died out or moved out.

Alum Rock Avenue

Alum Rock Avenue, *Naglee Avenue* as it was known in 1875², was the continuation of Santa Clara Street east of Coyote Creek. It was lined with four rows of trees creating three distinct roadways as far as its junction with McKee Road. Eucalyptus trees, donated by **Andrew J. Fowler**, lined the Avenue from Capitol to just above present Millar Avenue. **General Naglee** furnished the Monterey pines that stretched from Millar Avenue to the summit; narrowing to two rows and a single roadway above what it is today the San Jose Country Club's golf links. Most of not all of these trees along Alum Rock Avenue had been cut down to widen the Avenue or to protect the houses along the road from falling tree limbs. To build a seven-mile-long "shady avenue" from downtown to the east foothills was truly burdensome for a young city, which had few paved streets itself. Street-building in the 1870's cost on average \$1.50 per lineal foot. This would bring the expense of creating seven miles of road to a figure in the realm of \$55,000. San Joseans had to pay a special tax for four years to pay for the road.

² For a short time street names bore the name of the most important man connected with its construction.

Today the park's main entrance, Alum Rock Ave., is temporarily closed to cars due to landslide, but drivers can enter the Penitencia Creek Road entrance at the park's northwest edge. Visitors can enter either entrance on foot or bicycles.

Alum Rock Park

Today if you find the time to visit Alum Rock Park you would find a very different place from what it used to be, the park was "the" place to go. Alum Rock Park at some point had mineral springs, railroad transportation, children playgrounds, several tourist attractions, and water falls. By the 1900's the park had twenty-one natural mineral springs. The medicinal qualities of mineral water were much valued around the turn of the century and a large group of San Jose physicians vouched for the healing properties of these natural elixirs. It was the trend and it was fashionable to go to this mineral springs. The springs pick up their warmth, odors, flavors and mineral characteristics from the rocks through which they percolate. Springs stayed at a constant 98 degrees due to the fact that the Hayward Fault line lies beneath the park, which warms the water. Some of the springs were salty; some carbonated and most were sulfurous. The sulfur in the water is the source of the rotten-egg odor that penetrates the air. Today you can still find the mineral spring grottoes, but they are either empty or filled with plants and garden snakes. The water is now undrinkable because it has been polluted by agricultural runoff from the ranching operations above the park. Around 1904, the Alum Rock Lodge was built near the park's entrance; it's the fascinating stone house on Canon Vista Drive overlooking the park. The lodge featured baths of hot mineral water pumped up from the park, which were enjoyed in a large copper tub. Guests would sit in the tub while it was rocked by hand. The water would "slosh and froth," a kind of forerunner of the Jacuzzi. There was also a Hotel near the park built by Woolsey Shaw, but it was destroyed by fire on February 27, 1890.

The park even has a legend of its own, the legend that Joaquin Murrieta passed through the park while he was a fugitive. Supposedly he stayed in a cave for a while. This legend might have come from a cave that was discovered with Spanish clothing and various object inside.

Two years after the Peninsular Railway arrived at Alum Rock Park in September 1913, concession improvements included a new café, a new pavilion, and an up to date indoor swimming pool known as the Natatorium. The Natatorium was one of the main attractions of the park; it had a powerful spring board, a long “death-defying” slide, two high diving platforms, and an elevated gallery to accommodate the crowds of spectators. On September 25, 1915, the Native Sons and Native Daughters of the Golden West dedicated a *log cabin* filled with pioneer relics.

The park later introduced a merry-go-round, a deer paddock, and an aviary to its concessions. Visitors expected juvenile chatter in the Natatorium, and on the children’s playground, but most adult recreation was generally a quiet restful type. Horseback riding remained pleasurable.

By each passing year, the park attracted an increasing number of visitors. The introduction of the automobile caused horses and buggies to diminish in numbers, which could bring more people from far away places. The large number of visitors soon went beyond the management’s expectations. In 1921, a traffic officer on horseback had to become necessary to regulate their passage and controlling parking.

The Natatorium

In the mid-1890’s the first swimming pool in the park, the “Open Air Plunge” was constructed. It was a simple concrete reservoir, which varied in depth from two to twelve feet. It was filled by the natural mineral waters from the park’s springs. To make it accessible year-round, the pool was later enclosed within a large shed that helped trap the warmth the water produced. The setback of this was that it also held in the stinking sulphurous smell. The destructive flooding of March 1911 weathered away the park’s improvements, taking out all traces of the first plunge except the odor. Around 1914, a new crop of concessions was constructed including a new, improved indoor pool grandly named “The Natatorium.” The newly Natatorium was called “the Plunge,” probably because its official name was such a mouthful, besides it was what regular people in the first part of the twentieth century called a swimming pool.

It was a marvelous building that stood between the Log Cabin and the Visitor Center, on the site of today’s service yard. It had the character of a World’s Fair

conservatory, roofed over by a large vaulted ceiling with skylights running its length. Inside, on the sidewalls, were high galleries from which observers could watch the daring antics going on below. The Natatorium was also equipped with a state-of-the-art, high-powered spring diving board and two tall diving platforms. By 1975, the Natatorium had been demolished as part of the Park's return to more natural conditions.

Alum Rock Railway Company

People who had a horse and carriage could set out for Alum Rock Park via state-of-the-art, tree-lined Alum Rock Avenue by 1875. Average people that didn't own a horse was dependent on the streetcars, trolley lines and railroads to get himself and his family where they wanted to go. It was only a matter of time that a rail line would be extended to the park to accommodate visitors to the park. The same geologic formations that created the rugged beauty of the canyon proved to be challenging in laying down the first narrow-gauge rails. Two tunnels had to be constructed through the steep hills, bridges had to be built, and rock had to be blasted away in order to make a near-level roadbed

A Canadian named **Richard Henry Quincey** projected the Alum Rock Railway in 1891. The tract was a narrow gauge (three feet) rails steam line. Quincey was a San Jose wood and coal dealer. He might have gotten the idea of railroading from an earlier talk of a needed line to the City-owned Alum Rock Park. He started construction at Alum Rock Avenue and McLaughlin Avenue on May 11, 1891, but stopped construction at White Road on June 26, 1891, because he ran out of money. **John Center** came to Quincey's rescue. Center, a Scot by birth, had made a fortune in San Francisco real state, and could afford to help Quincey. On November 2, 1893, Quincey incorporated the Alum Rock project as the Alum Rock Railway Company. Railroads and countless other enterprises either died out or barely survived the economic depression of 1893. Among those affected by the depression was the Alum Rock Railway whose management under Quincey had never been an outstanding success. John Center foreclosed on Quincey, took over the line and sold it to his nephew, **Hugh Center**, for a dollar.

Hugh Center brought his brother, George, to San Jose to help operate the property. They both came from San Francisco. He obtained a steam locomotive and

restored service to the railhead.³ Then he obtained franchises to complete the line via Kirk and Toyon Avenues to Penitencia Road, then along Penitencia Creek into Alum Rock Canyon. The first cars resembled the light-wheeled gaudily painted English railway carriages of the ear. The first locomotive was built by Daniel Best & Co. of San Leandro, the forerunner of the Caterpillar Tractor Company. By the end of 1896, the Alum Rock Railway was fulfilling its obligation as a public transportation with little train that usually consisted of just three components: a small locomotive, one passenger car and a flat car.

Riders paid 25 cents for an excursion through the lightly settled ranchlands along Alum Rock Avenue to what today is Kirk Avenue where the tracks took a left-hand jog. At McKee Road, the tracks turned right and ran for a short distance to the Pala Rosa olive groves where they took a northerly course to Penitencia Creek and then turned right for the final leg through the park's lower entrance. Because steam locomotives were noisy and dirty, downtown dwellers did not want the Alum Rock Park line to start in *their* neighborhood, so a large frame building on the northeast corner of Hale and Alum Rock Avenue served as the engine house until 1902 when the line became electrified.⁴ The engine house then became the "car barn" for many years before finishing its days as a paint shop for the San Jose Railroads. By 1902, Center had incorporated the Alum Rock line into his Santa Clara and San Jose system, which he had already acquired before John Center sold him the Alum Rock Railway Company. This made for increased revenue, particularly on weekends and holidays.

By 1930, the automobile had not only replaced the horse and buggy, but it had also replaced the railroad. The last street car left the park for its last ride on June 12, 1932. The reason why we cannot see the rails today is because on April 1934, the rails were ordered removed. "A Ford in Every Garage" became the reality, which gave the kiss of death to the railroads. The Peninsula limped along until the 1929 stock market crash and called it quits in 1931. Its rails were used by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the next several years to improve the trails and bridges in the park and, ironically, in 1934, to carry the CCC workers into the park to tear down the train station.

³ Locomotives were disguised to look like ordinary streetcars so as not to frighten the horses.

⁴ They are now Twenty-six and Santa Clara Streets.

Tragedies of Alum Rock Park

Even though the trip to the park or back from the park was relatively safe, there were frequent minor mishaps which sometimes led to hours-long delays. It was not unusual for holes to be burnt in passengers' clothing by flying cinders. But they are two major incidents that resulted in death recorded in the park's history. On June 6, 1903, an unattached homeward bound trailer car's brakes failed as passengers were boarding it at the park's station. To the horror of the conductor already aboard, the car rolled forward. The car supposedly gained speeds of sixty miles an hour as it picked up momentum on the sharp downgrade before hurtling from the rails on a tight curve just below the Alum Rock.⁵ Two people were fatally injured and forty-five year old Edwin Brandon Goodrich, son of San Jose architect Levi Goodrich, who happened to be in that car died after his removal from the wreckage.

A more gruesome accident on April 11, 1909, scared every mother of every picnic bound youngsters for many years after this accident. Fifteen year-old Richard Brown of San Jose playfully leaned out the window of the car on which he was riding just as it entered the tunnel. A projecting timber caught his head and shoulders and jerked him through the window to be crushed and ground to death between the car and the wall of the tunnel.

Then in March 1911, rain produced an enormous flood on Penitencia Creek and in all the waterways of the Santa Clara Valley. This time the victim wasn't a child, or an adult it was the railway itself. The flooding inundated the tunnels erasing the narrow gauge railway. After the heavy rains stopped all but one of the railroad bridges were washed away, the ties and tracks were totally washed out of both tunnels, and one tunnel was completely destroyed. The park's entire infrastructure was nearly destroyed as well. The hills were eroded, wagon bridges were gone, roads were impassable, the park's water system was ruined, and creek's channel was altered. It was obviously a disaster, but miraculously it left the park with few of its modern improvements intact. By 1912 steam shovels were at work bringing another railroad into Alum Rock Park, the new and improved "railway of the future," the Peninsular Railway's *broad-gauge* line. The Peninsular Railway then took over the San Jose and Alum Rock Park Railroad's

⁵ The grade of the tracks in the park averaged about 3 degrees between the depot and the canyon mouth.

operation and great festivities marked the arrival of the new "big red cars" in September 1913.

Alum Rock Meteor

The park's greatest non-commercial attraction was also the most mystical and fascinating attraction, it was a huge black boulder, known as the Alum Rock Meteor. The meteor was on the north bank of the Penitencia at the lower end of the park. It was said to be the largest mysterious alien rock on earth. The elderly vouched for the meteorite's authenticity. They used to say that they had personally seen it streak through the night sky, and then crashing in the east foothills in Alum Rock Park.

It measured about twenty feet in height and twenty in with, with a sign nearby saying, "Alum Rock Meteor," and indicating an estimated weight of 2,000 tons. Everyone entering the park or leaving it via Penitencia Road stopped to look at the meteor.

The rock would still be in the park today if its composition hadn't been identified as manganese in 1918 during the early part of World War I. In the summer of 1917, when World War I was in full force, Director W.W. Campbell of Lick Observatory said that the Alum Rock Meteor was not a meteor at all. He said it was a chunk of manganese, a mineral much needed in the war effort. The rock's otherworldly character was quickly discarded when the San Jose City Council realized that the city treasury could be enriched when a mining man wanted to buy it for \$22,000. However no one made any money on the deal, because the meteor actually weighted only 389 tons instead of 2,000, and the purchaser went broke and the City lost the attraction that could have become highly profitable concession. For a long time thereafter, opponents of the sale never lost the chance to laugh at the embarrassed sellers. The rock would still be in the park today if its composition hadn't been identified as manganese in 1918 during the early part of World War I. People that analyzed the giant boulder said it was a "remarkable assemblage of manganese minerals found in a single great boulder" and was found to include several ores not previously known in California. Also a new mineral to be called Kempite was discovered in its composition.

Today most of the park rangers say that small pieces of the big rock are still found in Penitencia creek near the 1909 bridge on the road between the central picnic area and the park's back entrance. In the visitors' center there is a large chunk where one can rub the cold, smooth, metallic surface. But no matter what its composition and origin, Alum Rock Park lost a rare treasure when the rock was sold.

Dam

Since prehistoric times, the canyon is believed to flood rigorously in wet winters. But the heavy flooding would not have cleaned out parts of the park in March 1911 if the suggestion of a dam above Penitencia Creek had been followed. The idea of dam had been agreed since the park was established forty-five years earlier. For mysterious reasons, mostly because political reasons, a dam was not built until 1936. \$36,000 was spent that year damming the creek high up in the hills to the east of the park, high above the picnic grounds. The dam created Cherry Flat Reservoir, which can be opened and closed like a spigot to control water flow. Now the animal life of the park as well as human visitors have a guarantee of water in the creek year round.

Mining at Alum Rock Park?

It is hard to believe that any gold could be found in the park today, but in the late 1860's a gold rush fever made Alum Rock Park a place to go in search of quick success. The gold rush of 1848 was long gone, but there were still many people in California searching for gold. Just one speck of gold caused anyone to get a gold fever. On December 26, 1862, the *Mercury News* reported that a gold rush was under way to Alum Rock. Even though there wasn't a major depopulation as it did during the Mother Lode⁶, there seem to be less working men for several weeks. Many continuous stories in the newspaper kept the gold rush alive, but at the end the only gold found was found along Penitencia and it came from salted grounds.

In 1911 for a very short time gold rush was revived when someone discovered a cave with a few abandoned mining tools in it, but the rush died out because no one took interest in it. In February 1913 a similar gold rush that of 1862 got under way when a

⁶ The gold rush of 1848.

railroad grading crew cut into what seemed to be pay dirt. The *Mercury News* reported that J.H. Harrell had filed a twenty-acre quartz claim. This influenced many citizens to return to the park in search of gold, but after a short time, everyone in search of gold, including Harrell, was convinced that Alum Rock was no gold mine.

Many citizens, even the City was convinced that there was no gold in the park, but copper, on the other hand proved to be abundant. The park's copper vision received a lot of attention from the *Mercury News* throughout December 1861, and January 1862. Unfortunately, the Alum Rock deposit were not rich enough to hold the public's attention, and within a few years several abandoned prospect holes on the north side of the canyon constituted the only physical evidence of the copper rush of 1861.

This was not the end of mining; several interested diggers pondered the possibilities of coal, petroleum, talc, and aluminum. But growing awareness of the area's esthetic value inevitably diminish the City's willingness to open it to mining, especially since the park's official designation is a park.

The end of the Glory Days brings Mother Nature back

The Alum Rock Park's "glory days" were roughly from 1900 to 1950. During these years hundreds of thousands of tourists and local citizens came to dance, ride the rides, view the zoo animals, take some of the mineral waters, picnic and swim. People in trains, cars and buses jammed into the tight spaces of the park. People on foot, horses and bicycles came in droves. People of this time were naïve to think of the fragility of the canyon, its structures or its ecosystems. The canyon and its natural beauty were nearly smothered by the hordes.

The earth was trampled and the facilities worn down to seediness by the sheer numbers of guests. The park's popularity brought it to a near-fatal collapse. Reacting to the feel of decay in the air, fewer families chose the park as their destination. Less-wholesome guests filled the void. During WWII even less people visited the park because people were more interested in staying alive than outdoor recreation. The park's reputation also suffered as exaggerated stories of gang activities and mayhem inside the park were reported in the newspapers.

Various plans for the future of the park were outlined and all seemed to point toward encouraging a simpler, more natural park with a minimum of recreational facilities. One by one, the plain old attractions were quietly dismantled leaving only the mineral water pagoda that dates pre 1900, the log cabin, and a building that dates since the 1930's that became in 1953 the Santa Clara Junior Museum. Then in 1958 it became the Youth Science Institute, which is a small building where the casual nature lover can learn about the natural history of the Santa Clara Valley from the days of the Ohlone Indians to the present. Slowly but surely Mother Nature was reintroduced. The new focus of the park was on the natural history of the park. This new and great focus was set in motion because the Youth Science Institute moved into the park in 1953 to be at the core of this new focus. A new emphasis was put on trail building and protection of native animal species and nature, which is what the park is all about today. The dedication to conservation of the park's delicate geology and ecology brought the promise of sensitive and dedicated care to preserve San Jose's most wonderful asset for the future generations to enjoy.

Alum Rock Park today.

Today Alum Rock Park has become a more quiet, clean place from what it used to be in its "glory days." It has become a park for hikers, picnickers, and nature lovers. The park has seven trails for a combined approximate 13 miles. Today it is almost impossible to go up to the park and find the park fill with people like in the early 1900's, but you will find a couple of people either walking the many trails the park has or just ridding their bicycles with their family oblivious of the park's history.

The park's size of 720-acres has been the same for more than a hundred years. But in the year 2001 the board members of the Santa Clara County Open Space Authority voted 5-0 to approve a deal to buy the Kirk property, a hilly, 534-acres parcel on the park's northern boundary. The city preferred to combined the Kirk property to Alum Rock Park instead of having nearly three dozen \$1 million homes on the hillside at Alum Rock Park's northern edge where it is visible to visitors. This land purchase cost \$1.9 millions, which included a \$200,000 contribution from Jim Boccardo, the patriarch of a San Jose pioneer family.

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