



The remote Del Puerto Canyon area west of Patterson is filled with mysteries: American Indian tombs, dinosaur bones and rumors of UFO sightings and landings.

It's a place where just about everyone knows everyone else, and folks recognize a stranger's car in their midst.

But not all is quiet in these remote hills. Some folks say increased traffic in Patterson to the east has coincided with increased problems in the canyon.

Many residents are quick to talk about litter, trespassers, fires and marijuana farms patrolled by gunmen. The pot operations, typically run by non-canyon residents, have become quite sophisticated, with drip irrigation systems attached to natural springs found in the mountains.

*An American Indian grinding stone, probably belonging to local Yokuts Indians, sits filled with trash and broken beer bottles in Del Puerto Canyon. Elias Funez/Patterson Irrigator*

"You can't even hike on your own property," canyon resident Connie Daniel said.

Longtime residents say they love the area, but they want people to respect it.

### **Pot growers' paradise**

"Sandy," who did not wish to give her name for this article because of fear of retaliation by area pot growers, said she considers the canyon sacred and is fascinated by its history.

"Sometimes, I drive down the road and I see something I've never seen before," she said. "I love my canyon. I learn something new every day."

Sandy says she knows of nearby caves that serve as tombs for Yokuts Indians. The canyon houses other ancient mysteries as well, including the first dinosaur bones found in California, scientists say.

However, armed trespassers and gunmen guarding nearby marijuana operations increasingly disturb Sandy.

*A small, makeshift barbwire fence is all that remains of a failed marijuana cultivation operation busted years ago in Fall Canyon, a tributary of Del Puerto Canyon. Elias Funez/Patterson Irrigator*

She said scouts find water in natural springs and then irrigate large marijuana fields using thousands of feet of plastic hose, typically without the landowners ever realizing it. She has seen armed men carrying sleeping bags around the area during growing season.

Sgt. Robert Hunt of the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department said members of drug rings dealing in methamphetamine plant many of the canyon's pot farms to support their meth businesses.

Last year, the sheriff's department had a few major busts in the canyon, including one in which 22,000 plants were found. The sheriff's department works with state Campaign Against Marijuana Production to find those crops and eliminate them. However, Hunt said the department can only send agents into the canyon occasionally because of limited staff and finances.

Though detectives have found a few meth labs in the hills west of Patterson, they have not been nearly as prevalent as they are in rural parts of the Central Valley, Hunt said.

### **Desecrating the sacred**

Litterbugs are also a problem, Sandy said.

The area surrounding Graffiti Rock — so named because people have covered the stone with spray-painted monikers and messages — is one of the canyon's most notorious dumping areas.

Mattresses, boxes and other junk often cover the grassy area below, and pieces of carpet and bricks can be found in the creek.

Signs posted for trespassing are clearly marked along the 22-mile stretch of Del Puerto Canyon Road.

Sandy pointed out an old American Indian grinding rock nearby where someone had smashed beer bottles inside the holes in the rock.

"This is what we want to keep sacred out here, and this is what they disrespect," she said.

Residents say trespassing — always a problem — is getting worse. Rex Miller, who lives in Fall Canyon near Del Puerto Canyon Road, said some trespassers are just birdwatchers or rock hounds, but others carry guns.

He said he has seen strange things in the canyon, including a group of space alien worshippers that lived across the street for a while. Members would don multicolored outfits for special ceremonies involving crystals found in the ground. The group moved out of the canyon last year, Miller said.

Daniel said a couple of raves have been hosted in the canyon. The raves, all-night dance parties marked by electronic music and often by recreational drugs, attracted a slew of cars to the remote area, she said.

### **Perils of isolation**

Many canyon residents enjoy the isolation that the canyon offers, but that isolation has its drawbacks, too, particularly when it comes to police and fire protection.

Del Puerto Canyon Road itself is more than 20 miles long before it reaches Mines and San Antonio Valley roads deep in the hills, and it connects to several privately owned roads, often little more than dirt paths. The furthest stretches of western Stanislaus County only contain a few hundred residents, and Miller said he has waited hours at times for sheriff's deputies to arrive after he has called them.

Boulders in Del Puerto Canyon are littered with graffiti, many which tell the prehistoric story of California through its geologic records, as well as petroglyphs from Native American times.

Longtime rancher Garry Stoddard said many canyon residents pay hefty property taxes but don't get the same level of services as people in other parts of the county. It takes police and fire crews longer to get to the canyon, and there are no schools there, he said.

Stanislaus County Undersheriff Bill Hein said the department always has one deputy assigned to patrol all of the West Side's unincorporated areas, including Del Puerto Canyon, while another deputy patrols the Grayson and Westley areas during the day. It can take awhile to get to the remote areas of the canyon, sheriff's department officials say.

However, the department is in the process of decentralizing operations, with the possibility of stationing more people in Patterson to patrol the entire West Side. That could happen as soon as next year, depending on whether there is space available, Hein said.

Forest fires have been another regular problem, residents say. Those fires — most of which begin by accident — have increased as more people have moved into the area, said Chief Steve Barrett of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

In the summer, Cal Fire is required to man its San Antonio Valley station on Mines Road, just north of Del Puerto Canyon Road.

During fire season, Cal Fire normally keeps three people at any time at the San Antonio Fire station. This year, an executive order from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in May called for crews of four firefighters where needed, including in the San Antonio Valley directly west of Del Puerto Canyon.

A ground fire crew leaves the scene of a fire caused by arson earlier this year in Del Puerto Canyon.

However, there is little fire protection in the canyon during the winter months. The volunteer San Antonio Valley Fire Department closed a few years ago when it failed to meet increased state insurance requirements. The closest fire department, in Patterson, is a good hour from the San Antonio Valley junction, where the roads to Patterson, Livermore and San Jose meet. Fire departments in Livermore and San Jose are 1½ hours away.

## **History of infamy**

Though some canyon residents feel crime and safety problems are on the rise, the canyon is no stranger to notoriety.

One of the most famous atrocities was the rape and attempted murder of 15-year-old Mary Vincent, who had her arms chopped off and was left for dead in a culvert just east of the canyon in 1978 by trucker Lawrence Singleton.

Countless stories of yore remain mostly untold. Mike McNaughton, a real estate agent and former teacher at Harney School, which closed in 2003, said a well-known brothel stood in the canyon during its mining days.

Remnants of mines and a labor camp are scattered throughout the canyon, where trains once picked up loads of

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magnesite, particularly in the years between World War I and World War II.

The hills have seen cattle rustling and even the occasional murder, and littering has been a problem for years.

### **In love with their home**

Still, McNaughton makes it clear he would not live anywhere else.

“I don’t know of anywhere else where you can go 45 minutes and go 100 years back in time,” he said.

Portions of the canyon are filled with manzanita trees, brush and even pines up toward the western end of Del Puerto Canyon Road, and cattle roam freely throughout the hills much as they did a century ago.

McNaughton, who has called the area home since 1969, remembers a time without phone service, electricity and potable water.

However, he said the canyon was a wonderful place to raise children — one of the few relatively untouched places in California.

McNaughton said he has met fascinating characters in the canyon, from cowboys to a corporate executive and a motorcycle club leader.

For the most part, he said, everyone pretty much gets along.

Both Sandy and Daniel belong to a book group for women in the canyon. Some congregate at The Junction, which serves as a bar, hamburger joint, postal center and social gathering spot. Others go to Ruthie’s Trash ‘N Treasures up on Mines Road.

Canyon residents say they welcome people to visit the county-owned Frank Raines Park and Minnear Day-Use Area to enjoy the beauty of the area. But trespassing and a lack of consideration by some visitors can create resentment.

Most who live in Del Puerto Canyon love their homes and hope to preserve the way of life there.

“It’s blessed,” McNaughton said. “I hope it stays the same.”

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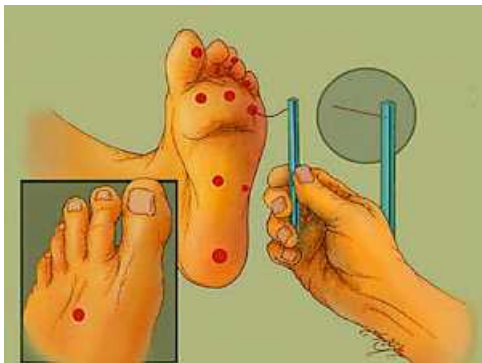
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