

PLANTS

Sagebrush Philosopher of the Santa Monicas

By CHRISTOPHER McCABE

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MCCABE LIVES IN LOS ANGELES.

Milt McAuley is 67 years old and he buys a new pair of hiking boots every year.

It's easy to see why.

Several days a week he can be found hiking one of the Santa Monica Mountains' 400 or so trails, or off into the San Gabriels.

He hits the trail so he can indulge one of his pastimes.

"I like to smell plants," McAuley says.

Breathing deep, he puts his nose right up to the sugar bush, the mugwort, the boykinia, the vinegar weed and more.

Only his trimmed mustache comes between them and his olfactory sense.

"Everybody," he says, "knows about the Jeffrey pine."

It has a vanilla odor?

"I put it the other way around," he says, chuckling at his perspective. "Vanilla smells a little bit like Jeffrey pine."

His way of looking at, and smelling, the Santa Monicas has made its way into his writings--five books, published with the help of his wife Maxine, from their Canoga Park home.

His First Book

"I wrote 'Hiking Trails of the Santa Monica Mountains,' " he says of his first book that has sold more than 15,000 copies, "because there was no adequate hiking guide at the

time.” The only one available, in McAuley’s opinion, left a lot to be desired.

“I made the statement that you would think an average person could do a better job than this. Someone said, ‘Prove it.’ So I did.”

McAuley recalls how, after 20 years as a U.S. Air Force pilot, eight years as an aerospace engineer and then some years of semi-retirement, he unexpectedly became a writer and publisher.

“I don’t claim mine are the ultimate in hiking books,” he adds.

“My idea behind the books is to make people aware of the natural resources in our own backyard.”

McAuley often leads hikes with participants of all ages--from institutions such as Moorpark College; The Learning Tree, a Chatsworth school, or the Sierra Club--to tell them what he knows about the mountains.

His reputation precedes him. “Milt McAuley is one of the best, if not the best expert on the trails in the Santa Monica Mountains,” according to Bud Getty, District Supervisor of the Santa Monica Mountains State Park.

Know the Rules

At the trailhead on a recent seven-mile hike, McAuley makes sure his hikers, a group from Moorpark College in Ventura County, know the rules of the park.

“Anybody have any aches, pains or blisters yet,” McAuley asks.

Everybody’s fine, but McAuley has one more thing to say and he delivers it with a grin.

“Anyone who doesn’t think they can make it back, let us know now if you want to be dragged head first or feet first out of here.”

On this hike out of Newbury Park in Upper Sycamore Canyon, no one has to be dragged out by the 5-foot 10-inch McAuley, but trail novices shod in sneakers find his pace a challenge.

Considerate of those puffing for air behind him, he stops to give them a break and himself a chance to talk.

“Look down at the road,” McAuley says, nodding towards the spot where a housing

subdivision bordered chaparral.

“That’s where you’ve been. Doesn’t that make you feel proud?”

From experience, McAuley says, he has learned never to prejudge a hiker’s ability to keep up.

“I do pretty well,” he tells them, “and I’m just an old, fat guy.”

“Yeah, but you have nice legs,” a lady shouts.

They’ve hiked part of what was once the El Canejo Land Grant, a former ranch the state acquired from the Danielson family four years ago.

On either side of the trail he has pointed out the chaparral, a generic term for the several hundred different kinds of mountain-growing shrub life.

Animal life is not much of a threat on the trail, according to McAuley, since bears no longer roam the mountains and the coyotes that still exist keep to themselves. But rattlesnakes are still to be seen.

After one alert hiker spots a brown and tan rattler sunning itself on a like-colored rock, the rest of the group quietly huddles nearby for an inspection.

Vibrating the end of its tail, the snake “graciously” demonstrates its rattling technique, earning murmurs of appreciation and awe, before speeding back into the rock’s crack.

“Isn’t that neat,” McAuley says, his blue eyes lighting up. “That’s probably his home for the winter.

“Did you notice how quick he got out of the way? He didn’t want any part of us. That’s mutual.”

He may spot the snake again in the spring, McAuley says, because reptiles reside in a small area and the rattlesnake’s habitat is probably no more than 100 feet from the rock where he was observed.

The group has now ranged over almost the full seven-mile trail and worked up a good sweat.

After such a workout, McAuley suggests “cowboy’s cologne” in lieu of your favorite deodorant.

He takes them to a path overgrown with California sagebrush, the cologne that only a trail maven like McAuley would know.

Rolling in Sagebrush

Cowboys, the story goes, after spending a week with the cattle, would roll around in the grey-green shrub before heading into town on a Saturday night.

The hikers were not as boisterous as their Old West ancestors but, as they marched through single-file, an aromatic smell rose from the plant.

Later, from his office--cramped quarters off a hallway in his home--McAuley describes the tensions that occasionally surface between hikers and property owners along the trail.

Some of the trails have been in continuous use for several thousand years, since the Santa Monicas were first settled by American Indians.

As the Indians were followed by the Spanish in the 1540s, the Mexicans in the 1820s, and the Americans soon after, the trail system continued to expand and, inevitably, disputes arose between those claiming a right-of-way on the trails and those claiming ownership.

"No one has the right to buy the property and close the trails," McAuley maintains. "It is an access trail that is in some cases thousands of years old. They must keep this in mind when they buy the property . . . But people who buy property and build a house over the trail don't understand it that way. They put up a gate and say you can't come through."

McAuley plans to contest this problem soon along the proposed Backbone Trail, a path that runs the length of the Santa Monicas from Will Rogers to Point Mugu state parks.

"One of my desires is to see the Backbone Trail built and completed and used," he says, "but we have some obstacles."

He pulls out a map and shows where a house comes within 30 feet of the trail.

The homeowner considers the trail personal property, though McAuley says the deed shows otherwise.

"It's actually an easement," McAuley says, sounding a bit feisty.

With a group of hikers present, he plans to discuss the reopening of the trail with the property owner.

“You’d never know it was there because the chaparral is overgrown and the trail has not been used. It’ll be a friendly confrontation I’m sure.”

McAuley also finds himself in the middle of a debate over his books.

Some members of the local hiking community criticize McAuley’s publishing venture because it competes directly with the nonprofit guides published by the Sierra Club’s Santa Monica Mountain Task Force, he says.

Ron Webster, a Santa Monica Mountain trailbuilder and Sierra Club hike leader says, “baloney,” to such criticism of McAuley’s books.

“The first wave of people into the mountains were people that the Sierra Club contacted,” Webster says.

“But Milt (McAuley) was the next wave, because people went to bookstores and bought his book and went out and tried to get into the mountains. I think a lot of people who bought Milt’s book wouldn’t ordinarily hike in the mountains.”

McAuley says he set up Canyon Publishing Co., his family-operated publishing concern, when Wilderness Press of Berkeley turned down his submission of “Hiking Trails of the Santa Monica Mountains.”

So he decided to rewrite the book and publish it himself.

“We borrowed money off my insurance policy, located a printer and (my wife) Max did the typesetting,” McAuley says.

McAuley says he sells enough to break even, but all earnings, as well as earnings from leading hikes, go back into the business to print more books.

This gives him the opportunity to keep his own books in print and also the chance to publish writers who cannot find an accepting publisher elsewhere.

A How-to Book

Canyon Publishing’s other titles include a how-to book on Indian stone toolmaking, called “FlintKnapping”; “My Moline,” the autobiography of a man who left Mexico for the United States with his family in the 1920s; and “The Appalachian Tale: The Adventures of the Poetry Man,” poems composed along the Appalachian Trail.

“I have this idea,” he says, “that the more you know about your environment, the happier you are with it.”

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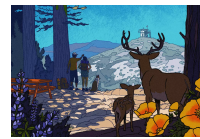
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