

AUGUST 26, 1992
 TOM FRYE

9:30



Solstice Canyon Trail

6-mile loop through Solstice Canyon Park
 600-foot elevation gain

Solstice Canyon Park in the Santa Monica Mountains is enjoyable year-round, but winter is a particularly fine time to ramble through the quiet canyon. From the park's upper slopes, you might even sight gray whales migrating past Point Dume.

We Southern Californians don't spend much time pondering the winter solstice, that time in the northern hemisphere when we have our shortest day, our longest night. After all, the days aren't that short, at least in comparison to those poor, sun-starved residents of Helsinki, for example, who spend all but a few hours of December days in the dark.

We modern city dwellers, to us, may seem to be nothing more than a scientific abstraction—the time when the sun is farthest south of the equator. To some of the earliest occupants of Southern California, the Chumash, however, the winter solstice was a very important occasion. It was a time when the cosmic balance was very delicate. The discovery of summer and winter solstice observation caves and rock art sites, have convinced anthropologists that the Chumash possessed a system of astronomy that had both mystical meaning and practical application. To those of us who buy all our food in the supermarket, winter solstice is just a date on the calendar, but to the Chumash, who needed to know about when berries would ripen, when the steelhead would run up Malibu Creek, when game would migrate, the day was an important one.

Solstice Canyon Park opened on summer solstice, 1988. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy purchased the land from the Roberts family. The park is administered by the Mountains Conservancy Foundation, the operations arm of the Conservancy.

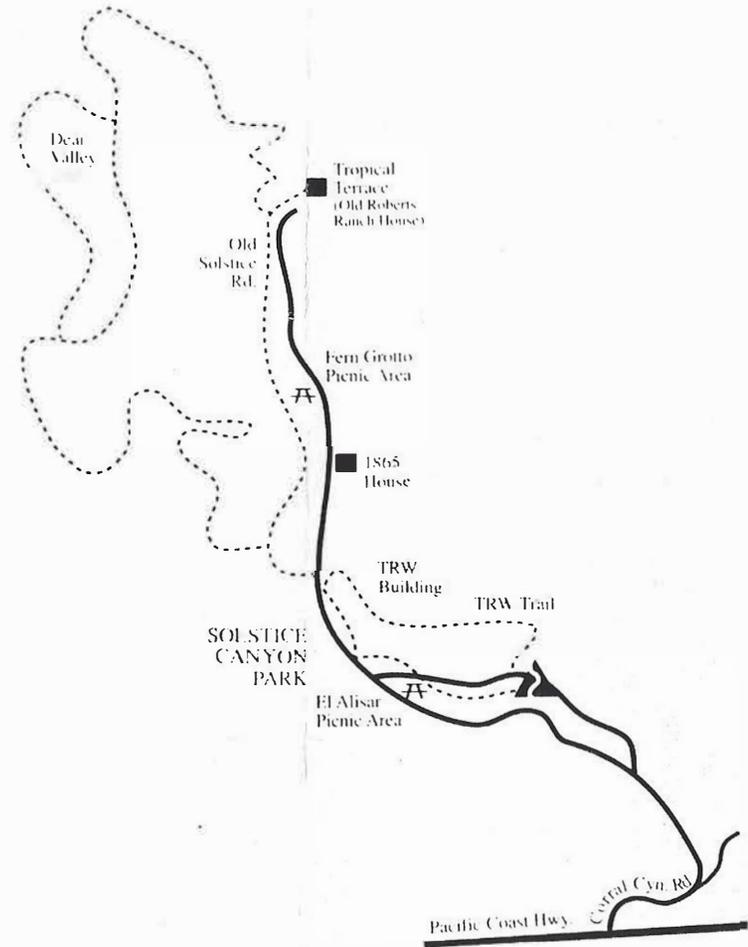
The Foundation has been working hard to transform the 550-acre Roberts Ranch into a park. Ranch roads are being converted to foot trails. Milk thistle, castor bean and other assorted nonnative plants are being eliminated. Debris, left behind by a 1982 fire, has been hauled away.

Destroyed in the fire was the Roberts family home, an extraordinary ranch-style residence that was highly praised by many home and architectural publications. The house incorporated Solstice Canyon's creek, waterfalls and trees into its unique design.

Another Solstice Canyon house—the Mathew Keller House—was built in 1865 and is the oldest house in Malibu, perhaps in the Santa Monica

Mountains. When restoration is complete, the house will become a museum and visitor center.

Solstice Canyon's third structure of note is really a strange one. It resembles a kind of futuristic farm house with a silo attached and defies architectural categorization. Bauhaus, maybe. Or perhaps Grain Elevator Modern. From 1961 to 1973 Space Tech Labs, a subsidiary of TRW, used the building to conduct tests to determine the magnetic sensitivity of satellite instrumentation. The TRW buildings are now headquarters for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.



Several trails explore Solstice Canyon. TRW Loop Trail leads to the canyon bottom, where the hiker can pick up Old Solstice Road (closed to vehicular traffic) and saunter through the canyon. Sostomo Trail climbs the park's east and south-facing ridges and offers fine coastal views.

Florence Roberts, with awful meter but heartfelt sentiment, expressed her feelings about Solstice Canyon in a poem. She etched her rocking-horse rhyme on a rock stair near her house:

*Leave behind your worries and cares,
And climb with us these thirteen stairs.
Our bubbling brook, our waterfall,
Here we relax and enjoy it all.*

Directions to trailhead: From Pacific Coast Highway, about 17 miles up-coast from Santa Monica and 3 1/2 miles upcoast from Malibu Canyon Road, turn inland on Corral Canyon Road. At the first bend in the road, you'll leave the road and proceed straight to the very small Solstice Canyon parking lot. Beyond the parking lot, the park access road is usually closed; however, on weekends, visitors are permitted to drive in and park in a second, larger lot, located just up the road.

The Hike: Walk up the park road to a small house, which is headquarters for the Mountains Conservancy Foundation.

Near the house, join the signed TRW Trail, which switchbacks toward the strange new home of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Employees report that they much prefer this spacious, hillside office to their former, far more stressful locale downtown at 1st and Broadway.

TRW Trail crosses a paved road, ascends west, then drops south into Solstice Canyon. You'll turn right on Old Solstice Road. In a few minutes you'll pass the 1865 Mathew Keller House and in a few more minutes—Fern Grotto. The road travels under the shade of oak and sycamore to its end at the remains of the old Roberts Ranch House. Palms, agave, bamboo and bird of paradise and many more tropical plants thrive in the Roberts' garden gone wild. A waterfall, fountain and an old dam are some of the other special features found in this paradisiacal setting known as Tropical Terrace.

Just below Tropical Terrace is signed, Sostomo Trail, which ascends a chaparral-cloaked slope that still bears evidence of the 1982 fire. The trail dips in and out of a streambed, begins climbing, and offers a great view of Solstice Canyon all the way to the ocean. At a junction, the trail splits, with the right fork leading to Sostomo Overlook, while you head left toward Deer Valley. The trail crosses an open slope then tops a ridge for a great view of Point Dume. The trail briefly joins a dirt road, then resumes as a path and descends a coastal scrub-covered slope to the bottom of Solstice Canyon. A right turn on Old Solstice Road leads past El Alisar Picnic Area and returns you to the trailhead.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Information on structures at Solstice Canyon

The Mountains Conservancy Foundation Office

This building was brought to the canyon by the Robertses from a World War II encampment located off Latigo Canyon Road. Various people have lived in the cottage including the family gardener and members of the Roberts family. During purchase of the property, the building was vandalized, and it has been completely renovated by the Mountains Conservancy Foundation. Examples of California ranch life are reflected by various photographs in the small gallery and by farming equipment and wagon wheels in the landscape. A part of the interpretation of this area is the "Darth Vader" structure located on the east rim of the canyon, a glass and blue steel futuristic home. The windmill located at the foot of the trail powered one of the original wells. It will eventually be repaired.

1960 TRW Buildings

The silo and warehouse structures located on the knoll are now the park facilities for the staff of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. From 1961 to 1973, Space Technology Laboratories, Inc. of El Segundo, a subsidiary of Thomson-Ramo-Woolridge, Inc. (TRW), rented ten acres of the Roberts ranch and erected testing facilities for their modification of the Faneslau coil system, a device which calibrates the magnetic sensitivity of satellite payload instrumentation. The Roberts ranch was chosen as a calibration site because of its distance from man-made magnetic disturbances as well as naturally occurring disturbances in the surrounding earth and air. Two other places in the world were used to test this equipment — Maine and East Germany. Their facility consisted of a nonmagnetic aluminum and wood cylindrical building 35 feet in diameter and 50 feet high with a ventilated cone-shaped roof designed to house the Faneslau coil and, 100 feet away, a rectangular building which housed a Hemholtz coil, a device for measuring magnetic fields. TRW and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory calibrated scientific payloads by simulating the nonmagnetic atmosphere of space. Portions of satellites and all of the Pioneer 12 Venus satellites were tested at this site.

1865 Keller House

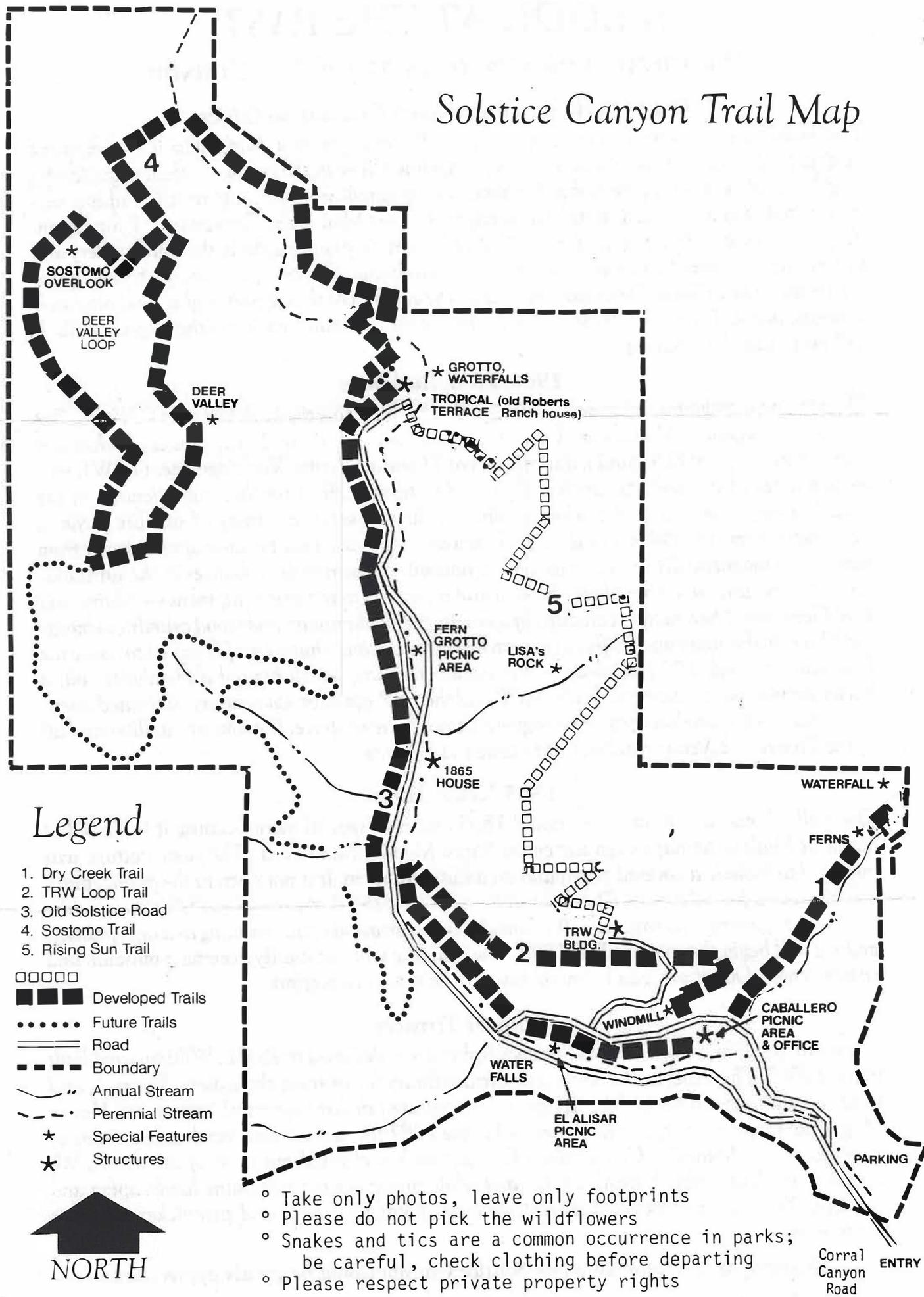
The Keller house was built in or around 1865 and is of special merit because it is the oldest house in Malibu, perhaps even the entire Santa Monica Mountains. The stone cottage was modified to include a covered porch and an additional room. It is not open to the public, but it can be viewed from the road. The Foundation is in the process of nominating the cottage to the National Register of Historic Sites. We consider the renovation of this building as a high priority; and we will begin the work in Fall 1988. The building will eventually become a museum and visitor center. Donations can be made toward the restoration effort.

Tropical Terraces

The main family home of Fred and Florence Roberts was designed by Paul L. Williams and built in the 1950s. The siting of the home was extraordinary for its time; the waterfalls, creek, and trees were an integral part of the design. It was featured in Architectural Digest and Home Magazine. Unfortunately, the house burned in the 1982 fire and storms later destroyed more of the area. The Mountains Conservancy Foundation has cleaned out most of the debris. We expect to work on safety hazards in the area while protecting the remaining landscaping and terraces. The area will be used as a destination point for hikers and picnickers after its renovation.

Photographs and information on Solstice Canyon would be greatly appreciated.

Solstice Canyon Trail Map



- Take only photos, leave only footprints
- Please do not pick the wildflowers
- Snakes and tics are a common occurrence in parks; be careful, check clothing before departing
- Please respect private property rights

