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Outlaw hikers forge illegal trails in woods

5/19/03

By MELINDA BURNS

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

"Outlaws" armed with handsaws and pruners have carved a network of illegal trails on the mountainside behind Santa Barbara and Montecito, taking matters into their own hands as they leave the beaten path, Forest Service officials say.



Miles of unofficial trails have appeared in Cold Springs, Rattlesnake and Mission canyons in recent years, as hikers seek an escape from weekend crowds and mountain bikers, said Kerry Kellogg, a trails manager for Los Padres National Forest.

Sure, people like these "Hobbit" trails, he said: the Sierra Club leads hikes on them. But the paths are too steep and narrow to be safe, Mr. Kellogg said, and they could easily erode into gullies in heavy rains. Some are impassable on horseback. Some are lined with unsightly piles of hacked-off brush that pose a fire hazard.

Who's going to maintain these trails? Not the Forest Service, Mr. Kellogg said. And how would a rescue team find someone who got lost or injured? he asked. None of the unofficial trails are on Forest Service maps.

"They start as little rabbit runs in the brush and they get



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'improved' on," Mr. Kellogg said. "We want it to stop. We kind of feel like we're getting blackmailed. Do we fence them off, do we drag the brush back, do we post them closed? It could go on and on. Maybe we ought to break down and just give them names."

But the self-appointed trail blazers, like the hackers of computer fame, have their champions, too. Mr. Kellogg has been booed at meetings of the county advisory trails committee for telling them to cease and desist.

"It reminds me of Robin Hood," he said. "People say, 'They shouldn't be building these trails ... but I sure enjoy them.' There are just some people who think any trail's a good trail."

The best-known trail hacker, a Mesa resident named Tom Powers, was trained by Mr. Kellogg as a Forest Service trails volunteer. He is proud of his work. He claims to have reopened abandoned trails that were created more than a century ago. They even appear on old Forest Service and U.S. Geological Survey maps, he says.

So, with help from Barbara Goll, a friend from Goleta, Mr. Powers sawed his way, 50 feet per day, through several miles of dense chaparral on both sides of the official Cold Springs Trail in the Montecito foothills. It took him four years, off and on. They are the widest primitive trails in Santa Barbara's "front country," as the mountainside is called.

"I guess I'm astounded," Mr. Kellogg said. "I kept thinking eventually they were going to burn out."

Mr. Powers' unofficial trail on the West Fork of Cold Springs Creek goes to East Camino Cielo via an old homestead, complete with an old plough, a rusted stovetop, some stone ruins and a grapevine gone wild.

On the east side of the creek, Mr. Powers claims to have "restored" an old road on the original Cold Springs trail.

The route was used later by marijuana growers to what was known as "The Hippie House," now just a pile of wood.

"They think I'm raping the countryside," Mr. Powers said. "I just cleared the original trails with some help. It was like a puzzle to find them, and it was good exercise

at the same time. It became sort of a game."

Mr. Powers said he chipped away at his mission on weekends. Most of the time, he works at a job cleaning draft beer equipment at bars and restaurants.

Ms. Goll said she combed through microfilm records and newspaper clippings to learn more about Jose Dolores Ortega, the man who is believed to have eked out a living farming on the west fork of Cold Springs Creek, so many years ago. She worked for more than a year with Mr. Powers, sometimes toiling with a saw and a hoe, and sometimes heaving the cut brush to the side.

"It was one of the most exciting things I've ever done, restoring that trail," Ms. Goll said. "I was pretty good at hauling trees like a javelin."

But the new Cold Springs trails have received a mixed review in hiking and riding circles.

Tony Biegen, the local Sierra Club outings chairman, and John Venable, president of the Montecito Trails Foundation, a nonprofit group, both said they asked Mr. Powers to stop.

"We're very unhappy about this," Mr. Venable said. "It appears to the public that the Montecito Trails Foundation is doing this work, and we are not. He really isn't doing this right."

Still, the critics are using and even promoting the unofficial trails. The Montecito Trails Foundation has erected an official-looking sign marking one of the trails as "Cold Springs Ridge."

Ray Ford, the author of "Day Hikes of the Santa Barbara Foothills," incorporated the new Cold Springs trails into the latest version of his book.

At the same time, Mr. Ford said, he could not support "people brazenly deciding they are going to create new trail systems."

"It's just not their decision to make," he said. "It's a community decision."

Allyson Biskner, a city associate park planner, wishes the illegal hackers would channel their energy into helping maintain the official network of "front country"

trails.

"We will prosecute to the extent we can if we could find whoever is doing this," Ms. Biskner said. "I understand there's a lot of enthusiasm for cutting trails, but there's a lot of damage that occurs."

After a warning from the city parks ranger, Mr. Powers said he stopped clearing new trails. He now goes out only now and then with clippers -- to maintain them, he says. At 60, and after two hip replacements, "I'm not going too far," he said.

### **A BIG ADVENTURE**

One of the reasons people make new trails here is that they want to go somewhere specific -- maybe to a waterfall, a peak, a homestead, a viewpoint, or another trail. The seven trails leading into the Santa Ynez Mountains from Santa Barbara and Montecito were not built, historically, for recreational use. They were built to get people over the top as efficiently as possible.

Often the only way to connect from one Forest Service trail to another is via a "Hobbit" trail -- and that can mean trying to follow plastic orange ties fastened here and there on the manzanita.

"I love the primitive trails," said Bill Henderson, a Sierra Club hike leader. "It's like, 'way big adventure.' Everybody has said, 'This is so exciting.' It's like being a child and crawling in tall grass in a field. That's the memory that comes up for people."

Plus, Mr. Henderson said, it's a good way to avoid bicycle riders.

"When a mountain biker comes running down at 30 miles per hour and mows you down, that ruins the getting-away-from-it-all experience," Mr. Henderson said. "I'll just change trails."

Some of the unofficial trails, such as the one to Cathedral Peak, a rough, clothes-shredding trip from Tunnel Trail, have been there for decades. There are dates from the 1920s carved into the sandstone on the peak. But it's not for the novice. Cathedral Peak is notorious for dead-end paths that can hopelessly confuse even seasoned hikers.

"You can get lost like you can't believe," Mr. Henderson said. "You can be looking down at the city and you have no idea where you are. You can call 9-1-1 and the Sheriff's Department and whoever you want to call. They aren't going to be able to find you. Or they can locate you by helicopter, but the helicopter can't land."

Sometimes, storm damage will force the Forest Service to move a section of trail, as on the Rattlesnake Trail above Skofield Park. Now someone has reopened the abandoned section, which goes to a horse trough. Parts of it are slippery and dangerous, but people are using it anyway to make a loop off the main trail.

Mountain bikers, too, have carved out paths for their own purposes. At the top of one of the new Cold Springs trails, they cut some limbs off an oak tree to create a bike jump. At the bottom, they created a new curve in order to slow down.

"Once a trail has been cut, it takes on a life of its own," Mr. Biegen said.

### **"TRYING TO HANG ON"**

It's no secret that the Forest Service, perennially hamstrung by budgetary shortfalls, has been unable for years to properly maintain the official network of trails in Los Padres, much less build any new ones.

Blazing a new trail two feet wide to Forest Service specifications means bringing in botanists, archaeologists and engineers to ensure that no sensitive species are damaged, and that the proper drainage is built in. It may mean obtaining a public right-of-way from a private landowner. An environmental report is always required.

"There are lots of people who would like us to build new trails," Mr. Kellogg said. "Whether we can afford to go out and build them is yet to be seen. We're trying to hang on to what we've got."

The Montecito Trails Foundation is building the only official new front country trail in decades -- the two-mile-long Gerard Trail, connecting the McMenemy Trail to the Edison Catwalk, where a line of electrical towers stands. The trail, which includes a retaining wall and two stone benches, will cost \$25,000. All of it is paid for with private donations.

Because of the funding shortage, the Forest Service is forced to rely on volunteers to repair and maintain trails. About half of the 1,400 miles of official trails in Los Padres are maintained once every three years. Most of the effort is focused on the mountainside behind Santa Barbara. Meanwhile, hundreds of miles of backcountry trails are disappearing.

Trail maintenance entails hiking in with tools, then cutting through the prickly chaparral in the hot sun. To prevent the cut brush from piling up, it must be minced into small pieces, then thrown out of sight into a hole in the bushes.

By contrast, piles of dead brush line the trails built by Mr. Powers at Cold Springs.

"The Forest Service never would have done this in a million years," said Mr. Henderson, the Sierra Club hike leader. "The trail was too big, too wide."

Mr. Powers furthermore had a poor sense of direction, Mr. Henderson said. He would saw through the brush, then realized that he had reached the edge of a cliff; then backtrack and start over.

Mr. Powers says he never got lost.

"That wasn't me," he said. "I just followed a 1901 map."

Jim Blakley, a veteran hiker and historian of Los Padres, showed Mr. Powers the old Forest Service maps with the original Cold Springs trails, and walked him down them. He has praised Mr. Powers' work.

"Tom did a wonderful service to the forest and the public by opening these old trails," Mr. Blakley said. "They're overplaying this out of jealousy that he did the work. He needs to have people who say, 'Thank you for what you did.'"