

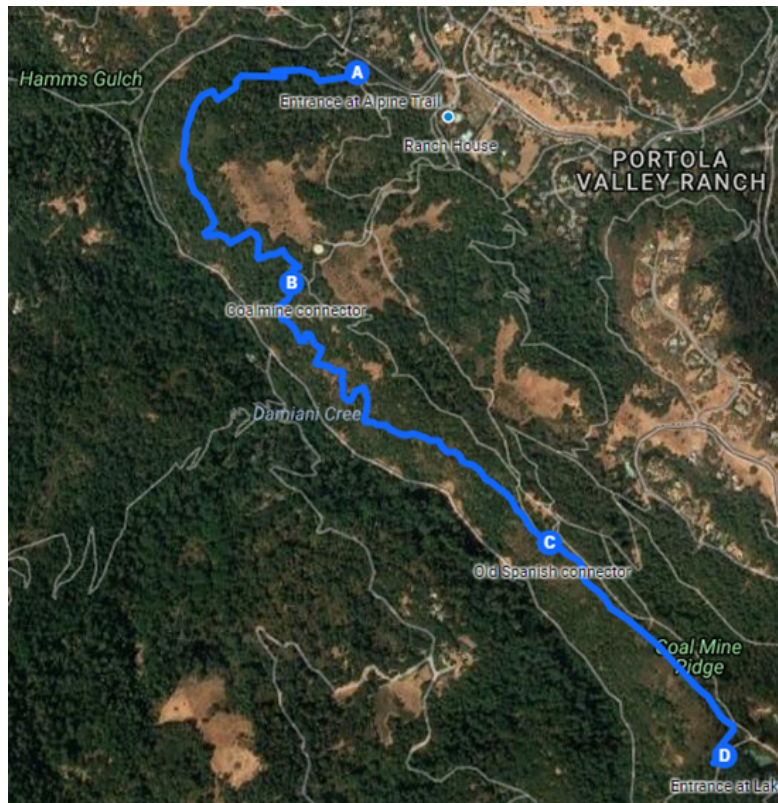
Discovering Toyon Trail

I wrote this article originally for the Portola Valley Ranch Newsletter in February 2018 as part of a series: Discovering our Trails. It introduces the make-up of Coal Mine Ridge Nature Preserve's much loved Toyon Trail, the history of its creation, as well as less obvious pleasures new even to experienced walkers.

Toyon Trail route

This masterpiece of a trail is 2.3 miles long, from the trailhead above Alpine Trail near Willowbrook winding and gently climbing to the top of the ridge before descending near its terminus at Lake Trail. Most

people walk one of its three sections at a time, each being about 3/4 of a mile in length.



Besides the two entrances at top and bottom, there are two connectors; it is often from these intermediate locations [Map: B and C] that hikers join the path to make their hike a loop experience. Coal Mine Ridge Nature Preserve contains only the two lower sections: Lower Toyon (A - B) and Middle Toyon (B - C). Upper Toyon (C - D), also known as the Toyon extension, falls on the Blue Oaks open space and it was built at a different time and under very different circumstances. This article will only discuss the two sections from A to C which were designed as a single trail by the legendary naturalist, Herb Dengler.

Conception and design

When Joe Whelan granted the easement to the town of Portola Valley for Coal Mine Ridge open space and trails in 1975, Toyon trail did not exist. Herb Dengler, a naturalist known for his work on Jasper Ridge, was a leader on the PV Town Conservation Committee. In that capacity, during the latter part of the 1970's, his vision for this extraordinary trail was conceived. As Nancy Lund puts it in her book "History of Portola Valley", Herb Dengler "hacked through two miles of tough underbrush to lay out Toyon Trail on Coal Mine Ridge". George Mader, long time town planner, adds some color, recalling that Herb "laid out the trails in his moccasins". Conversations with long time residents Marilyn Walter and Dan Quinn led me to Jane Ames, the volunteer who led the effort to implement Herb's vision. In several conversations I had with Jane, now living in Baja California, she described the effort:

"Toyon Trail did not exist in the original trail plan for Portola Valley Ranch. But Herb

Dengler visualized a way to bring people along that lovely, steep slope of Coal Mine Ridge and Joe Whelan responded to the idea with enthusiasm. I was Chair of the newly-formed Portola Valley Town Trails Committee and Toyon Trail became one of our first projects. In respect for the steep hillside, the trail was to be for hikers only. We knew the trail had to be built 4 feet wide, in order to survive for long.

"Herb Dengler planned every inch of the trail to a moderate grade he knew gave pleasant walking, and he flagged it for us ahead of time. Volunteer hands were needed, to avoid sending machinery into that untouched woodland, and I sent out an announcement which brought a very good response for the first of the monthly work days. So many neighbors and friends were swinging mattocks and shovels, the work jumped ahead, but we didn't cut the full 4 foot width needed, and we had a fine chance to see the necessity of that as the first section of trail began to disappear in the next months. We reworked that section several times, till we got it right.

"When the work on Toyon Trail was almost complete, we came to that last section climbing up into the meadow on the ridge and Herb found he was not satisfied with his own flagging of the route. Then he demonstrated his fidelity to principles by laboriously redesigning the whole section and we completed it following the new plan."

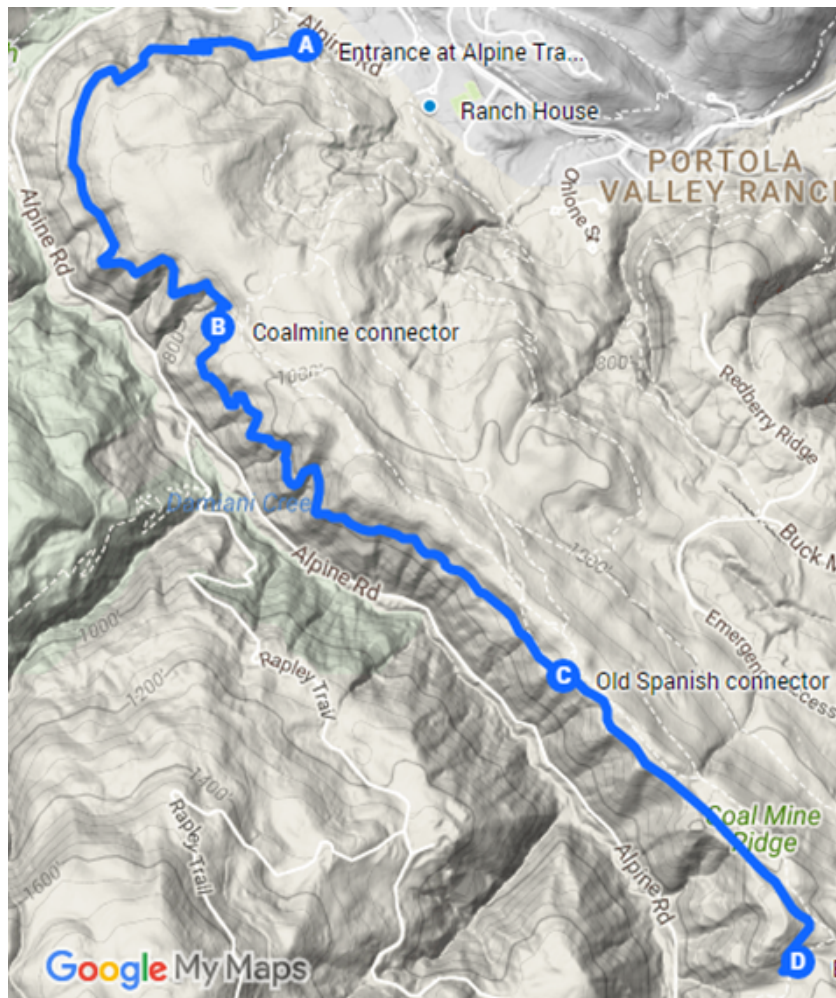
The trail signs added by the town to mark this trail are not what you see today (which are 3rd generation), but a few of the originals remain. Looking closely at one of the original posts, still standing at the Coalmine connector, a simple image of a bare human footprint, signifying the only type of user this trail was intended for by its designer, Herb Dengler, and specifically excluding horses and dogs.



The most talked about attribute of this carefully designed trail is the angle it maintains, never steeper than a gentle 5% for its entire length. Herb Dengler, it is said, felt that a nature trail designed for humans should not be made physically arduous because to do so limits the hiker's attention to the natural habitat, the very purpose of the trail. How effective this silent gift he has given us; everyone who walks the trail in casual fashion reaps these rewards without noticing why.

During my many walks on Toyon, I often stop and look in amazement at the extraordinary steepness of the grade on which it was built, this western side of Coal Mine Ridge. The trail grade of less than 5% stands in pleasing but dramatic contrast to this

steepness, which at times moves from ridge summit heights of 1000 feet to Corte Madera Creek bed close to 500 feet. This regular steepness is more easily appreciated looking at a contour map such as provided when viewing the trail on a Google MyMaps base map type Terrain.



Nature's schoolhouse

The real genius of Herb Dengler's vision for Toyon trail can be found in the story told by Marge Destaebler, a science specialist during the 1980s and 90s. Marge was working with grade school children at Ormondale Elementary School where Herb Dengler once again had created a beautiful and purposeful trail, this time along Corte Madera creek just as it passed through the Ormondale school's grounds. Marge used this wonderful resource by creating hands-on learning activities to demonstrate how streams enriched the environment. The experience was so effective that when these young children graduated to Corte Madera middle school, they continued this practice, this time as docents for the

next generation of Ormondale 2nd and 3rd graders. Reflecting her own passion, Marge volunteered exclusively to provide the 7th and 8th graders a leadership experience using what they had received as elementary school students. In after school programs with parents, the young docents each took three 2nd or 3rd grade students on a nature experience using Toyon trail. Hiking a loop from the Coalmine connector downward, the young students were told to each walk alone from the rope bridge about a half mile down to a wide sweeping set of steps (sadly no longer present). During their solo hike (a first for most of them) they were to walk in silence and notice all that came to them: sounds, sights, the touch of flora, smells and imaginings they might concoct. At the meeting place below, the children would share their amazing observations, prompted by questions Marge had left for them at their sitting place.

Reflections on the trail

We do not have records of the children's own experience of these moments alone on the Toyon Trail. But I have re-enacted this process myself several times and can easily imagine what discoveries they might have made.



If you look to the side of your own foot path, you will see at least a half dozen animal trails, some diverging from Toyon trail itself, as if to suggest another route. What animals could create such a substantial path? Were these the paths taken by the Ohlones? I rarely see deer on these trails, so maybe bobcats or mountain lions use these at night time. It helps me understand and appreciate why our dogs are not permitted on this trail and the ridge, for surely they would drive away these animals.

One of the most surprising moments of my recent walks was looking out to the ridges on the other side of the Corte Madera gulch that includes Alpine Road. In the distance these are Razorback Ridge, Hamm's Gulch Ridge and at higher locations Rapley Trail and Skyline itself. They appear as one long ridge paralleling Coal Mine Ridge, but in fact most are perpendicular to it. But looking in close, you suddenly realize you are IN THE CANOPY of the Coast Live Oaks and the Madrones. This was not always

so, but as the trees have grown on the very steep bank of the Ridge, the upper canopy has come almost within the reach of a hiker.



A picture will not provoke the thrill of experiencing the canopy up close yourself, as I imagine those children did.

One of my most powerful experiences when travelling Toyon is that of sound. On this occasion, I stopped to listen to the birds; I had seen them fluttering above and below me. But I could not hear for the distant roar of jets overhead. I waited until the sound faded and

nearly diminished, but before the anticipated quiet, another came, and I had to wait for that to pass. As it did, what I thought was silence started to encroach, taking back what felt like the land's natural state. I then started to hear several bird calls and chirps and even rustlings. I could not put together the creature with its sound, no more than I could name any of them - nameless birds and detached music, no less beautiful for it. Then strangely, I thought I had finally reached perfect silence, but only for a second or two, when steadily a new sound arose, as if always there but simply unheard before this moment, the soft rush of Corte Madera Creek. It comes AFTER the silence, as if a deeper quiet, a more natural form of silence. I walked on, and like most poetry found in nature, it was swept away like a soundless wind might do.



There used to be many magnificent views along Toyon Trail, but now fewer due to the growth of trees on the steep bank. A favorite of mine is the iconic view of Windy Hill, framed by the trail's namesake, the red berried Toyon.