

CA-VEN-1303H (56-001303) The Hall Family House in Upper Bell Canyon

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This paper is intended to provide and describe several photographs of the former Bill Hall and family ranch house in upper Bell Canyon, Ventura County, California, which is now recorded by the State of California as CA-VEN-1303H (56-001303). The paper is not meant to be a definitive history of the Hall family, or of their house. Most of the photographs seen here were provided to Ray Vincent, of the Chatsworth Historic Society, by Edwin Hall (b. 1946), who is a long-time resident of Montana, and who lived in the house (1946-1954), when he was a child. A few additional photographs of the Hall house were provided by Marcia Silvernale McGillis, of Cloverdale, California, who frequently visited the Silvernale/Hall ranch when she was a child, as described following. Mr. Hall also provided Ray Vincent with several other photographs that show Ed, his parents (Bill and Betty), other people, and selected examples of the ranch operations. Because the focus here is on the house/site itself, only a small selection of these photographs are shown here- enough so that the reader can get their own impression of what Bill Hall's family looked like during the period under consideration. All of the photographs provided by Mr. Hall are on file at the Chatsworth Historic Society, and are available for examination by those that may be interested reviewing them.

The Hall house was located on a private ranch in the eastern Simi Hills, which in time (beginning in the late 1940s) became part of what eventually became a 2,850 acre government/private scientific research facility, that eventually became known as the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (hereafter SSFL). Many people, the author included, still refer to the facility as "Rocketdyne," even though that is not entirely accurate (different parts of the SSFL had different names, at different times). The research facilities are no longer in operation, and the place is now generally referred to as the *former SSFL*. Most of the old buildings and facilities have been or will be demolished and removed from the mountain, although it has been proposed that three sets of rocket-engine test-stands (the Alpha Bravo, and Coca complex's) be retained for exhibit, since there are plans to convert the former SSFL, including all of the areas that were once part of the Silvernale/Hall ranch, into park land and/or open space.

The former SSFL has been divided into six several administrative areas for many years; the "terminal" property owner's and/or facility operators include the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), the Boeing Company, and the United States Department of Energy. The Silvernale/Hall Sky Valley Ranch eventually became SSFL Areas II (NASA), III (Boeing Co.), and IV (Boeing leased to the United States Department of Energy). CA-VEN-1303H, the site of the old Hall ranch house, is located in the southern end of Area III. The author is grateful to Paul Costa of Boeing for allowing access to the site to Ray Vincent, myself, and other researchers.

The general public has never had access to the former SSFL. Before Rocketdyne was established, the entire mountain was various private ranches, and neither the ranches nor the field lab encouraged people to visit the area. And so, today, few people are aware that ranching operations once existed in the eastern Simi Hills (indeed, many people have never heard of the SSFL, until relatively recently). But they did, beginning about 1800, with the establishment of Mission San Fernando (in 1797), and they continued in one form or another until the last herds of cattle were removed from Sage Ranch and the SSFL during the mid-1980s (a few cattle are still run

on the Brandeis-Bardin property, on the north side of the SSFL, but these are largely there to keep the brush at bay, so as to reduce the risk of range fires).

For a brief part of the mid-20th Century, the Silvernale/Hall ranch was the largest in the eastern Simi Hills. The old ranch sign seen in Figure 23 gives "Burro Flats" and "Silvernales Ranch" as names for the ranch. But according to Marcia Silvernale McGillis, Henry, as senior partner, named the place *Sky Valley Ranch*" (personal communication, 2015). The Silvernale's and the Hall's owned and lived on the ranch during the years 1939-1954, and were thus present when the earliest Rocketdyne facilities were established. Both the Hall and the Silvernale ranch houses were demolished at an unknown time, after the families left the mountain. Sky Valley Ranch was used for the setting of numerous motion pictures and television shows (e.g. many episodes of the Lone Ranger were filmed there). A few of the photographs provided here, for example, are from *Wings of the Hawk*, a 1953 Universal Studios production. This aspect of the ranch is not discussed here.

The site of the Hall family house is located at the head of Bell Canyon, near the geographical feature called Burro Flats. These flats form the catchment for the principal headwaters of the Los Angeles River. The general area is well-watered and continues to host a wide variety of wildlife. When the Rocketdyne facility was established, during the late 1940s, the area was still considered to be "wild." And wild it still is; Mountain Lions have been seen in the area many times, even today, and a Brown Bear was filmed visiting a guzzler in Boeing's Area I (perhaps 2 miles east of the Hall house site) as recently as October of 2016. Beautiful Native American pictographs can still be seen in the canyon below the Hall site. Because of the lack of roads into the Simi Hills, the area remained difficult to access during Spanish and Mexican times, when the area was visited by only a few Vaqueros and sheep-herders, and perhaps an occasional intrepid equestrian or hiker.

Various Anglo-American's took control of the ranching activities in the Simi Hills beginning in the late 19th Century, with the best-known of these being William Randolph Hearst. We do not have any definitive historic records that refer to any permanent residences in the eastern Simi Hills at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century, although Marcia Silvernale McGillis noted that in the oldest photograph of the Silvernale ranch house, the house looks different, and perhaps older, than the one she remembers from her childhood. She thinks that perhaps this version of the house was already there when her grandfather bought the ranch, and that it was subsequently improved into the version that she remembers. So perhaps the Silvernales and Halls were not the first people to establish their homes on the east side of the mountain in the 20th Century. In any event, they are the first people that we know anything about.

It was Henry Silvernale that decided to establish a ranch which largely focused on Burro Flats, which could be dry farmed, while the entire ranch was suitable for cattle. Henry Silvernale's family had a younger friend (the same age as his sons) named William H. (Bill) Hall (1913-2002), who was a fireman, and Bill bought a 1/3 interest in the ranch. The ranch house had been built by the time that Bill married Elizabeth (Betty) Knapp (1918-2000); they had two children: Edwin (b. 1946), who provided the majority of the photographs seen here, and Lynne (b. 1951). Sally Silvernale Ziegler told the author that: "... They didn't call HIM "Bill"- they always called him [Bee or] Beehler. He passed away in his early 80s . . . He had one son [Edwin] who became a college professor in Montana; Betty was also a professor. Beehler also [after he left Sky Valley Ranch] owned a large piece of land in Malibu, Cold Canyon- the telecommunications site. He sold some of the land but most likely Edwin is still collecting fees from the communications plant on the top of the ridge (personal communication, August 27, 2015; Sally appears to be referring to the extensive communications facilities on Saddle Peak, in the Santa Monica Mountains).

According to Marcia Silvernale McGillis, "Betty was a child's book author and did a lot of writing up there in a home that Bee built out of the sandstone boulders" (personal communication, August 26, 2015; Betty's pen-name was "Bettye"). Betty's father was Frank Knapp Sr. (1875-1952; see Figure 3) and her mother was Mary Jane Meixner Knapp (1878-1949). Frank Sr. and Mary Jane had eight children: Mary, Frank Jr., Alfonso, Fredrick, Max, Walter, Joseph, and Betty (Ray Vincent, personal communication, October 22, 2016). The Knapp family had moved to the then-new Owensmouth community (in what is now part of Canoga Park) in 1911. Max, Betty's brother, knew quite a bit about local history. Max had met many of the members of the old west San Fernando Valley Native American/mixed race community when he was a youth, and in September of 1977 he provided important ethnohistoric information to Bob Edberg, then a student at California State University Northridge. Max told Bob Edberg that his brother Frank Jr. (Betty's brother) knew much more about the local Indians than he did, and Edberg subsequently interviewed Frank, in 1978.

The first motor vehicle road to Burro Flats began on today's Valley Circle Blvd. in the west San Fernando Valley. The Dayton Canyon Motorway led west, up Dayton Canyon, from Valley Circle, to the north fork of Dayton Canyon and a steep jeep road (it is now a hiking trail); this road led to an area that is below what is now upper Woolsey Canyon Road; the old and the new route soon became the same, and it led to the Albertson Motorway (the E-W track between the head of Black Canyon, across the top of the mountain, west to Thousand Oaks), at Sage Ranch (on the east side of Sky Valley Ranch). One then turned west, passed across the southern side of the eastern Simi Hills uplands, and eventually arrived close-by upper Bell Canyon. Ed Hall told Ray Vincent that Ed's mother complained about having to open and close numerous gates along the way. The Hall ranch house was established at the head of the canyon (above the streambed area) and the Silvernale ranch house was established in Burro Flats; this arrangement of roads can be seen on an undated late-1940s Automobile Club of Southern California map for *Los Angeles and Vicinity*.

Sky Valley Ranch did not exist for a long time, only 15 years (1939-1954). Although Bill did not want to sell, Henry, who was an older man, owned the controlling interest. Life on the ranch, for the times, was quite primitive, and it is likely that Henry realized that it was time to move on: "Henry lived there until he was 80 yrs. old, when they decided it would be a good idea to have a telephone and electricity, They cooked with propane and we carried kerosene lamps from room to room and set them in holders on the wall" (MSM, personal communication, October 19, 2015). Bill used his part of the proceeds for the ranch to buy some ranch land in the Santa Monica Mountains, in the hills above the Malibu Coast. He and the family moved to Montana sometime later, and his son Edwin continues to live in Montana today.

Although Marcia Silvernale McGillis was not a member of the Hall/Knapp family, a letter from her to the author, dated September 9, 2015, provides quite a bit of pertinent information about the Sky Valley Ranch- beginnings, operations, and how it all came to an end. Lightly edited, the letter reads as follows:

I am enclosing pictures to illustrate some of the life on the ranch. My cousin Sally was just here for a visit and we had a good time telling stories about our childhood on the ranch' baling hay, riding horseback, doing chores, and swimming in the pool my grandfather [Henry] had built on White Oak Flat which was on the eastern part of the ranch where Rocketdyne was.

To give you a short background- my grandfather, Henry Silvernale, and my grandmother Beulah, came to Santa Monica from Wisconsin in the 1920s. He was a dentist in Santa

Monica. They had 2 sons: Rex and Max. Rex was my dad and Sally's dad, Max, was a Zoology professor at Santa Monica City College.

My grandfather and the boys did a lot of hunting and fishing in the mountains around them. "Dad" taught the boys to take care of all kinds of animals to keep them busy and out of trouble. They had a neighbor boy named Bill Hall who used to watch them with the quail and rabbits and chickens. He had never hunted or fished or been up in the mountains, so my grandfather kind of took him in and he started doing everything with the boys. He became like another son. He loved everything about wilderness and wildlife.

The boys had been deer hunting in Box Canyon and told dad about how beautiful it was up there and he went with them and fell in love with the whole area. He had always wanted to raise cattle so he talked to his realtor, who found out the land belonged to the Maier Brewing Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He made them an offer of \$3 an acre and bought \$1,060 acres and began his dream. Bill Hall, or Bee as we called him, became a part owner. My grandfather retired at 65, they moved up to the ranch and Bee helped build the house and then built his own house into the sandstone caves above what became the barn and corral below. The entire back/side was sandstone rock.

My grandfather contracted with RKO Pictures and Republic Pictures to make western movies on the ranch- my cousin and I got to work as horse wranglers on some of the movies.

My grandfather began buying cattle at auctions. He bought a prizewinning bull and began breeding and building his herd. They had a large cattle truck and brought them in one truckload at a time. He also purchased several horses from auctions for us to ride and to use for running the cattle. He would take cattle as they were ready, to market at the auctions again and buy more. He eventually had several hundred head. My horse was purchased from an auction- he was a Tennessee Walking horse that had been in the circus- I used to ride him in parades.

To answer your question about the Indian bedrock mortars. We used to take my grandmother's spices like cloves etc. and grind them with berries and leaves for pretend play. There was at least one pestle which we used- I don't know where it came from. The stools we sat on around the table were made from nail kegs covered with cowhide for seats and each keg was branded with the Burro Flats brand . . .

When my grandfather was 80 yrs. old, North American Aviation bought the ranch. He decided it would be a good idea to have a telephone! Bee was not happy about leaving, but he bought a ranch in Malibu Canyon, later selling that and buying a bigger ranch in Montana . . . Those years were the best years for all of us.

The author intends to use this paper as a first step in the creation of a larger report that will discuss the historic ranching period in the Simi Hills. Members of the Hall, Silvernale, and Sage families- the last families that were ranchers in the eastern Simi Hills- are still around! They have already contributed a considerable amount of information on their families ranching activities during the mid-20th Century, and they have expressed a willingness to contribute towards putting the information together in a coherent way, so that the historic record of the ranching period in the eastern Simi Hills (ca. 1800-1986) is preserved.

The Photographs

The photographs shown here are courtesy of Edwin Hall, unless otherwise indicated as follows:

Figures 21-22, 24 MSM = Marcia Silvernale McGillis

Figure 23 RK = Rurik Kallis

Figure 19 = YouTube c/o RV

Figure 25 RV = Ray Vincent

Photographs 1-4 were taken ca. 1949-1950

Photographs 8 & 17-20 were taken in 1953

Figure

- 1 Betty Knapp Hall, Bill Hall, Blue
- 2 Bill Hall, Edwin Hall on Danny
- 3 Frank Knapp Sr., Bill Hall, Edwin Hall on Henry Silvernale's horse Silver
- 4 Bill Hall, Betty Knapp Hall, Edwin Hall, Blue
- 5 South side of house under construction (date?); note massive rock outcrop
- 6 South side of house; note massive rock outcrop
- 7 Front (west) side of house (1)
- 8 View of SW corner of house: photo by Universal Pictures
- 9 Front (west) side of house (2)
- 10 Front (west) side of house (3)
- 11 Bill, Betty, and Edwin in front of house
- 12 Bill in front of west side of house. Photo shows the framework for a ramada, outside and slightly away from the house.
- 13 House interior, showing rock face and tile-work
- 14 House interior, showing the east, rock face, inside of the house
- 15 View is to south, from house, looking across upper Bell Canyon. Early view. Note circular bull-pen, for working horses, etc., in lower center of picture. Note corrals are not very substantial.
- 16 Later view to south, from house, looking across upper Bell Canyon. View very slightly west of previous photo. Note that Bull-pen is gone and corrals are now substantial.
- 17 Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953). Note Hall house in upper right of photo.
- 18 Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953). View generally to south, across corrals in upper Bell Canyon, from Hall house. Note corral arrangement is different from that seen in photos 15 and 16. Things are definitely being rearranged for/during movie shoots.
- 19 Scene from Wings of the Hawk (1953). Note people, horses, wagon, etc.
- 20 Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953). Same scene as seen in photo #19, but without people, etc. Both structures in photos #19 and #20 were movie sets, not Hall ranch buildings. Note brush fence in left photo is different in each photo (as seen in photo #20, the fence is more substantial than it is in photo #19).
- 21 View of SW corner of house
- 22 Looking at front door of house
- 23 "Burro Flats" Silvernales Ranch (Sky Valley Ranch) sign
- 24 Sky Valley Owners and family: L to R, Bill Hall, Henry Silvernale, Beulah Silvernale, Rex Silvernale, Marcia Silvernale McGillis; Silvernale Ranch House in Background
- 25 Hall rock house site in 2016



Figure 1 Betty Knapp Hall, Bill Hall, Blue

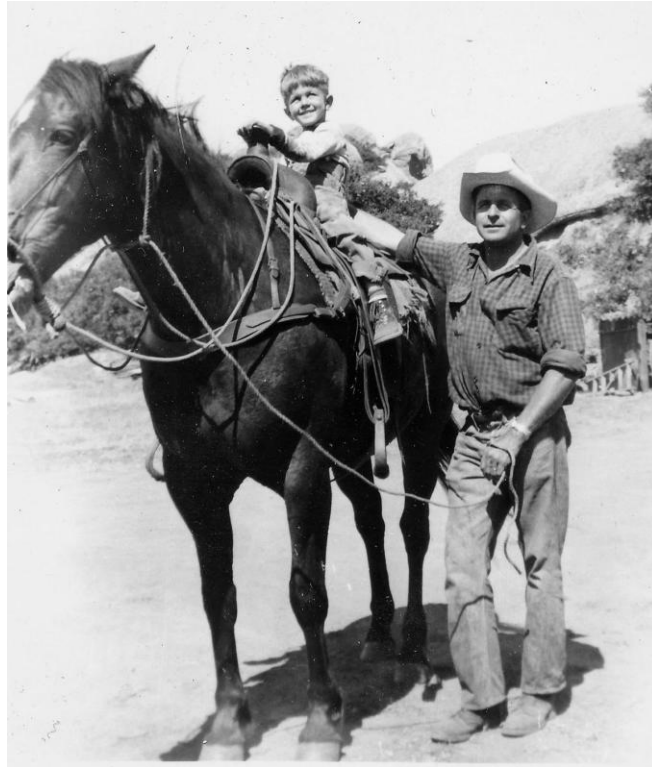


Figure 2 Bill Hall, Edwin Hall on Danny

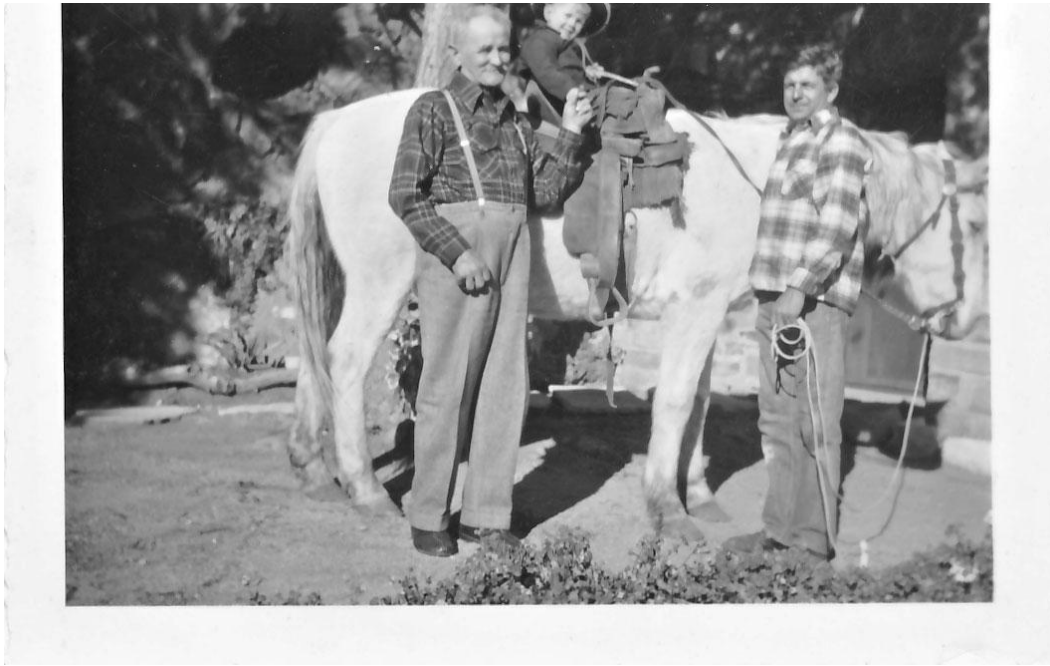


Figure 3
Frank Knapp Sr., Bill Hall, Edwin Hall on Henry Silvernale's horse Silver



Figure 4 Bill Hall, Betty Knapp Hall, Edwin Hall, Blue



Figure 5 Canyon (south) side of house under construction



Figure 6 Canyon (south) side of house



Figure 7 Front (west) side of house (1)



Figure 8
View of SW corner of house: photo by Universal Pictures



Figure 9 Front (west) side of house (2)

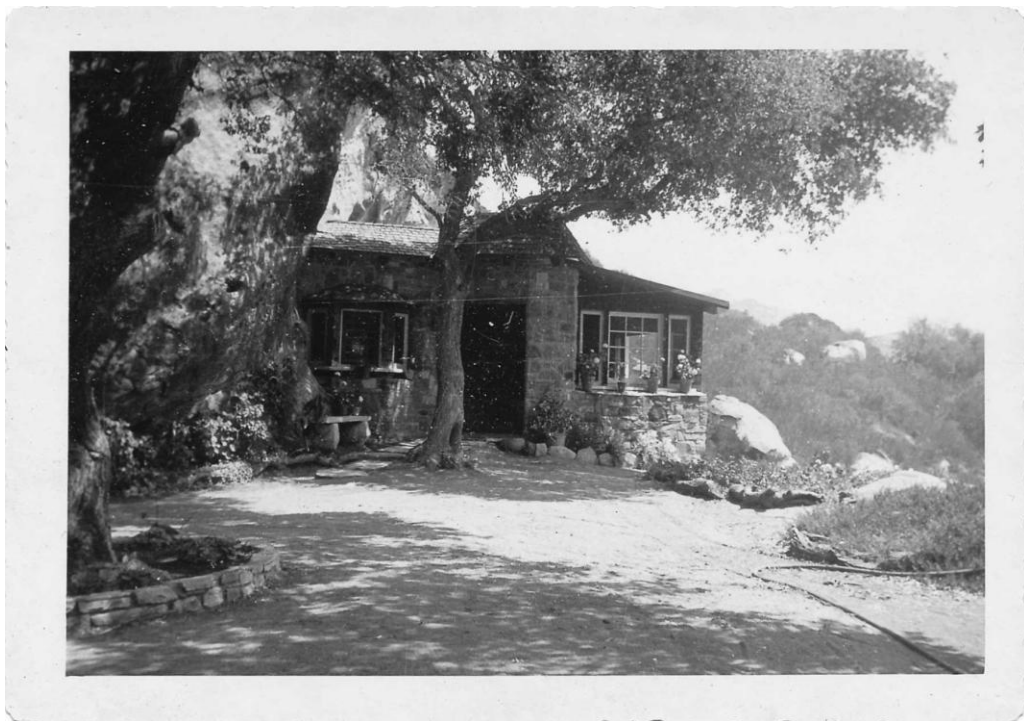


Figure 10 Front (west) side of house (3)



Figure 11 Bill, Betty, and Edwin in front of house

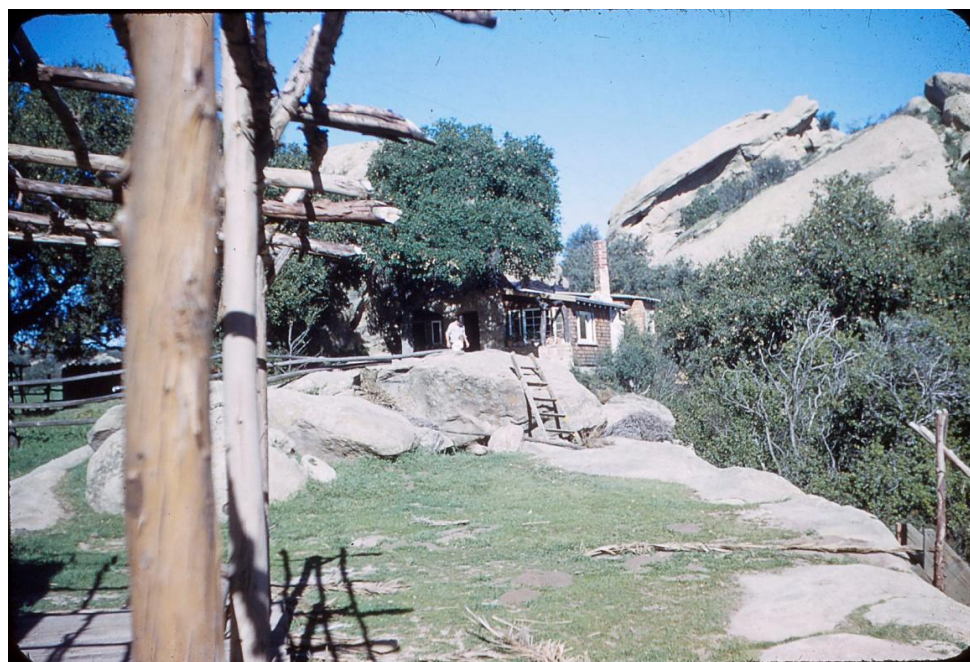


Figure 12 Bill in front of west side of house.



Figure 13
House interior, showing rock face and tile-work



Figure 14
House interior, showing the east, rock face, inside of the house



Figure 15 Early view to south, from house, looking across upper Bell Canyon.



Figure 16
Later view to south, from house, looking across upper Bell Canyon.



Figure 17
Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953)
Note Hall house in upper right of photo



Figure 18 Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953)



Wings of the Hawk Western 1953 Van Heflin, Julie Adams & Abbe Lane

Figure 19 Scene from Wings of the Hawk (1953)

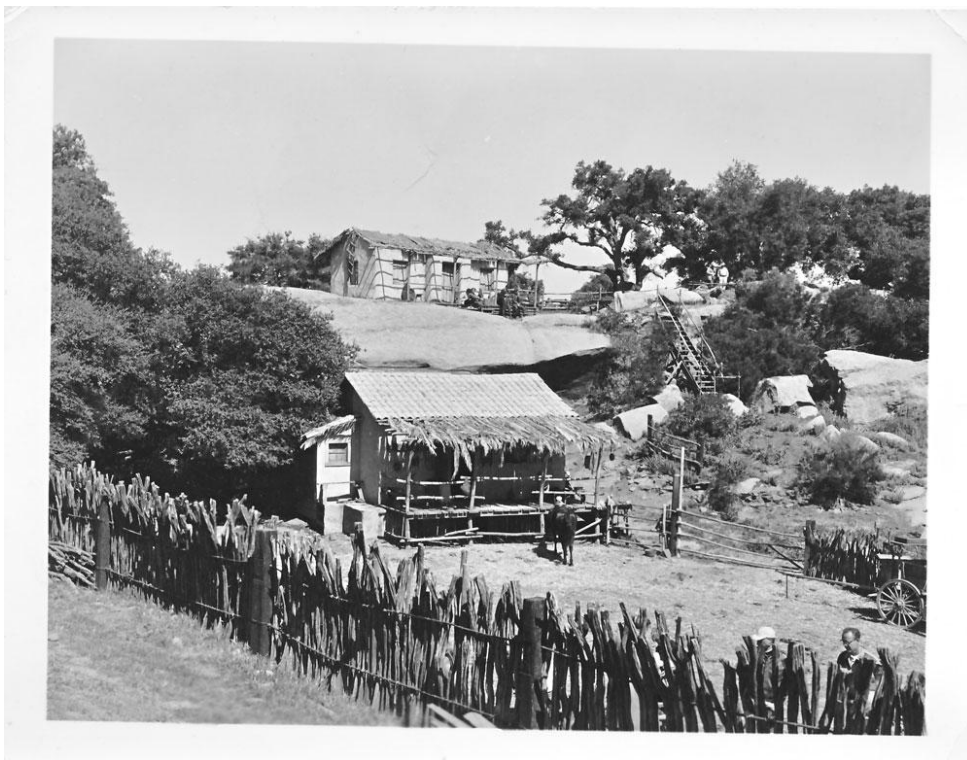


Figure 20

Universal Studios photo of Wings of the Hawk set (1953). Same scene as seen in photo #19, but without people, etc.



Bee's House
Figure 21 View of the SW corner of house



Bee at his house
Figure 22 Looking at front door of house



Figure 23 "Burro Flats" Silvernales Ranch (Sky Valley Ranch) sign



Figure 24 Sky Valley Property Owners and family: L to R
Bill Hall, Henry Silvernale, Beulah Silvernale, Rex Silvernale, Marcia Silvernale McGillis
Silvernale Ranch House in Background



Figure 25 Hall rock house site in 2016

Thanks to RC for editing an earlier version of this paper.

