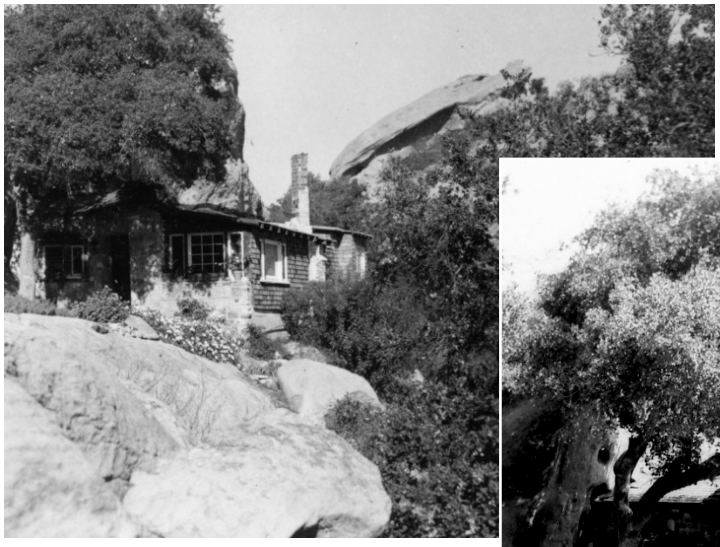
SANTA SUSANA

WESTERN RANCHING AND MOVIE FILMING

The Santa Susana Field Laboratory is well known as a historic rocket engine testing site that propelled Americans into space and helped land man on the moon. The site is also known as home to Native American cultural resources, abundant wildlife and endangered plant species. But there is a period of Santa Susana's bygone era that is less well known, but still of great historical importance – Western ranching and movie filming.

The site was originally part of the 113,009-acre Rancho Simi land-grant given by the Spanish Governor of California, Diego de Borica, to the Pico Family in 1795. "Simi" is derived from the Chumash word, "Shimiji," which means thread-like cloud, according to some historians. In 1842, the ranch was sold to Jose de la Guerra y Noriega, of Santa Barbara. Following his death, de la Guerra's family sold the ranch to the Philadelphia and California Petroleum Company, which explored but failed to find commercial quantities of oil. Soon after, they sold off portions of the ranch.

In 1887, much of the old grant was purchased by the Simi Land and Water Company, which subdivided the ranch.



William B. "Bee" Hall and his wife, Betty (Knapp) Hall, built their ranch house in a side of a mountain at Burro Flats.

Subdivision "A" was identified as Putrero del Burro or Potrero del Burro, "Pasture of the Burro." In 1910, Eddie Maier, a beer brewer, purchased Subdivision "A" to begin ranch operations. In 1939, he sold 1,060 acres to Henry Silvernale and Bill "Bee" Hall for $3 an acre. Henry Silvernale called the area Sky Valley Ranch.

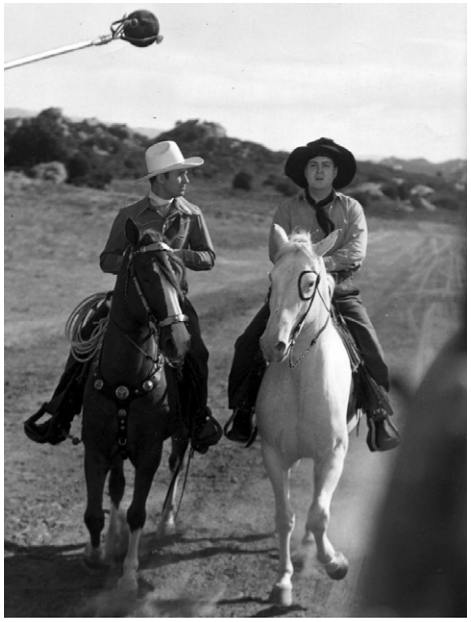
The property was also referred to as Burro Flats and occasionally as the Silvernale Ranch or Silvernales Ranch. The Silvernale Ranch house was built on the east side of Burro Flats and the Hall Ranch House was built in the side of a mountain overlooking the Bell Creek streambed, with a face of the rock forming walls in some of the rooms.

Numerous farms and stock ranches were established in Simi Valley itself, while the Simi Hills uplands continued to be used mostly to run range cattle and horses.

The Silvernale Family established Sky Valley Ranch at Burro Flats in 1939.

During its 15-year existence, some of the land at Sky Valley Ranch was dry-farmed, which meant crops were cultivated without irrigation. The other areas of the ranch were used for raising cattle.

The rugged open terrain and majestic rock formations interspersed with sculpted oak trees made the area a natural choice for country living. It was also a picturesque setting for motion pictures. RKO and Republic Pictures approached Henry Silvernale about using his property for movies and television shows and they entered into a filming agreement.



Gene Autry in *Rovin' Tumbleweeds* (Republic Films, 1939).

Between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, more than 40 movies, mostly Westerns, were filmed in and around Burro Flats and elsewhere on Sky Valley Ranch.

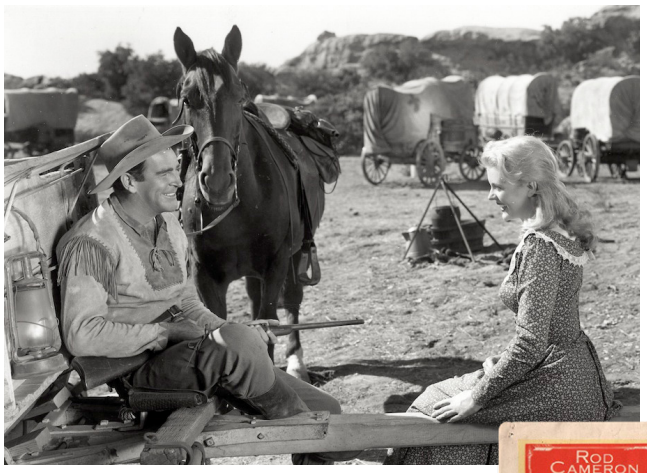
Westerns, often referred to by the early Hollywood press as "oaters," were the mainstay for the industry for decades. The Iverson Movie Ranch and Corriganville were two of the most used filming locations in the local Santa Susana Hills. Despite its remote location – or because of it – Burro Flats was used to film dozens of movies, including *Romance of the Rio Grande, Arrow in the Dust, Ride Clear of Diablo, Drums Across the River* and *Apache*. The movie stars featured in the Burro Flats films included Gene Autry, Cesar Romero, Roy Rogers, Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster, Audie Murphy, Walter Brennan, Donna Reed and Slim Pickens.

Other films shot onsite included: *Wings of the Hawk, Come on Cowboys, Zorro's Fighting Legion, Code of the Cactus, Rovin' Tumbleweeds, Adventures of Red Ryder, Robin Hood of the Pecos* and *California*, starring Barbara Stanwyck. One of the most remembered movies was *Rose of Cimarron*, released by 20th Century Fox in 1952, with Mala Powers, Bill Williams, Jack Beutel, Jim Davis and Bob Steele.

In addition to feature films, television shows were also filmed close to Burro Flats, including *Zorro* and the *Lone Ranger*, which was filmed at nearby Iverson Ranch. As a point of interest, Henry Silvernale's horse was named for the Lone Ranger's trusty steed, Silver.

In 1942, Orrin Sage, Sr. and his family leased 1,800 acres of land to the north of the Silvernale Ranch from the Dundas Family for cattle ranching. The family called the property Home Ranch, and their cattle grazed near orange and avocado trees. Today, the area is known as Sage Ranch Park and is a part of the Mountains Recreation Conservation Area.

In 1947, North American Aviation (NAA) was awarded contracts to design and build large liquid-rocket engines, and they



Rod Cameron and Anita Louise in *Wagons West* (Republic, 1940).

needed a large and remote location to test them. NAA leased, and later bought, 540 acres to the immediate east of Sky Valley Ranch from the Dundas family; the acres were previously leased by Sage Ranch. By 1954, the "Rocketdyne and Power Division of North American Aviation" purchased Sky Valley Ranch from the Silvernales and Halls. Sky Valley Ranch was subsequently divided into what became known as Areas I, II, III and IV. The field lab was renamed the Santa Susana Field Laboratory and became the proving ground for rocket engines that launched America into space and helped win the Cold War.

Although the rugged rock outcroppings and open skies of the Santa Susana hills were ideal for westerns, the area also provided the backdrop for other genres and was used in such classic motion pictures as *Sergeant York,* and later, for portions of the *Star Trek* movies. Filming of movies and television shows continued at Santa Susana after the site was operational. Two of the movies were *Telefon*, starring Charles Bronson, and *Return from Witch Mountain*, starring Bette Davis. A number of television series episodes were shot at Santa Susana, including: *I Spy, Barnaby Jones, Star Wars: A New Hope, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Gangster Squad*.

Gary Cooper is pictured here in *Sergeant York* (Warner Bros, 1941), which was the highest grossing box office film of the year.

After more than 50 years of operation, the former rocket engine testing site ceased operations and filming became sporadic as the focus shifted to remediation investigation activities. The site sits within a critical habitat linkage that connects California's coastal and inland mountain ranges. The North American Land Trust holds a conservation easement that permanently preserves nearly 2,400 acres of the site as open space habitat. Boeing's goal is a cleanup that is protective of human health and the environment, consistent with the land's future use as open space habitat. The site remains a unique part of the cultural, environmental and technological fabric of Simi Valley and the nation, and that includes its ranching and movie history. After all, engines – from the short-range post-World War II Redstone to the huge Saturn-V that took man to the moon – were tested at a place once known as Sky Valley Ranch.

Return from Witch Mountain (Disney, 1978) starred Bette Davis and Christopher Lee.

#santasusanaopenspace

For more information, please visit:
www.boeing.com/santasusana

CONTACTS

MONICA ZIMMER
Environmental Communications
The Boeing Company
w | 425.919.3005
monica.m.zimmer@boeing.com

KAMARA SAMS
Environmental Community Relations
The Boeing Company
w | 818.466.8793
kamara.sams@boeing.com

SPECIAL THANKS

1. England, Jerry. Reel Cowboys of the Santa Susana. 2008.
2. England, Jerry. A Drifting Cowboy Blogspot. http://a-drifting-cowboy.blogspot.com/2012/07/chatsworth-filming-location-burro-flats.html.
3. Knight, Albert. The History of Sky Valley Ranch. 2017.
4. Kramer, Robert S. Rocketdyne: Powering Humans into Space. AIAA Education. 2007.
5. Vincent, Ann and Ray. Burro Flats movie clips. Chatsworth Historical Museum. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29QZKgpS4bQ&t=1s.
6. Simi Valley Historical Society. www.simihistory.com.
7. Iverson Movie Location Ranch. https://www.cowboyup.com/Iverson_Ranch.html.