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Hunsaker Canyon

By Cathy Dausman



Wild horses (although this one is actually a statue) couldn't drag most residents away from their beloved Hunsaker Canyon. Photos
Cathy Dausman

Hills, and as far north as Martinez. On a clear day, residents and guests of another home can see the Sierras.

People from as near as Walnut Creek and as far as New England populate Hunsaker. "We sort of have a hillbilly reputation, but we have doctors, lawyers, writers, business owners and some local green community advocates," Karen Schneider told Lamorinda Weekly. "To live here you need an independent and free outlook," she explained. Schneider and her husband, Doug, are no strangers to the area; they grew up in the East Bay. "We built our [Hunsaker] home 25 years ago, but were owners of the property for 43 years," Schneider said.

Schneider says Hunsaker Canyon was developed along Grizzly Creek from part of the Rancho Laguna de Los Palos Colorados land grant. The Hunsaker family lived there 20 or 30 years, said Lafayette Historical Society's Laura Torkelson, adding the family produced two county sheriffs. The Hunsakers moved out when Horace Carpentier took over the Moraga land grant in the 1870s and eventually moved to Oregon, Torkelson said.

Author Joyce Maynard and her husband, Jim, "fell in love with Hunsaker Canyon and the little community here just a year ago." Maynard spent her "young years" in New Hampshire. "I'd seen pictures online of a house for sale in the canyon, and the place was so unlike anything I'd seen anywhere else that I knew I wanted to see it that same day. We jumped on his motorcycle, and off we flew, and when we pulled around the last bend in the road and saw the place, I knew I was home," she said.

For Maynard, Hunsaker is "quiet, utterly peaceful, and surrounded by nature. When I step outside at night, I can see the stars, and all night long we hear owls calling to each other."

Kim and Fred Curiel felt they got the best of both worlds when they moved from Hayward in 1998 and built their dream house of straw in Hunsaker Canyon. "He wanted to live in the country and I wanted to live within 15 minutes of a hospital and school. Hunsaker met all of our requirements. It's amazing to wake up surrounded by the absolute beauty of the oak woodlands, walk to work at Burton Valley Elementary School (she is the gardening teacher), and in the evening we can be in downtown Berkeley in less than half an hour," Curiel said.

Hunsaker Canyon may be one of Lamorinda's best-kept real estate secrets, but its residents eagerly share its attributes. Nestled in acreage adjacent to Burton Valley and land owned by East Bay Regional Parks and PG&E, Hunsaker is imminently accessible yet retains a distinctly remote, definitively country feel. It is a warm, dry oak woodland habitat populated by 70 or so residents sprinkled among 20 or so homes.

Unlike the other Canyon abutting the East Bay hills, this is not a stand-alone community but a Lafayette neighborhood. Some homes are new and generously sized at 3,000 to 4,000 feet while other originally tiny homes were enlarged over time.

Residents claim the original houses were built in the 1920s as a collection of summer residences. An adobe home and one built entirely of straw clad with stucco sit among more standard wood-sided homes. A home built at a 1,000-foot elevation commands a 180-degree view, to the east of Mt. Diablo, the west beyond Moraga to the Berkeley

Erin Partridge grew up in Hunsaker, moved away, and then came "home." As a child, the art therapist was a member of what she called the Canyon Kids Club.

"Living here has been such a gift," Partridge said. "We explored the hillsides looking for fossils, wildlife tracks, and wildflowers. I know it has shaped me both personally and professionally; living in this beautiful place with such a great group of people has taught resilience, collaboration, and the importance of community."

With their Hunsaker Canyon acreage, Diana and Norm Paulson have cultivated a sunny garden nearly the size of a city lot. The certified composter and his wife grow an abundance of fruits and vegetables, including rhubarb, peppers, cane berries, zucchini and cucumbers across the road from their house. (Read the story about their composting efforts in the Lamorinda Weekly archives at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0807/Lamorinda-Home-Composting-A-Diverse-and-Growing-Practice.html>.) The Paulsons incorporated a portion of an original Hunsaker wall within the terraced garden.

Attorney and resident Joan Fife said life in Hunsaker Canyon provides unheard of opportunities and mixes the best of both worlds. "The space makes it a great spot for pursuit of passions and interests," she said, including big dog walking, keeping roosters, bird and weather watching, and the Frisbee golf her sons play. Yet Hunsaker Canyon residents are a scant 15 minutes from fine dining, the best shopping and BART.

Hunsaker properties "weave in and out of Lafayette city limits following the path of Grizzly Creek," said Schneider, who estimates 90 percent of canyon properties fall within the incorporated area. Residents maintain the length of their two-mile-long privately-owned single lane road and rush to repair it after a washout or downed tree.

Single lane access does come with at least one concern. Schneider says her Hunsaker neighbors "are wary of grass fires and have a phone tree set up to contact each other in an emergency. Additionally, many upper canyon properties keep extra water tanks [filled] for use in emergencies.

"We know since there is only one road, once the fire trucks come in, no one is driving out," she said, adding her family works to keep the natural vegetation trimmed away from their house. But for Schneider, it's worth it. "It is actually an awesome place to live."-



This metal sculpture adds movement and whimsy to this outdoor space.



Four-legged residents of Hunsaker Canyon Photo Cathy Dausman



With a hillside elevation and sweeping views, Karen Schneider's Hunsaker Canyon home is the perfect spot for a telescope. Photos Cathy Dausman



Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

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