

Exploring the Santa Cruz mountains history 3/16/2009



Alma bridge built in 1926, recently uncovered

Part I

The whole adventure started with hearing on the news that the Lexington reservoir by Los Gatos was at a historical low after a couple of dry years, and later seeing an article in the newspaper about some historical artifacts that had been revealed after many years of being hidden under water.

So one Sunday afternoon after church, I thought I would take advantage of this unique opportunity to see what was there. I ventured down to Los Gatos along 17 to have a peek. I had passed through just a couple weeks ago on the annual PBC men's retreat, so I knew about where to look. Upon arriving, I was surprised to see how many cars were parked there - I guess a lot of people had heard the story and wanted to photograph a bit of history. Plus, rain was in the forecast, and people knew the chance probably wouldn't last for long. It's nice that Lexington reservoir is accessible to the public (most are fenced off since I guess they don't want people tampering with the dam or water supply).



Exposed pipeline in the bottom of the empty reservoir

It was surprising how low the water had gotten in the reservoir, and I could see why many people were worried about a drought and water rationing - the reservoir just seemed to be a puddle in the bottom of the valley. Taking the trail down toward the reservoir, I passed numerous bathtub-ring like patterns that formed in the hillsides as the water receded. A large pipe at the bottom of the reservoir was mostly exposed, and we walked along the pipe toward the edge of the water. Up ahead, we could see a bunch of folks milling about and taking pictures and exploring - we'd make our way over there and see what was going on.

Actually it was already obvious - they were walking along a concrete bridge that seemed very out of place. It seemed a strange place to have a bridge in such a desolate looking place shaped by the bathtub rings of the receding water. As we got closer, we could see a date stamped in the concrete - 1926. It seemed a strange sight until we realized that the reservoir hadn't been there forever, and that there were towns in this very spot many years ago.

The town of Alma was once along the railroad which went from Alameda to Santa Cruz, with stops in Drawbridge (now a ghost town near Alviso, just minutes from the heart of Silicon Valley), Alma, Wrights Station (just a few remains are left), Felton, and Santa Cruz. Alma had a hotel, a bunch of saloons, a general store, and a lumber mill (100 years ago, logging was a big industry in the Santa Cruz Mountains - luckily now, most of the ancient trees are protected.)

I was a bit less dismayed later to find out they let the water get this low on purpose, since they were deliberately letting the water to be low in order to do some much-needed repairs on the dam. As soon as the rains started, the reservoir should start filling back up.

While walking through the remains of the old town of Alma, I met a couple along the way, and we were talking about the history of the area. The wife had studied the history for many years and gave me tips about some old railroad tunnels through the mountains. She gave me directions to the north entrance of the Wright's tunnel - probably the easiest one to find - to pique my interest. She also recommended a book - Ghost Towns of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Sounded interesting...

Well, this was a couple months ago, and since then I wanted to get back to see if I could find the rest of the tunnels and history that the lady had talked about. I had asked a bunch of my friends and I was surprised to find out how few people even knew of these tunnels - I had to do a bit of searching online to even get accurate details on where to look for them. A couple of the tunnels are marked in the USGS topographic maps, but some aren't.

It was fun to imagine families riding the train down for family outings to Santa Cruz back near the turn of the century - it seems so quaint now after the busy highway has been around for so many years. We take it so much for granted that we can just drive on 17 to Santa Cruz. Back then, it would have been strange to imagine how so many people even commute to the San Jose area from near Santa Cruz and they pass every day along the route of the railroad without thinking twice. We take the highway for granted and get annoyed when the car in front is going just a little too slow or comes in front of us!

The tunnels have been around for about 100 years now - many of them still have the construction dates stamped by their entrances.

There are 4 tunnels total - the Wright's tunnel, the Laurel tunnel, the Mountain Charlie tunnel and the Zayante tunnel. The first two are the longest - each over a mile long! All except the last one are collapsed in the middle - done deliberately (according to some sources) after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Part II

After church one Sunday, Nisha and I decided to go on a quest to look for the lost tunnels. She had been the inspiration for exploring Drawbridge and the Alma/Lexington town sites, and now we were going to look for these tunnels. Along the way was also the semi-ghost town of Holy City.

As we headed down on 17, we soon passed the Lexington reservoir and since now it was March, most of the water had filled back in, covering once again the historic landmarks hidden for so long. Who knows, if we have another really dry year, maybe they will be visible again at the end of the year... Passing through Holy City, we noticed the old glass blowing shop that was once famous. It looked mostly abandoned, but there were still some signs of recent activity. Although bullet holes were in the door, we could look through them and see the delicate works of glass art inside. Maybe the shop is only open occasionally. Around back, it was interesting to find piles of what looked like old trash, but were old books, LP records, and scattered pieces of glass. They were obviously quite valuable to some people long ago.



Holy City glass-blowing shop

Around the corner, a landowner was fixing up his old house with his own hands. I wonder in this down economy, how people are less likely to throw out something old and buy new, instead of salvaging what could be restored. He had a big German Shepherd watchdog whose bark was definitely bigger than its bite - since it came up to me and gave me a couple big licks! I said hi to the owner and soon noticed that he had an old sky-blue Willy's jeep (from the WWII era). Definitely an antique! I had a good look at it, and except for the flat tires, it looked in pretty good shape (though it probably hadn't been driven for 30 years). My dad is especially interested in finding and restoring an old pickup truck as a hobby (like the old ones with the split windshield). I took a picture and mailed it to my dad who was eager to find out!



Old Jeep

I actually just brought in an old Bible to be restored. Ironically I bought it at a garage sale for just \$5, but it would be \$250 to get it restored. I was surprised to find someone in Menlo Park whose personal business was restoring old books and especially family Bibles. I knew I could just go to a bookstore and get a paperback bible for just a couple dollars, or even get one online for free! But the charm of something ancient (in this case, the bible was from about 1850-1860) was worth the effort of restoration. In our society we've seen how so many things are treated as disposable, but with the economy in the current state of disrepair, I wonder how many people are re-thinking what should be thrown out and what can be restored with some care. Sadly, the disposable way in which we treat many things has happened in relationships where divorce and re-marriage is easier than working through difficult moments in the marriage.

On our way to the first tunnel, we passed the old Burrell schoolhouse. Built about 100 years ago, it was a one-room schoolhouse out in the country with a great view of the Santa Cruz Mountains all around. Fortunately instead of it being abandoned and falling into disrepair, it is now a winery with vineyards covering the hillsides nearby. Featuring wines like the "Spring Break Syrah", "Detention Red Zinfandel", and the "Valedictorian", it's got a lot of character. Reading through the wine tasting options on the blackboard, I decided to go for some tastes and ended up getting a bottle after all - something to enjoy with friends and family and with a great story. It's cool that something historic like the old schoolhouse could be resurrected and kept alive today, even though in a slightly different way. Sadly so many historic structures are demolished or left to fall into disrepair that they are lost. I'm especially glad the devastating Summit fire last summer didn't damage the schoolhouse or any of the historical structures around Holy City or the railroad tunnels.



Burrell Schoolhouse

Just over the hill, we found the first railroad tunnel next to what used to be Wright's station. Wrights was named after Rev. James Richards Wright who had property by the Burrell schoolhouse. Apparently it was a bustling town 100 years ago - it was an important shipping point for fruit growers and wine producers and timber. There was a post office, hotel, blacksmith shop and train depot. All of the buildings are gone, but we still found the remains of the old swimming pool that lay behind the hotel - the concrete bowl was still there partially filled from the recent rains. And of course the entrance of the railroad tunnel was still there.

This tunnel is one of the most accessible of the Santa Cruz mountain tunnels - yet it looked so abandoned and there was hardly a path leading to it anymore. After parking near a historic bridge (the wrought-iron work was still in place), we headed into the woods just off the road. At first it wasn't obvious there was anything interesting - it was all pretty much overgrown with trees and bushes (luckily no poison oak though). But walking along a faint path for a few hundred feet revealed an interesting sight - emerging from the depths of time and the redwood forest, like an old secret waiting to be revealed. There it was - the north entrance of the Wrights tunnel. And as an added bonus, the recent rains produced some nice waterfalls splashing down the sides of the old tunnel - almost like large gates opening to the blackness of the tunnel beyond.



North entrance of the Wright's tunnel

Sadly, like most interesting historical structures, the tunnel had its fill of graffiti - by countless gangs and groups of punk kids who wanted to be cool and leave their permanent mark. The place seemed to be out of sight and thus out of reach of the law - I couldn't imagine it was patrolled that much. Dozens of assorted empty spray-paint cans filled the back of the tunnel by where it was collapsed. Much of the graffiti was somewhat artistic though, instead of the quick scrawblings of gang symbols painted in the inner-city streets. Obviously many of the gangs had taken their time - some looked like artwork on some heavy-metal rock album covers.

Even with the graffiti, the tunnel had its charm - like a secret hideout out of sight from society. One could only imagine what other acts probably happened in the blackness where society had turned a blind eye. The tunnel had been abandoned long enough where mineral deposits were slowly covering the walls and ceiling. Small stalactites and soda straws several inches long made rows across the cracks in the ceiling, and for part of the way, flowstone deposits and even some small rimstone pools decorated the floor, like what you would see in a limestone cave. Interesting how they say on cavern tours how the formations take tens of thousands of years to form, yet these formations had appeared in just a few decades.

The other end of the tunnel was about 6000 feet away, to the southwest. Like most of the tunnels in the Santa Cruz Mountains, this one had been collapsed in the middle, only permitting entry for the first few hundred feet. I had approximate directions on how to find the other end - but I knew it would probably take some exploring. I was a bit nervous - even if I was just 100 feet away, the ravine could be filled with poison oak, or there could be landowners with guns or crazy dogs (the German Shepherd earlier could have been a bit to deal with if the owner wasn't nearby).

Supposedly there were 2 ways to get to it - one way by taking Summit Canyon road and following it until it became a logging road, then hiking a couple hundred feet down a trail to Burns creek below. The other way was to go to the town of Laurel and reach the creek from the other side (and I had better beta on this route). Since I was near the first way, we decided to give it a go. If we couldn't find it, we could try the more sure way (even it was a bit longer). Heading down the road, it rapidly narrowed and entered a "private property - no trespassing" zone - it was all private property (almost all the mountain folks have dogs who weren't afraid to notify their owners of our presence). The road dead-ended right up someone's driveway and one of their large dogs came running after us (even though it didn't look like they were home), so we looped through the driveway and went back up the hill - bummer.

Back on Summit road, we headed down Schulties road where the pavement gradually went from smooth road to narrow smooth road to narrower rough road to even narrower semi-paved road (maybe the road was fully paved at one point, but with lack of money and resources, the road was falling into disrepair. But maybe the owners liked it that way, since it discouraged a lot of extra traffic from passing through). It felt like we were so far from home now - even being just a few miles from bustling highway 17.

The road seemed to go an eternity, and even my GPS would sometimes get confused - the dense tree cover would block most of the satellite reception, causing our car to appear it is in the middle of nowhere, or going along another road, or in the middle of a lake, or maybe back on Schulties road! But the map was right and we soon entered the town of Laurel. A historical plaque confirmed our location.

I knew the north entrance of the Laurel tunnel was nearby, so we could tag that first, then go on our quest to find the south entrance of the Wrights tunnel. In fact, from the plaque, we could already see the Laurel tunnel! Just about 50 feet just outside the fence of someone's property, there it was. A small dog started barking loudly, scaring Nisha a bit, but fortunately it was on the *other* side of the fence and didn't seem likely to hop over! A stack of abandoned old railroad

ties and rails lay by the path, which by the way was an unusually level place in the rugged mountains.

The tunnel was right in front of us - the construction date was stamped at the top of the entrance - 1909. Wow - that's 100 years ago. And if the tunnels were collapsed in the 1940's, which was over 30 years where trains passed through these tunnels.



North entrance to the Laurel tunnel

Since the rail bed was pretty much the only flat level path in the area, we should be able to follow it north and east and find the Wrights tunnel (note if we tried to find it the other way, we wouldn't have this clue and finding the tunnel would be much more difficult...) A dirt road followed the direction of the rail bed and curved around to parallel the creek. This had to be it - all the other roads went up or down steep hills. However a little ways down the road was a "private road" sign with an old broken gate. Hmmm - I wonder what this would bring.

The road dead-ended right at someone's house - bummer. But there were lights on, and we could at least knock on the door and see what they might know about the tunnel. The tunnel couldn't be too far. While climbing the stairs to the front door of the house, I heard a couple dogs barking - the owner opened the door before I even reached the doorbell. I was curious if she knew anything about the tunnel since she lived close by - maybe I had gone down the wrong street or missed the tunnel somehow. However, she did hint at there being something behind her property, but she had never been there and she started making a bunch of excuses for me to not go past her land - there are ticks in the pine trees, neighbor's dogs that bite, poison oak, and mountain lions. Yeah - thanks for the tip - these are pretty much anywhere in the mountains. I could tell that she was wary of visitors - a woman living alone in the mountains,

with her 3 dogs for protection (not sure if she had a gun on her, but I didn't want to find out). She eventually reluctantly gave me permission to pass, but she would be watching what I did. I wonder if she suspected I was illegally growing marijuana or something (I wondered if I would pass someone's pot farm on the way and some guy would come with a gun since I was trespassing on their illegal pot plants!).

Just behind her house was a small creek that went steeply uphill. I knew the tunnel to be right by Burns creek, but this creek seemed to be too small. hmmm - I wonder if I went the wrong way. Nisha had decided to wait in the car while I went exploring (I knew the dogs bothered her and she didn't want to risk getting bitten, plus she wanted to read my book on the history of the Santa Cruz mountains). I knew I might have to thrash around a bit to find the tunnel and I didn't quite know where to look. Luckily there wasn't much poison oak (it would have just started to leaf for the spring, so I could recognize it - o/w it would just look like a bunch of sticks...)

After about 10 minutes of thrashing around, I found a wide level path parallel to a much bigger creek, which I figured must have been the rail bed. Excellent! I would just have to follow it upstream and I would find the tunnel. I wondered to myself how I had missed it earlier, but I realized that the small creek behind the lady's house must have eroded through the leveled rail bed, erasing it from the local topography. You had to go a little ways past the creek through the brush to get back to the rail bed.

The rail bed was remarkably level, about 15 feet wide, with occasional small trees growing up and some large fallen trees lying across. In a couple places, the rail bed was washed out, requiring a quick scramble through the brush to get across. But all in all it was pretty easy to follow. The canyon started to get narrower, and the path had to go through the mountainside pretty soon. I quickened my pace and soon found a deep black opening in the distance through the trees - hallelujah, I found the lost tunnel!

It felt like discovering an ancient secret, like something out of Lord of the Rings, when the moon gate opens by the lake with the snake-like monster. The ancient gate had been there for many years, hidden by the ravages of time. The tunnel and gate were not even marked anymore on the USGS maps (the Laurel tunnel was marked, but not the Wright's tunnel). I felt so privileged to come to such a spot - it was almost like a religious experience of finding something that had been lost for such a long time.

The tunnel was larger than I expected - but I knew that standard-gauge rail had passed through. It was a good 20 feet wide and 25 feet high, with the date - 1909 - stamped on the top. The remains of a couple broken-down trestles stood in the creek where the train crossed. I was surprised to see the excellent shape of the original brickwork on the ceiling of the tunnel and the shape of the walls and floor. Even the stones covering the gutters were mostly intact - you could see where the groundwater was still being channeled through the gutters to prevent flooding of the tunnel. A few patches of old graffiti marred the walls near the entrance, but most of the tunnel was remarkably clean. I guess not too many people have found it, even though it is only a short walk (assuming you know where to go!) Actually it is only about 1/2 mile from highway 17!



South end of the Wright's tunnel

The tunnel was collapsed about 500-600 feet in, and I'm glad I had my high-powered Maglite to light my way. I was careful to get as many pictures to document the experience as I could. I wonder how it would change if I came back 10 years later. I took a bunch of movie clips too - after getting my new computer at home with Adobe Premiere, it is fun to do more things with video. Plus, it feels more real, like being there, while watching the video.

Just as I was heading back on the trail, my phone buzzed indicating a message. I couldn't call back or hear the message due to lack of signal (but somehow I could still get the notification of the message... strange.) I hurried my pace back, since I knew Nisha was probably waiting 30-40 minutes by now. But I hope she didn't mind since I would have a great report. The dogs barking were now a welcome sound, since I knew I was almost back. Good - no pot farms and growers with guns defending their illegal plants! I soon found the house and was back on the road heading back toward Nisha and the car. The barking got louder and I saw the dog was joined by his 2 buddies - now there were 3 of them! The smaller they are, the louder the bark too! The owner came out, hearing her dogs barking - she was probably a bit relieved knowing I was leaving, but also trying to corral the dogs back into the house!

I was back with Nisha when one of the dogs started tugging on my pants - the owner got really apologetic (and she was probably a bit frightened) when the dog started to bite. But they were

probably surprised and maybe felt threatened. I was glad to talk with the owner again (and especially after she calmed the dogs!) - And of course Nisha was relieved when they stopped barking and calmed down! The owner apparently didn't know about the tunnel right behind her house, and she was impressed when I was able to show her the pictures (and videos!) of the tunnel. It turned out her house used to be a bell station, where the bell was rung just before the train reached the town of Laurel. In fact, the private road to her house used to be called Tunnel Road. (Now it doesn't have a name on the map). Apparently our conversation triggered some of her old memories. We parted on good terms after a long chat - a nice end to a bit of adventure! I realized later I should have gotten her contact information so I could send her the pictures... oh well.

It was starting to get a bit dark - it was 6:00 now, but the other end of the Laurel tunnel was just by the Glenwood Cut-off off highway 17 - just a few minutes' drive away. It couldn't have been easier to find - right under Glenwood drive near where it intersected with Eagle road (the directions were perfect!). Sadly, the tunnel only went in about 15-20 feet before it was collapsed under Glenwood Drive, but it still made an interesting find for a bit of history.

Well, it was a successful day - finding both ends of 2 of the 4 tunnels. The other two were much smaller anyway, and the last one is also privately owned. We'd have to go back to find the Mountain Charlie and Zayante tunnel, but we'd save that for another day. And to make the journey complete, we'd have to ride the train (still running) from Roaring Camp by Henry Cowell Redwoods state park to the Santa Cruz beach boardwalk! Back on highway 17, we were back in San Jose in about 20 minutes, where we enjoyed a nice dinner and savored the memories of an interesting outing to see the history right in our own backyard!

Exploring the Santa Cruz railroad tunnels part III - Nov 21, 2009



East end of the Mountain Charlie tunnel – built in 1908

I had heard about these tunnels almost a year ago now and I wanted to "complete my quest" to find all the tunnels hidden in the mountains. I had been to both ends of the first two, and there were two more. The last tunnel wasn't really on my list since it is privately owned (it's a records archive so there isn't really anything to see), but the third tunnel was supposed to be quite interesting.

I had some beta as to how to find the tunnel, but had been a little afraid so go back and try to find it. Nisha and I drove by on our last quest but ran out of time - there were several things I felt I had to work through –

- the "interesting" experience finding the south end of the Wrights tunnel
- poison oak (quite pervasive in the Santa Cruz mountains, and this time of year it looks like any of the other bare sticks, and it's hard to avoid everything that looks like sticks in the woods)
- landowners with possibly crazy dogs (and these last tunnels were near private property as indicated on the map)
- a guy from my chorus took a 40 foot fall and broke his back looking for the south end of the Wrights tunnel (and it would have been a real bummer to get hurt right before my big anticipated trip to the canyon country of UT for Thanksgiving the next weekend)

- the tunnel looked a bit away from the main road and there were steep slopes all around (according to the topo)... of course there were always steep slopes - o/w why would they have built a tunnel in the first place?
- who knows about mountain lions / ticks / etc

I had been hemming and hawing for the last few weeks when to go look for the tunnel and passed on a couple chances (went to Santa Cruz twice in the last month and would have had plenty of time to look for the tunnels but wasn't up to it). It had been bugging me to the point where I felt I had to go for it (and the fact the YAF retreat was 1/4 mile from the Laurel tunnel seemed to be a clear sign. During our free time we even had a group go out and explore the tunnel!)

So after church on the 21st, I had my chance (Nisha wasn't able to make it to church and the friends who were supposed to move a sofa that afternoon decided to move it that night instead - suddenly I had a few hours free, so this seemed like a sign as well). I suddenly felt nervous again and sort of hoped my friends with the sofa would change their mind back so I wouldn't have to look for the tunnel... but then again that would only delay the whole quest yet again... This was my good second chance to go and find these tunnels.

We had actually just been talking in one of my small groups about how God is one who gives second chances - there seemed to be a pattern –

- My trip to UT coming up was a "second try" - the original plan fell through rather unexpectedly, but suddenly another chance came up and I got to go! (the trip was wonderful by the way!)
- The refinance on my house didn't work out the first time, but interest rates fell and housing prices went up, so the refinance would work out even better
- Even small things like the gas pump at one station didn't work so I went to a different pump where it was cheaper and I even remembered I also had a coupon so it was yet even cheaper!

The pattern seemed like when God doesn't necessarily say "no" but instead "wait, there's something better coming".

So with all that, I headed up the hill on 17 and found the Glenwood Cut-off and the left on Glenwood Drive. Amazingly, I found the east end of the tunnel in less than 5 minutes (and there was an easy path). And it was very quiet - no crazy landowners or dogs or anything... but there was an old pickup from probably 30 years ago that was rusting in the middle of the woods (creepy but interesting). There was the tunnel, a silent testimony of the history that had once filled the Santa Cruz mountains, echoing a past of happy families taking their kids on vacations to the Santa Cruz beach boardwalk for ice cream and rides and the beach (the Giant Dipper

was built in the 20's and the Carousel even earlier.) Now the tunnels were quiet, slowly being engulfed in forest and being lost to fading memories.

The tunnel was collapsed in the middle due to age, fears of the Japanese during WWII, earthquakes, and difficulty of maintenance (the tunnels had been the site of several methane explosions that had killed dozens of unfortunate workers). And of course, everyone drives cars now and since highway 17 was built, the tunnel is now quite obsolete. So passage through the tunnel was impossible, requiring a hike through possible thick brush / poison oak / slippery steep hillsides to find the other end that was only roughly indicated on the map (my GPS was unusable in the thick forest and the roadbed was probably eroded beyond recognition due to age).



View from inside the tunnel

Through a fortunate turn of events, there was actually a road (Schoolhouse Road) that passed a couple houses and turned around the corner, went down the hill and joined directly with the original roadbed of the train tracks! The road passed a horse barn and a chicken coop and a couple signs "children at play" and a tree with a big tree house - it looked like I had traveled back in time to simpler days from childhood. I was only about 30 minutes away from the hustle and bustle of Silicon Valley! A couple goats bleated behind the horse barn.

At the bottom of the hill, I knew immediately I had found the old roadbed - the evidence of the hard work to grade the level path through the steep mountains was easily visible. Images of the trains running flashed through my mind. I started following the roadbed - a little overgrown in places with weeds, but very easy to follow. A song from church that morning was going through my head as I walked the peaceful path through the woods "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus", and call it coincidence or divine inspiration, when I got to "Amen", there was the opening of the tunnel appearing behind the trees! Seemed like another sign!



Seldom seen west end of the Mountain Charlie tunnel

It looked like the tunnel ended immediately with some mounds of dirt formed from the collapsing of the roof near the entrance, but there was a path going over the dirt mounds into the blackness beyond. A couple collapse pits right near the entrance made for some interesting skylights to the greenery and sky above. I didn't expect to see much beyond the entrance so I didn't have a torch with me, so I was quite surprised to see the opening continuing into the depths of the mountain. My camera flash served as a light, strobing every few seconds to probe deeper. My "Flashlight" app on my phone ended up being very useful to continue, following the tunnel deeper...

The dirt mounds gave way to a mostly level and slightly damp floor that was littered with old railroad ties (the rails had been pulled up around WWII since metal was in high demand). Some

parts of the walls just past the dirt mounds still had metal and wood beams to shore up the sides from collapsing - I was careful to not bump these beams in case one would decide to give way on top of my head that very moment!

The tunnel went on and on and my cell phone battery was slowly draining from the flashlight running. I momentarily turned off the light to discover how dark the tunnel really was - it was kind of spooky actually! I was probably 200 feet into the tunnel and the dirt mounds blocked most of the light from the entrance, making for a rather dark passage further in. I guess if my light were to go completely out, I could go to a wall and just follow it all the way out, while tripping over rocks and broken railroad ties, but at least I would eventually find my way out. But that would be no fun. I couldn't imagine being stranded in a cave several thousand feet in and losing my light (that's why the NSS encourages everyone to have 3 lights with extra batteries!) It was a humbling experience to realize how dependent we could be on even a very basic source of light.

I had had enough and started back out - the tunnel according to the map was about 1/4 mile total in length and it was collapsed in the middle, so it could have gone several hundred feet further in. I'd have to go back to find out... But I had a good taste of what there was to see while several hundred feet beneath the surface. The "light at the end of the tunnel" was a very welcome sight as I slowly navigated my way out with my dimming flashlight as the batteries held on to their last whisper of life.

On the way out, I was a bit surprised to see a guy ahead of me in the woods - but I had already found the tunnels so if he wanted to kick me out I didn't care since my "goal" was already accomplished! I wasn't technically trespassing since I was on the road but in a place far from police and the law, many landowners take the law in their own hands (but I've heard Texas is far scarier - you don't want to mess around since someone could come out any moment with their shotgun!)

Turned out the guy was very interesting - he was probably about 60, definitely a "mountain man" with his shaggy beard and country lilt in his voice. He had lived in the mountains his whole life, "living his dream" on Mountain Charlie. He was about 15 feet up an old eucalyptus tree, cutting some branches and getting ready to take down the whole tree. He was clearing space for some solar panels. He already had a couple of them up and he wanted to open the view a little more so they can bring in more power. The contrast was interesting - a guy who seemed to live a simple life was embracing new technology and "clean energy" with his solar panels. He loved to talk - he probably didn't get a whole lot of visitors and life is probably a bit lonely in the mountains. He talked about his grand-nephews of 8 and 12 who loved their new tree house (I guess they were the "children at play"). I got to talk a bit about our cabin in western MD and compare our tall tales about life in the mountains.

All in all, this was an interesting "project" to look for the lost tunnels in the Santa Cruz mountains and I felt I had finally completed the quest.

-- THE END (for now) --