

Dump or Paradise? : With 50 Junkyards, Sun Valley May Be the 'Auto Wrecking Capital' of California, but Many Residents Brag of a Small-Town Ambiance

By Greg Braxton, Times Staff Writer

It almost never snows in Sun Valley, Calif.

But Sun Valley Chamber of Commerce President Carol Silver still gets regular inquiries from out-of-state callers wondering about skiing conditions.

"People outside California get us mixed up with Sun Valley in Idaho, I guess," said Silver, who runs a printing shop in a Sunland Boulevard shopping plaza. "They're surprised when I tell them there's absolutely no snow here. They don't realize that this Sun Valley exists."

Although local skiers would not likely look to the northeastern San Fernando Valley for ideal skiing, an outsider driving casually through might still get his Sun Valleys mixed up.

The "first" Sun Valley, centered on the northwestern and southwestern portions of town, around La Tuna Canyon Road, is distinguished by ranches, farmland, horses, curbsless streets, lukewarm breezes and a rural, small-town atmosphere that reflect the city's name.

But only a few miles away, in the center of town, lies the "other" Sun Valley, a heavily industrial area that is the reverse image of the idyllic country setting.

Railroad tracks and scores of auto wrecking yards share the streets with junkyards filled with mountains of scrap metal. Other streets in the area are strewn with aging, mangled cars that have been neglected or abandoned.

The area has been pockmarked since the early 1900s by gravel pits. Fourteen have been filled in with household refuse from the city of Los Angeles.

Would the real Sun Valley please stand up?

The schizophrenic nature of Sun Valley, surrounded by North Hollywood, Sunland, Burbank and Lake View Terrace, is both the curse and the charm of the community, according to homeowners and city officials.

'Auto Wrecking Capital'

One Sun Valley businessman jokingly called the town "the auto wrecking capital of the state," while Lure Lovick, 75, who has lived in the La Tuna Canyon area for 56 years, insisted that Sun Valley is a "showplace. People from outside can turn their noses up at the industrial parts, but where do they take their old cars?"

Along with the civic pride come anger and controversy.

The community is a prominent portion of Los Angeles City Councilman Howard Finn's district, and he often points to the town's landfills and gravel pits as examples of why he opposes more landfills or waste disposal in his district, which he says has most of the city's dumps and draws 80% of the city's refuse.

"In the past, Sun Valley was a major dumping ground for the city because of the gravel pits, which were already here," Finn said. "But there wasn't much thought to what to do with the pits after they were filled.

"Now these filled-in pits form whole pockets of land along Glenoaks Boulevard which are not suitable for any purpose. It's not natural or pretty open space, and the cosmetic look of the area has suffered."

Suspicious Raised

Tensions erupted last year when officials and residents thought toxic gases from one of the city's inactive landfills were seeping into the campus of Francis Polytechnic High School. Laboratory tests proved negative, but residents still fear future health hazards of the landfill.

Homeowner groups three years ago helped to block a household refuse landfill at Glenoaks Boulevard and Peoria Street. The pit was subsequently filled with inert materials.

But despite the area's shortcomings, a core of residents remains fiercely devoted to the area, due in part to the beauty of the La Tuna Canyon area. They claim that their problems are not much worse than other cities, and that the city is superior in several respects to most other communities in the Valley.

"It certainly is a community which has room for improvement within its borders," said Ira Freeman, a pharmacist and former Sun Valley chamber of commerce president. "However, it seems that people who have lived here have a strong sense of community. There are people who have been to school here and are now watching their children and grandchildren go to school here."

Silver, 35, who moved to Sun Valley five years ago to start her business, added: "Sure, we have ugly parts here, but so do all communities. We're obviously not in Venice or near the Pacific Ocean, but who says you have to be? We have businesses and families who are going into their third or fourth generation here. That says something."

Silver and others point to the family-owned and operated Roscoe Hardware on Sunland Boulevard, which is celebrating its 62nd year of business. Another landmark, Roy's Furniture, which chamber officials say is indicative of the "country-store image" of Sun Valley, is approaching its 40th year.

Paul Feist, 71, a retired engineer who moved with his family to Sun Valley in 1955, characterized the split image as "a balanced structure and a balanced community. That's what sets us apart. We have our residential, our industrial, our horse country. And everyone gets along."

Recent state and local figures place the population of Sun Valley at roughly 54,000. According to the 1980 census, 36.9% of the town's households earn under \$15,000 per year, whereas about 18% of the households earn \$25,000 to \$34,999 annually. About 72% of the residents are white, and about 36% of the remaining population is Latino.

There are more than 50 auto dismantling and wrecking yards in Sun Valley, most of them in the roughly heart-shaped center of town zoned for heavy industry and manufacturing. Managers of Valley Junk, a yard near the railroad tracks on San Fernando Road, boast that they have the largest junkyard in the Valley, with 2,000 tons of junk displayed in overflowing piles.

Three towering red-and-white striped smoke stacks mark a city-owned steam-generating plant. CalMat Co., a combination of Conrock and California Portland Cement Co., is in charge of a multimillion-dollar operation, digging 2 1/2 to 3 million tons of sand and gravel out of the ground every year to use as construction material. A 44-acre gravel pit is now the site of the Bradley West landfill, one of three city landfills.

Piles of Parts

Despite efforts of business owners to landscape and hide some of the less attractive aspects of their establishments, piles of auto bodies and parts are still plainly visible from passing cars, and the area has a haphazard, unkempt look.

"There is a definite problem with the way that area looks," said Dennis Chu, assistant city planner for the area. "We would like to see it upgraded to an appearance that would resemble an industrial park. Sun Valley was one of the last city communities to be developed, and it

sprang up around industry. But it's heavy industry, and the worst part of that is that it's not a very visual product."

Chu added that several businesses have taken pains to install parking buffers, landscaping and reinforced walls to hide some of the debris. But legislation that would require business owners hide even more would have to be initiated by the city.

He said salvage businesses and auto wrecking yards are required to have six-foot walls surrounding their properties. But most of the Sun Valley salvage businesses were built before the regulations went into effect.

Only one city landfill still operates in the area, a fact that gladdens Finn, who has advocated converting waste into energy instead of putting it into the ground. "We can't keep raping the community," he said. "We're sick of landfills. It's not the proper way to dispose of trash anyway."

Sun Valley business people are becoming more interested in beautifying the area, landscaping and clearing more abandoned cars off the streets, Finn added.

Residents of Sun Valley, while not enamored with the industrial community and the landfills, prefer to point at the beauty of the hillsides, which they say offsets the junkyard ugliness. Even the fact that the area may not live up to the images conjured up by the name Sun Valley doesn't bother them.

"What's in a city name, anyway?" snapped Silver. "I mean, there's Woodland Hills, and I think of wooded hills, but where are they? And what about Hawaiian Gardens? I grew up in Hawaii, and that place doesn't look anything like Hawaii. Our place may not win any city planning or beautification awards like Warner Center, but I think it's a lot better and friendlier than Woodland Hills."

The Sun Valley of California wasn't always Sun Valley.

Local historians say the area was known as Roberts in the early 1900s, several years after Southern Pacific built a railroad through town.

Maurice Ratner, 81, a real estate agent who moved to the area in 1914 with his parents and 15 siblings, said the community was mostly attractive, rural space with a scattered population. But even then gravel mining had already begun in the middle of town.

Several years later--no one is sure of the exact date--the community was renamed Roscoe. The name remained until 1948, when Roscoe residents held an election to change it.

Ratner, known now as the honorary mayor of Sun Valley, said North Los Angeles was among the names on the ballot. "We also had the name 'Paradise,' but there was already a town named that in Northern California," he said.

When the vote count was completed, Sun Valley was the winner of the name contest.

Screenwriter Evan Archerd, 34, who moved to a three-acre ranch in the Sun Valley area three years ago, said he is taken by surprise when he drives through the industrial areas.

"Sometimes I drive through town and I see all these unsightly parts that are quite near me. It bothers me, but this place is nice when you get away from the auto wrecking yards. It's the last bastion of horse country around the Valley. What this place needs is a public relations campaign which would show outsiders that there is a nice place away from the yards."

But don't start looking for any "I Love Sun Valley" bumper stickers in the immediate future.

"We don't have to toot our horn," Silver said. "We're not trying to hide from anyone, but we're not Palm Springs or Beverly Hills with an image to maintain. There's no shortage of folks moving in. In a way, we may be the best-kept secret in California. But we're satisfied."

Said Ratner: "I still think it's paradise."