

## SURROUNDINGS | HERMON

## Corner of L.A. Might Be Small, but It's Home

Overlooked Hermon still has a hold on its residents, 100 years after Methodists built it.

By BOB POOL  
Times Staff Writer

Sometimes you have to leave a place — or lose it — before you realize how much you love it.

That's the way things are in Hermon, a corner of Los Angeles that time didn't forget but just about everyone else did.

Hermon is a half-square-mile residential community tucked in a valley east of downtown Los Angeles. It is bounded by the Arroyo Seco and the Pasadena Freeway on the north, South Pasadena on the east and hilly open space on the south and west.

It was created in 1903 by Methodists who came to Los Angeles to open a church school. For the first part of its 100 years it was a gentle refuge from the stresses of the city that quietly reflected its namesake: the biblical Mt. Hermon, a sacred landmark at the Golan Heights headwaters of the River Jordan.

For the past quarter-century the 1,100-home neighborhood has continued to be a quiet refuge. But its identity disappeared, residents contend, when the community's name was hijacked.

In 1978 then-City Councilman Art Snyder renamed venerable Hermon Avenue "Via Marisol" for his 3-year-old daughter, Erin-Marisol. Not only were the street signs changed, but the freeway's Hermon exit was renamed Via Marisol as well.

Locals were outraged. But there were only about 2,500 of them at the time and their tiny number didn't carry much weight at City Hall.

When residents begged officials to at least mention the community at the Via Marisol freeway exit, Caltrans engineers complied. They added insult to injury by misspelling the name as "Herman," however.

"I'd see the name on the freeway when traffic was jammed and I was looking for an alternate route and wonder what it was," said Charles Fall, a retired state employment worker. "The

music group Herman and the Hermits."

On one of his freeway bypass commute trips, Fall drove through Hermon and was enchanted by its feeling of isolation. Fourteen years ago he purchased a hillside home there and moved in.

These days there are 3,327 people living in Hermon, according to Los Angeles planning statistics drawn from the 2000 census. And the locals are reclaiming their identity.

Five years ago residents organized to fight a planned 24-acre development on a hill at the edge of the community. In 2001 they renamed their group the Hermon Neighborhood Assn. with an eye toward putting themselves on both the political map and the road map.

Some residents were concerned last year when they thought Hermon's identity might be eroded further by a proposal to lump their community into a city-sanctioned neighborhood council that included surrounding areas such as Highland Park, Mount Washington and Monterey Hills. Gregory Rodriguez, a senior fellow with the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy institute, recounted his frustrations in an essay published 10 months ago by The Times.

"If all else fails, I'm going to lead a movement for Hermon to secede from Los Angeles," Rodriguez wrote, referring — tongue in cheek — to the then-pending San Fernando Valley secession campaign. "Small is better."

City officials have begun listening. They have erected three "Hermon" signs on streetlight poles at the edge of the community and are promising to install three more. Caltrans has corrected its spelling error with a "Hermon" sign at the Pasadena Freeway's Via Marisol offramp.

In June, the city plans to rename a sycamore-shaded recreation area that buffers Hermon's homes from the freeway as "Hermon Park in the Arroyo Seco," said Liberty Mesa, an aide to City Councilman Nick Pacheco. Residents have also learned that their tiny community may be recognized in the next edition of the Thomas Bros. Guide street map book.



Photographs by ANNE CUSACK Los Angeles Times  
**KITSCH:** Wendi Riser holds a piece of a Model T Ford from Hermon's car wall. It includes bricks from an early schoolhouse and parts from a car that is said to have been driven from the Midwest.



**TYPO:** A photo compares an old, misspelled street sign with the corrected version. The area also has suffered other oversights.

mon a reason to celebrate, said neighborhood activist Wendi Riser. Not that there hasn't always been plenty to appreciate about the community.

Riser was born in Hermon 45 years ago and has lived there all but seven years of her life. She delights in giving tours of a place with a history that encompasses 100 years — but with a geography that spans just 12 city blocks.

story to tell," she said, her arm sweeping from the Arroyo Seco riverbed to the hilltop school site where the community was launched by a church group known as the Free Methodists.

Big in the east, the Free Methodists were looking for a place in Los Angeles to establish a school when a property owner named Ralph Rogers offered them free land, recounted Riser.

Because the area was boxed in by hills and became totally iso-

lated when the Arroyo Seco flooded, Rogers was having trouble selling land. So he offered to give the church 14 acres for a school, along with 100 lots that the Free Methodists could sell to raise money to build classrooms with, Riser said.

The lots were tiny. But that was fine for members of the church, who lived modestly and on a strict budget so they could pay their children's tuition to the school. Called the Seminary, it opened in 1904 with 70 students in grades one through 12.

"A lot of the homes were kit houses. They were very small, about 800 square feet, but very sweet. They were great family homes," Riser said. "People would move out here to be near the school so their children could attend. That's what my parents did. They grew up as next-door neighbors and eventually married."

The Seminary added junior college classes in 1911. It was named Los Angeles Pacific College when it became a four-year school in 1934. Funding problems and safety issues with its aging buildings prompted it to merge with what is now Azusa Pacific University in the 1960s.

These days the Hermon campus is used for a private college-prep school called Pacific Christian on the Hill that has 130 pupils in grades six through 12.

The Free Methodist connection is still felt in the community. Streets such as Ebey, Coleman, Terrill and Redfield are named after early clergymen. For decades, the community was "dry." Deed restrictions, in fact, prohibited the sale of alcohol until after the college moved out of the community and the local grocery store obtained a liquor license.

Hermon resident Claude Watson, a lawyer and a Free Methodist, ran for U.S. vice president in 1935 and for president in 1944 and 1948 on the Prohibition Party ticket.

The six-span concrete Arroyo Seco bridge was built over the Arroyo Seco in 1926 to end Hermon's physical isolation.

The Monterey Road "pass" was cut through Walnut Hill in 1930 to connect Hermon with El Sereno. In 1939 the Hermon Avenue (now Via Marisol) bridge was built over the riverbed.

There are lesser landmarks too. Like the Model T wall — a decorative structure next to Lodge Avenue built of concrete, bricks from an early Hermon schoolhouse and parts from an old car.

The embedded wood-spoke wheels, engine pieces and chunks of rusty brakes are left over from an auto that is said to have brought an early resident to Hermon from the Midwest. But the wall is starting to crumble.

"I've gone through three city councilmen trying to get it repaired," said Charles Fall. "But my worry is that if the city does come in they'll just rip this down and put up a retaining wall."

Riser said plenty of locals are determined to see that that doesn't happen. People in Hermon know treasure when they see it.

"A lot of people are like us," she said of herself and her husband, writer Joe Riser. After stints in Indiana and Orange County, they moved back. "There are people here who have come back after being away 35 or 40 years."

To them, it's home. And it's called Hermon.

To see video of the Hermon neighborhood online, go to [www.latimes.com/surroundings](http://www.latimes.com/surroundings).