
TV

Doug McConnell of 'Bay Area Backroads' back on TV

By **Tony Bravo** | April 29, 2015 | Updated: April 29, 2015 5:30pm

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Photo: James Tensuan, Special To The Chronicle

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Andrea Mackenzie of the Santa Clara Open Space Authority speaks with Doug McConnell about Coyote Valley Park on Thursday, April 23, 2015 in Morgan Hill, Calif. McConnell is filming a new series about open space in the Bay Area.

After 16 seasons and countless miles traveled as the host of the old KRON-TV show “Bay Area Backroads,” one might ask if there’s any part of Northern California broadcaster, outdoor enthusiast and honorary state and federal park ranger Doug McConnell hasn’t explored.

“Are you kidding? It’s just staggering,” McConnell says. “It’s a receding horizon: The more I do this, the more I realize there’s stories yet to be told. We live in one of the most diverse, spectacular places on Earth culturally, ecologically and historically. It’s just endless.”

That joy found in the Bay Area’s natural world is part of what brings McConnell, 70, back to local television (and the Web) in the new series “OpenRoad,” airing Sundays on KNTV. When “Backroads” ended its run on KRON in 2009, McConnell lost neither his wanderlust nor his connection to the land. As a fourth-generation Californian (he grew up in Southern California and the Central Valley before moving to Marin County with his family in the 1980s), he knows that if he just gets in his car and drives, there’s always something new around the bend.

“There’s places we’ll revisit that we saw in ‘Backroads,’ but there’s plenty of new places on the new series,” he says. “We celebrate things as diverse as Rosie the Riveter and the national park in Richmond that tells the stories of the Kaiser Shipyards. Then we’ll do something like visit John Muir’s house in Martinez.”

He even shakes things up by visiting some of the more notorious natural landmarks in the Bay Area. “In the

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second story, we walk the San Andreas Fault in the hills of Palo Alto. Even in familiar places, there's new things to discover.”

Among the new locations that McConnell is most excited about is Morgan Hill's Coyote Valley, an expanse of undeveloped farmland at the narrowing of the Santa Clara Valley south of San Jose. Just minutes away from the traffic and congestion of the tech epicenter is a world unchanged by the innovations of the last decades.

“It was like a time machine,” McConnell says of the park, which has long been a target for South Bay developers. “One view gave you the kind of farmland you would have seen a hundred years ago, then if you looked another way, you saw what California was like before that and before European settlement. Then you realize that just on the other side of all of it was Silicon Valley.”

In a rapidly changing and growing region, part of what “OpenRoad” will highlight is the long culture of conservation and preservation that the Bay Area has heralded since the 1930s. An episode in Berkeley's Tilden Park gives McConnell a chance to tell the story of the founding of the East Bay's ever-growing expanses of protected lands, which started with the founding of the park system in the 1930s.

“In one of the most inspirational acts in the history of this county, the voters of Alameda County said, 'Let's go for it.' In the midst of the hardship of the Great Depression, they voted to create this park plan. Now, 80 years later, the East Bay Regional Park system is still growing.

“This commitment we have here to conservation and preservation is really unique in any major urban area in the nation, maybe even the world, at the scale and with the level of public support that we have here.” As the region's tech culture takes the spotlight, McConnell hopes that his new show will remind people that “we're also a hub of ecological innovation and making it accessible to everybody. People should be proud of that legacy we're leaving.”

Even at an age when many of his peers have retired (and after surviving a stroke in 2012) McConnell has no desire to stop traveling those local roads.

“My parents were backroads people. It’s a joy just to get in a car and find a story to tell. When I’m somewhere like Coyote Valley, I look around and think, 'Not a bad office.’”

In the end, McConnell remains humble about his contribution to the series.

“My role on the show is to celebrate what we’ve got and remind people it’s not here by accident, it’s here to use. I’m not the star of the show; it’s best to get out of the way of the real story.”

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OpenRoad: 6:30 p.m. Sunday on KNTV, the NBC outlet. www.openroad.tv.



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