



HERITAGE

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Major Levi Chase, El Cajon's First Booster

by G. Carroll Rice

A Budget of Background

There was no *legal* question as to the ownership of the El Cajon Valley in 1868 when the Rancho El Cajon was acquired by San Francisco/Los Angeles businessman and land speculator Isaac Lankershim. A decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1856ⁱ had confirmed that the land comprising the Rancho El Cajon was the private property of the heirs of Miguel Pedrorena. However, by 1868, the valley was populated by nearly fifty farmers who had settled here under the impression that the land was open to 'homesteading' under the provisions of legislation signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. In Los Angeles and to the north, the Land Commission, created to determine the claims of ownership of lands originally granted by the Spanish or Mexican governments were in fact valid, often found that the original grantees had no right to their properties which were re-granted to the U.S. citizens who squatted on them.

In El Cajon, the Pedrorena family had largely ignored the so-called 'squatters,' but when Isaac Lankershim purchased the Rancho, he engaged attorney Levi Chase to press his claims, ensure clear titles, and remove anyone opposing his ownership.

In spite of the Supreme Court ruling, some of the 'homesteaders' were prepared to challenge its validity in court. In response, Chase took action that resulted in the issuance of the land patentⁱⁱ by President Grant in 1876, confirming once and for all time the rights of the Pedrorenas to dispose of the property as they saw fit and legitimizing the titles of those to whom they had sold.

As a fee, paid in advance and as an incentive to clear titles and establish boundaries, Lankershim granted Chase 7,624 acres on the south side of the valley. His efforts were not only successful and skillfully performed, but in the process Major Levi Chase became an enthusiastic experimenter and promoter of agriculture in the El Cajon Valley. Many of the early records are confusing, but piecing together those that are available presents us with the story of a remarkable man.

Note: A debt of gratitude is due to Jane Kenealy and the other Archivists at the San Diego History Center. Without their expert assistance, collections and advice articles such as this would be rare.

Major Levi Chase was a newcomer to San Diego in 1868 when he was engaged by the Lankershim interests to oversee negotiations for the purchase of the Rancho El Cajon. Isaac Lankershim and Chase may have met in San Francisco the year before, but however the relationship began, his employment was the start of a career that earned him a considerable fortune and raised him to the position of the Southern California's most prominent attorney. While he is memorialized by the Chase Elementary School and Chase Avenue passing along the hills that define the southern boundaries of the El Cajon Valley, his real legacy lies in his efforts toward orderly settlement and the promotion of the valley for agriculture and commerce. His enthusiastic leadership in the development of the El Cajon Valley was just one in a long list of achievements.

Levi Chase was born in Calias, Maine in 1823, one of six children of a prominent land owner and farmer. In his twenties, he left Maine to join a brother in the business of contracting for the construction of iron railroad bridges in the State of New York, and married his first wife, Elizabeth Wheeler. When two of the railroads failed to pay, the brothers lost their contracting business, Levi felt a need to continue his education and entered the Collegiate Institute in Nunda, New York, studied law, and graduated in 1846.

Levi and Elizabeth had a son, Charles and a daughter, Charlotte, but as happened all too often in those days, he lost his wife and daughter to typhoid fever in 1848.

He began the practice of law in Louisa County, Iowa, in 1850 and married Cornelia King in 1853. In 1861, at the outbreak of the Civil War, Levi Chase formed a cavalry unit of local men and was elected Captain. Supplying their own horses, the men were mustered into the service in the Union army as part of the First Iowa Cavalry. His unit was active in the campaign against Little Rock, Arkansas where his gallant service earned him a promotion to Major in 1863. He later commanded several posts, including a remount station at Little Rock. His health, however, was unequal to the rigors of war and in 1864 and he was discharged from the service as disabled. His health broken, he was unable to continue the practice of law or engage in business. Then, like so many men of his generation, he decided to move West and make new beginnings. In 1868, he moved to San Diego, reestablished his law practice and was recognized almost immediately as a prominent member of the bar.

Soon after arriving in San Diego, he was engaged by Isaac Lankershim to deal with the Pedorena family, other agents, the settlers who claimed land, and to clear the titles on parcelsⁱⁱⁱ of the El Cajon Rancho. As his fee, he was granted 7,624 acres of land in the El Cajon Valley. In 1874, it was noted in Mrs. Hazel Sperry's excellent compilation of facts about Major Chase, that after his 'friendly partition' of the valley he was awarded 3,786 acres as his entitlement, about half of his original grant.^{iv}

In spite of frequent warnings by his colleagues in San Diego that he was wasting his money, Major Chase developed an enthusiastic interest in the development of his El Cajon Valley property. In true "gentleman farmer" fashion, while living at a beautiful home in San Diego, he had a weekend 'cottage' built on the southeast corner of today's Chase Avenue and S. Anza St. and hired managers to supervise this development of his 'Cajon Villa and Fruit Farm.' Stables, a packing house, sheds, homes for managers and a bunkhouse for the 'hands' were among the improvements. Throughout the 1880's he disposed of his unused lands at a considerable profit, and certainly invested heavily in the 'Villa.'

After reaping the profits from vast plantings of wheat, Major Chase recognized the fertility of the soil and began experimenting with new methods and cultivating equipment. Such innovations included the multi-plowshare 'gang plow' and a riding cultivator pulled by a team of six horses that 'made the dust fly.' Deeper cultivation brought richer soil to the surface and increased its potential yield. A well, with a steam-engine-operated pump enabled his experiments in dry and irrigated farming until water was available from the newly constructed San Diego Flume. Some crops, particularly the fruits and vegetables, increased with the introduction of plentiful water, while the vineyards continued to produce prize-winning raisin and table grapes without irrigation. His raisins, incidentally, were dried and packed at the ranch.

Since his property included a variety of soils and elevations (it extended into the foothills), his plantings expanded to include a variety of fruits, vegetables and grains. By 1876 105 acres had been set aside for orange and other citrus fruit trees^v. Other orchards contained peach, plum (table and prune), apple, pear, apricot and cherry trees. In adjoining areas he planted olives, quinces, loquats, and English walnuts. Except for some almond trees, all of his plantings proved successful, and his methods attracted state-wide attention.

Other local growers were certainly observers of Chase's success, making more specialized planting and developing markets for their produce. By 1889, the San Diego County Producer Union had been formed, primarily through the efforts of George Swan and J.M. Asher.

In 1890, the first carload of oranges was shipped directly from the Valley, largely from the orchards of Major Chase. His farmhands cared for the trees, picked the fruit and packed it in his own private packing house, stamped 'Put up at Cajon Villa by Major Levi Chase, San Diego.' (Earlier shipments may have been made since it was noted in an advertisement in the Great Southwest Magazine in 1890 that some El Cajon oranges had been purchased by Riverside County packers and labeled as Riverside fruit before shipment east.)

An El Cajon Agricultural Society had been formed in 1889, and while Major Chase didn't participate in its activities, he was certainly involved with the El Cajon Fairs of 1889 and 1890, and in 1891 he won a prize for his oranges. He also exhibited at the State Citrus Fair in Los Angeles in 1891.

Little mention has been made of his large plantings of vegetables. Mr. Willis Parsons, grandfather of the present president of the Historical Society was one of the managers of the ranch. Her father often told her of riding with his father to San Diego to deliver fresh fruit and vegetables to the then-new Hotel del Coronado.

In addition to his cultivation of fruits and vegetables, Major Chase continued to plant large acreages of wheat, some for grain and some for hay. His philosophy of deep plowing and the use of the mechanized equipment of the time paid off handsomely.

In addition to his activities in El Cajon, Levi Chase became one of the most well-known and wealthiest attorneys in Southern California. His specialties certainly included real estate law, and it was said that he never had taken a criminal case.

Major Chase's real estate transactions were not confined to the Chase Ranch or El Cajon. In 1874, he acquired 3,000 acres in the Lakeside area (Tract B, Rancho El Cajon) and was involved with land acquisition and sales in Coronado, Julian and the Warner Ranch.

The El Cajon Valley News reported that Major and Mrs. Chase were taking a trip around the world in 1891 and 1892. It may be assumed that his interest in his El Cajon properties was in no way diminished by his travels.

The Cajon Villa and Fruit Farm continued to thrive, even after the death of Major Chase of cancer in 1906. In 1910, his son Charles began the sale of the properties. When I was young, I was told by Montelle Springstead, of one of the older ranching families in El Cajon, that up until the time of World War I, Chase Avenue was fenced and closed on Christmas Day, an indication that the Avenue was still private property.

The influence of Major Levi Chase in the development of the El Cajon Valley was tremendous; his heartfelt dedication to his Cajon Villa and Fruit Farm experiments set agricultural patterns that would last for another 100 years. Even today, removed as we are from El Cajon's rural past, the very streets and city planning owe their origins to the surveys and land boundaries, ordered and influenced by the efforts of this remarkable man. There were, indeed, giants in those days.

¹ Thomas W. Sutherland, guardian of the four Pedrorena children, filed the claim for the Rancho El Cajon with the Land Commission, in accordance with Land Act of 1851, in 1852. It was confirmed by the Supreme Court in 1856 and Patent granted in 1876. The case is listed as: ***United States v. Thomas W. Sutherland, Guardian of Victoria, Isabel, Miguel and Helina, Minor Children of Miguel De Pedroarena Deceased***, U.S. Supreme Court, 60 U.S. 19 Howard 363 (1856)

¹ A **land patent** is a title to land which was originally acquired by a treaty. It is the only form of proof of absolute title to land in the United States of America.

¹ The "Friendly Partition" refers to the agreement between the 'homesteaders' on the land, the Pedrorena family, and the Lankershim interests to allow the District Court to determine ownership and boundaries of properties within the former Rancho El Cajon. It is assumed that proper compensations were agreed to among the parties; it is known that some parties were dispossessed. This solution to the boundary problems occupied the attention and dedication of Major Chase for seven years. The litigation ended in 1874 and the process was completed by the issuance of the land patent in 1876.

¹ Hazel Sperry, compiler, The Story of Major Levi Chase and the Chase Ranch 'Cajon Villa' in El Cajon. 1968, Manuscript in archives of the El Cajon Historical Society

¹ Elliot, Wallace W. and Co., History of San Diego County, San Francisco, 1883. (Includes comments regarding 105 acres of Major Chase's Cajon Villa and Fruit Farm, "Orange trees put out in 1876 now have from 800 to 1000 oranges on them.")

News from the Past - 1918

The little city of El Cajon, main trading center of the beautiful valley of the same name, is probably one of the smallest, if not the very smallest city in the state. It is about three-quarters of a mile square, and its inhabitants do not exceed 500.

Originally the city had a greater area, about 2 ½ miles by 2 miles square, but political disturbances within caused a rearrangement of boundaries to the lesser area, and peace has since prevailed.

El Cajon's size is no indication of its business importance, for it is a prosperous trading town, second to none in the county of San Diego. The activity of its bank and other business houses, and the appearance of Main Street, in the afternoon and evenings, and especially on Saturday, tell a story that has no chance of contradiction.

The city has the advantage of being on the state highway from San Diego to Imperial Valley and the east, and will be the junction of this highway and the new paved highway now being surveyed to Julian and the mountains, in the northeast part of the county. It has a good lighting system, and the water system, which comes from the Cuyamaca supply, is owned and operated by the municipality.

Indication that the property of the city extends also to its municipal affairs is shown by the city treasurer's report, made to the Board of Trustees at the last meeting. The treasurer showed a balance on hand of \$4847.92 more than double the amount of cash on hand at the same time two years ago, and just previous to the last election of trustees and officers.

During the term of the present board of trustees, 85 consumers have been added to the city water system and the revenue increased by \$1323. The water system, which two years ago was being operated at a dead loss, is now on a paying basis, and the trustees were able, last Monday night, to make a first payment of \$2000 to Ed Fletcher, as a part of the purchase price of the main pipe line, leaving a balance owing of less than \$4000.

The tax valuation of the city is \$2340.20, and the rate is \$1.70, which, however, includes 70 cents for a sinking fund for the purchase of the main pipe line and for the payment of the bonds of the city section of the state highway. There is money enough on hand now to pay for the cross sections at the two main corners and this work will be done when the city section of the highway to Julian is paved.

El Cajon is strongly Republican as is shown by the recent registration figures. Of 153 voters, the total of the eligible list, 106 are Republican, 96 Democrats, 5 Socialist, 1 Prohibition, 1 Progressive, and 4 have no party. This covers practically everyone in El Cajon entitled to vote as the registration is complete. The outside sections within the former city boundaries are taken in by the precincts of Meridian, Santee, and El Cajon outside.

The present trustees of the city are O. D. Imes, chairman; B. F. McKinney, John McKinnon, Mrs. L. L. Knowles and H. L. Griswold. The two last named retire at this time, and the election on Monday next will fill the vacancies. The candidates are Charles Hayden, F. R. Manning, E. A. Mueller and J. R. Ramsey. (from our archives)

Mission Statement: To gather, preserve, and protect historical records and personal publications about those living in and around the El Cajon Valley. As part of our stewardship we will promote the gathering, display and appreciation of the region's history.

\$12 - Individual

\$20 - Family

\$30 - Organization

\$40 - Business

\$500 - Lifetime Member

Mail your check to: ECHS, PO Box 1973, El Cajon CA 92022-1973

Funds are used to maintain collection, purchase supplies and equipment, upgrade building interior, print/mail newsletter, maintain insurance, pay storage fees for newspaper volumes, etc.

El Cajon Historical Society, Inc. is a 501(c) non-profit corporation.

KEEP HISTORY ALIVE! FORM ON BACK PAGE.

HELP WANTED:

Volunteers to Docent at Museum 3 hours per month. Judges and helpers, also refreshments, for essay contest. Leave message at 619.444.3800

CONDOLENCES

We were saddened by the February news that our friend and member, **John Boutilier**, passed away. John taught many years at Madison Elementary School and was fondly known by students and parents as "Mr. B."

Member and long-time resident **Viola Melvin** passed away in March. Vi was 93.

THIRD GRADE ESSAY CONTEST

It's our Centennial this year and El Cajon turns 100 on November 12, 2012. Our theme for the essay contest is the Centennial but any topic of the past is acceptable, as we know children have varying interests. The Cajon Valley Union School District is our partner - staff ensure that our written materials reach the third grade teachers, who are teaching local and pioneer history. We will be needing volunteer reader/judges and helpers at the program on June 4. Historical characters from El Cajon's past will be in attendance. Thank you to the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians for underwriting the program for a third year. Everyone is welcome to attend the 7 p.m. program at the Ronald Reagan Community Center.

GRANT APPLICATION

Once again, we have applied to the County Board of Supervisors for a Community Enhancement Grant that would allow us to pay for the rehabilitation of the interior window frames with sanding and paint. In addition, new UV film to protect the interior from the sun would be applied to glass. We hope to get good news as we only requested \$3,500.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Rosa Alcaez
Hal Wheply
Kristine M. Napora

April 23 is **World Book Night** and we will have 20 copies of *Namesake* to give to non- or light readers.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Members and Friends,

They tell me the older you get the faster the time flies. The quarterly meeting of the El Cajon Historical Society is scheduled for Thursday, April 19, 2012.

We are meeting at the Jamacha Steak House (formerly known as Jamacha Junction) at 11:30 a.m. Ken Gallo & Frank Pekarek will share information on collecting milk bottles. A reservation form is attached. Please fill it out and send in with your check. (July meeting will be box lunch and tour of Police Station.)

The month of February was highly advertised as "Museum Month" and Knox House Docents welcomed over 100 visitors during the four Saturdays we had open house. We are now open 3 Saturdays per month.

The 3rd Grade School Children, teachers and parents, have been visiting also in preparation for the Essay Awards Program that will be held June 4. The students either walk or are bussed to the museum and also visit the Weighorst Museum the same day. (One of my favorite items on the shelf in the Hoosier Cabinet in the kitchen is the Hershey Chocolate Bar. The Hershey Company is 100 years old. The children love it.)

Congratulations to Odie Goward, 2011 Citizen of the Year.

Please welcome Anita Tinsley . We are so pleased she has accepted the position of Newsletter Editor.

- Fran Hill

TIDBITS FROM THE ARCHIVES

While perusing the archive files at the Museum, the following were found.

Valley News, April 8, 1893

A.L. Knox has been awarded the contract for carrying the mails between El Cajon Heights and the village of El Cajon. He gets about \$130 per annum for the job.

Advertisement, March 17, 1894

Knox El Cajon Hotel and Livery & Feed Stable. Carriages with or without drivers to any part of the valley at reasonable rates. Having been established here for the past twenty years, I can give my patrons more reliable information and better services than any similar establishment in the Cajon Valley. A.L. Knox - Propr.

Guess Who, Guess What –



Valley News, May 12, 1894

A couple of weeks ago the swallows attempted to take possession Knox' Hotel - and began by starting numerous additions. Mr. Knox, however, met them with a shot gun injunction and kept up a pretty steady fusillade, killing as many as eleven birds at a single shot. (Good thing we're not in Capistrano!)

Headline: San Diego Union, January 1, 1909

*Where Naval Officers Engaged In Navel
Orange Battle on April 14*

(an orange fight on the Villa Caro Ranch, Col. Fletcher's property.)

from *El Cajon Valley Homelands*,
Citrus & Small Fruit Yield Per Acre
Oranges, 10 yr old trees, 750 boxes
Lemons, 10 yr old trees, 1000 boxes
Pomelos, 10 yr old trees, 750 boxes
Raisins, one and one-half tons
Strawberries, \$750-\$1000
Blackberries, \$650-\$1000
Loganberries, \$850-\$1500
Raspberries, \$250-\$750

Did you know?

1893 was the year of the Chicago World's Fair: When the first Ferris Wheel was unveiled; when the first brownie was served created by the Palmer House; AND, when El Cajon won 1st place for its raisins!

2012 – Oreo Cookies turned 100 years old.



El Cajon Historical Society Board

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MEET A NEW VOLUNTEER

Anita Tinsley

Anita recently retired from the San Diego Air Pollution Control District where she produced the District's employee newsletter. During her career, she has served as editor of more than 20 different newsletters for different organizations. She just recently visited the Museum and volunteered to be editor of our *Heritage* newsletter. Anita has lived in El Cajon near Grossmont College for many years.

Anita's stellar background includes: Editor-in-Chief: *Prime Time Living Magazine*; Editor: *San Diego Seniors Guide* and *Ideal Mobile Home Magazine*. Anita has a degree in Journalism from San Diego State University. Look for exciting changes in July.

Our 1906 portable Corona



Ans. To Guess Who, Guess What –

Mr. Harvey and Earl Langley, 1937 (photo archives)

Knox Readers History Book Club

In January when the air was nippy we met with tea and oatmeal cookies and discussed *Killing Lincoln* by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard. This fact-filled book is paced much like a modern thriller with great background of the Civil War, generals, and the dastardly men and women involved in Lincoln's death. In March, we read and discussed *Unbroken* - a story about Olympian Louis Zamperini who, though he hated to fly, became a bombardier in WWII and how he survived the war. Knox Readers meet every other month on the 2nd Wednesday, 2 pm, at the Knox House Museum. Next: May 9, *The Kitchen House*, and July 11, *One-Thousand White Women*.

Historical Research

Tuesdays are still quite busy in the Museum – though not open for tours, research projects and volunteer work continues. Volumes of the El Cajon Daily Californian are being brought out of storage for the use of researchers. Our volumes go to 1975. Once these projects are completed, the newspaper volumes will return to their slumber in storage. Available now on our research computer: El Cajon Valley News: 1899, 1909-1916; Once a Week: 1899; San Diego Advertiser: 1898; Semi Tropic Culturist: 1898.

Adoption Opportunity – would a member, or members, like to adopt the newspaper volumes and pay the \$800 annual cost for storage?

Welcome a New Volunteer – **Rosa Alcares** attended a quarterly meeting and then came to the Museum to offer her time and talents. Currently she is learning how to handle paper archives and she is shadowing docents.

Special Projects

Volunteer Mike Kaszuba is embarking on a long-term project. The goal is to photograph every artifact, room by room, and enter into a database program along with a complete description, accession and donor information. Thank you **Michelle Kaszuba** for cleaning Museum linens – they are bright white. Melissa Fazio continues scanning our photograph collection into the database. Do **you** have a project you would like to do?

Tour Guides Needed

Please consider getting involved or re-involved by leading tours of the Museum. Training provided. Only 3 hours a month is needed. Opening available on last Saturday of the month.

Historical Photos are available for purchase from the museum. Any photo owned by the San Diego Historical Society or Titor Title must be purchased from the San Diego Historical Society. Those funds go to preserve, catalogue and protect the photos.

Photo copy	\$20.00
Scan Fee	\$25.00
Research	\$38.00 per hour

Keep Checking the Website: elcajonhistory.org

In addition to posted historical articles about the El Cajon Valley, there will be essays written by third grade students who participated in the 2012 essay contest. Look on the Resource page and the Education page on elcajonhistory.org.

In order to add photos for sale on the website, we may have to revamp the entire website and go to a third party to take orders, print, and mail the photos. We are still trying to figure this out. If anyone has expertise and would like to help, please contact us.

Membership dues expired Dec. 31 – Please renew if you haven't done so.

We appreciate your membership support, helping to preserve our El Cajon History.

Knox House Museum
280 N. Magnolia Ave
P.O. Box 1973
El Cajon, CA 92022

Museum Hours:

1st, 2nd, 3rd Saturdays

11 a.m. – 2 p.m.

SAN DIEGO'S ANTIQUE MILK BOTTLES

April's meeting will bring more news about bottles than you ever wanted to know! Ken Gallo and Frank Pekarek, avid San Diego milk bottle collectors, will share about their collections and the history of milk bottles in general. Both men are members of the San Diego Antique Bottle & Collectibles Club - website: sdbottleclub.org.

To go along with this topic, our own collection will be shown, including a one-of-a-kind Stacy pint bottle. Our small bottle collection is now on display at the Museum.

Our meeting will be on **Thursday, April 19**. We begin at **11:30 a.m.** with a social time to meet and talk with friends. Then, on to eating, business and drawings, before our speakers take the podium. Donations for the opportunity drawing are always welcome.

Cost: \$15, all inclusive - that includes program, meal, beverage, dessert, tax & tip. Choice of soup or salad, fish tacos, grilled chicken sandwich or steak bites and apple cobbler.

Location - **Jamacha Steak House**, 777 Jamacha Rd. El Cajon, near Harvest Ranch Market.
To reserve your space, mail a check to ECHS, P.O. Box 1973, El Cajon CA 92022



Our Milk Bottle Collection is on display

Please Reserve My Seat at the Quarterly Meeting Luncheon – **Thursday, April 19 at 11:30 a.m.**

Number Attending _____ X \$15.00 Amt. Enclosed _____

Name _____ Phone _____

Address: _____ City _____

Email _____

Entrée Choice (**circle one**): grilled chicken sandwich fish tacos steak bites

Please renew my membership: _____

Yes, I'll bring a prize for the opportunity drawing : _____

Mail Reservation checks to: ECHS, P.O. Box 1973, El Cajon, Ca 92022 See you there!

El Cajon Historical Society
P.O. Box 1973
El Cajon, CA 92022

*Return Service
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*Exhibits:
Shards from
Corona Hotel privy
& El Cajon Milk Bottles*

MAKE AN IMPACT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

YES, I want to be a member or renew my membership.

NAME _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

CATEGORY/AMOUNT _____

\$12 Individual \$20 Family \$35 Organization \$40 Business \$500 LIFE

THIS IS A GIFT ___ YES

Mail to ECHS, P.O. Box 1973, El Cajon California 92022-1973