

A look back / The Knox Hotel was the hub of the El Cajon Valley

Ever wonder what El Cajon was like in its infancy? How streets or areas came to be named? What kinds of people were important to the early growth of the community? Anybody who has lived in the area for even a short time has probably been curious about these subjects. A new feature starts today in The Californian's Living Section to help answer those questions and instruct us a little bit about our history. The column is being presented by the El Cajon Historical Society and The Californian. The photos and artwork shown with each column are from the society's collection on display at the Knox Hotel on Magnolia and Park avenues in El Cajon. The column will appear monthly.

By Chloris Scott
of the El Cajon Historical Society

A hotel, the first post office, a home and a museum. What do these have in common?

The four diverse identities can be found in the story of the one time Knox Hotel, built in 1876, in an area that had no town or streets and very little population. That same hotel is now a city-owned museum, operated by the El Cajon Historical Society.

Who was this Amariah Knox who saw such a potential in El Cajon Valley?

Born in Maine in December 1833, Knox decided to "come west" in 1856. Leaving from Boston by ship, which sailed around the Horn, he and his shipmates arrived in San Francisco after a journey of more than 150 days. He worked in Northern California until 1869, decided that San Diego was going to be a thriving area so drove a four-horse team south.

The following year he came out to El Cajon Valley, where he made his home until his death in 1918.

During those early years in the valley he raised wheat and built a ranch house for Isaac Lankershim who had bought 30,000 of the 48,799 acre Spanish land grant, Rancho El Cajon, and was subdividing it for

resale as wheat ranches. That ranch house still stands on Trenton Street and was the home that Knox purchased after his retirement from the hotel business and in which he died in 1918.

Why build a hotel in an area that with only a few families and no semblance of a town?

Knox was sure that the teamsters, hauling gold ore and supplies between the mining town of Julian and San Diego, would like a place to sleep as they made the trip back and forth. They were already hobbling their teams here, using only a few to go into San Diego, then picking them up again on the way back up the mountains.

Started late in 1876, Knox built a seven-room, two-story wooden hotel, costing \$1,000, on 10 acres on what is now the southwest corner of Main Street and Magnolia Avenue. It had four bedrooms and was the first commercial building in El Cajon. He soon built an annex, a kitchen and area in which to serve food and drinks; he tore this down in 1882 to build a 14-room hotel addition.

The original hotel lobby became the first post office in 1878, when the entire valley had 25 families with 90 individuals, and Knox was the postmaster. He also became the county road master, keeping the road from El Cajon going to San Diego, in repair.

The hotel was also a family home for Knox married a widow, Iliia Birdseye, with two small children, Frederick and Theodora. The couple produced two children, Charles and Alice Mabel, so the family of six made its home in the hotel. The two boys both became doctors, Frederick practicing in the East and Charles in El Cajon for over 50 years. Theodora was a teacher and the wife of John Ballantyne; and Alice Mabel a nurse, at Edgewood Geriatric Hospital and working with brother Charles.

Even though the area in which Knox built his hotel was once called Knox's Corners, there is no street in El Cajon named for him. His name is found only on the hotel museum and on the Knox Auditorium of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in which the family was involved.

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EL CAJON HISTORICAL SOCIETY**



The Knox Hotel as it looked in 1887. Actually, this is the rebuilt Knox Hotel. The first was built in 1876 and soon an annex was added. The addition was torn down by Knox in 1882 to make room for a larger structure. The hotel stood at what is now the southwest corner of Main Street and Magnolia Avenue.

Historical Collection of the Insurance and Trust



Amariah Knox, who built the first hotel in El Cajon in 1876. His family has a long history of involvement in the El Cajon Valley, and he was one of the early pioneers who settled in this area because they believed in its potential.

El Cajon Historical Society photo