

EAST COUNTY STORYTELLERS

Fertile land gave rise to award-winning

Take a trip through East County, not on its roads but into its past, with tour guides who know their terrain. They are local historians with stories to share and a knack for tracing the winding, wild roots of the things around us today. Each week offers a new tale from a different part of East County.

By Eldonna Lay

Even before Amaziiah Knox came to El Cajon Valley to grow wheat in 1869, farmers and their families from "back East" and Northern Europe were arriving. What drew them was the valley's rich soil — the result of the area being under water for millennia.

Over time, ocean matter lived, sank, decomposed and eventually formed deep layers of fertile muck. With the

ocean's retreat, those layers were left open to the sun and additional nutrients from rain.

Fossils found in Southern California tell us that enough plants thrived through the next stages of Earth's development to support saber-toothed tigers, mammoths, bison and even canines before the first humans arrived. Later still, deer, mountain lions and other contemporary animals took up residence. Scientists estimate that about 14,000 years ago, American In-

dians arrived and lived on the area's natural resources.

In the mid-to late 19th century, farming was the dominant occupation for most families. In the rain-deprived West, however, newcomers had to experiment with new methods and crops. They would be aided in the latter part of the century by flume water coming from Lake Cuyamaca, but in the early years, most people dug wells to get water for irrigation.

San Diegan Maj. Levi Chase was an innovator in dry farming and regularly hosted agriculturalists and arborists from around the country at his spread along what is now Chase Avenue.

The success of fruit ranching caught the attention of Joseph Asher, who arrived in San Diego the same year that Knox came to the valley.

Asher established a nursery in Paradise Valley, east of Horton's New Town San Diego. Asher imported, planted and grew quince, apple, peach, pear and orange trees, along with varieties of flowering cactus.



This aerial shot from the 1920s of an avocado ranch along agricultural uses of knolls and hills around the valley floor used by would-be aviator Donald Gordon for his daredevil Today, the knoll is occupied by St. Kieran's Catholic Church.

In addition, Asher sold the Army the eucalyptus timber required to build barracks at H Street and Atlantic Avenue. He also built the city's first flower shop on Fifth Street. His wife operated the shop, from which early San Diegans purchased trees and garden plantings.

According to William Sullivan's 1985 article "100 Years of San Diego History" in *The Journal of San Diego History*, Asher championed San Diego's future in agriculture in a region then used primarily for cattle ranching. He also helped organize the San Diego Horticultural Society and was active in the city's agricultural fairs.

In 1885, Asher moved his wife and seven children onto a 34-acre parcel along what is now Fletcher Parkway. He paid \$1,025 in gold for the land and buildings where the Sears store stands today.

On the acreage, Asher and his family established another nursery. Many older residents still remember the odd little house and riding school that remained there for decades.

The former owner of Asher's new nursery property had already planted its boundaries with olive trees, and built a house and enclosures for cattle and horses. Asher and his sons planted part of the property with ornamental plants, rose bushes and fruit trees.

They also had a vineyard of raisin grapes. It was with those grapes that Asher's daughter, Josephine, played an important role.

Josephine had loved growing things since the age of 5, when she helped at her mother's flower shop. At 17, "Josie" was propagating roses, palms, pansies, verbenas and other ornamentals. With her skills as a horticulturist, she regularly won local and countywide recognition, but at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, she won prizes for

the superiority of her raisin grapes. The grape-drying process was critical, and the fruit was picked by teams hired from East County plantations. Workers placed grapes in slatted wooden crates and stacked them a dozen high.

At regularly set intervals, the grapes were and restacked until they were ready to be sorted and the Asher's adobe storage building. There, the fruit was sprinkled with sulfur to kill insects and allowed to dry away excess liquid.

The Asher family was only one involved in viticulture. According to research conducted from the El Cajon Horticultural Society, plantings in the area amounted to fewer than 200 acres of vines but had risen to 2,000 by 1889.