

From Raisins Grown in El Cajon to Chicago's 1892 World's Columbian Exposition

Eldonna Lay

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In 1869, the El Cajon Valley was opened to settlement. The area attracted fruit ranchers and farmers from around the world eager to begin experimenting with dry-farming agriculture. In 1876, Amaziah Knox built the first commercial building on what became Main Street and named it the Knox Hotel. The building offered rooms, dinner, and horse feed for \$1.00 a night. It also spurred growth in what had become a small village called "Knox's Corners." Stores were built, as were saloons, public bath establishments, harness repair and a forge.

The success of the ranchers and farmers caught the attention of Josephus Asher, then busy with developing Paradise Valley near the coast where he raised quince, apple, peach, pear, orange and flowering cacti. Formerly San Diego's first customs officer, Asher had made quite a name for himself by building and operating the city's first nursery and building the first flower shop - run by his wife who was "assisted" by their five-year-old daughter, Josephine. Asher organized the San Diego Horticultural Society and assisted in San Diego's first Fair in 1880. Then, turning his eyes eastward, Asher, his wife and seven children moved onto a parcel he'd bought for \$1,025 in gold coin. The orchard and nursery he started there is on the land that now holds the Sears store on the west end of Westfield shopping center on Fletcher Parkway and Johnson Avenue.

Olive trees already stood tall around the property perimeters. Also there were a house, and enclosures for cattle and horses were already there, and Asher and his sons planted the rest of the 34-acre property with fruits and ornamental plants - mostly roses. Peach trees covered 14 of the acres, pears two, and apricots one. A vineyard planted in raisin grapes sprawled over the remaining 9 acres.

The family added two greenhouses in which their teenaged daughter, Josephine, propagated and sold roses, palms, pansies, verbenas, and other ornamentals. Josie was so skilled that she regularly won county-wide recognition, but at the 1892 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, she won prizes for the superiority of her dried raisins. The raisin grapes were picked every hot September by Indians from East County reservations. They put them in slatted trays and stacked them a dozen trays high. At regularly schedule times, the workers then sorted the grapes, then took them to an adobe building where they were sweated after being sprinkled with sulfur to rebuff insects. There followed a lengthy process of drying. It was said that the family heard that the King of Siam claimed that raisins from the Asher's ranch were the best he'd ever tasted.

Children's books on Josie's birth in Old Town, living and teaching in inland mountain communities and near Tecate during the Mexican Revolution are available at \$3 apiece at Knox House settler's museum through the El Cajon Historical Society, corner of Park and Magnolia -- open most Saturdays from 12:30 - 3:15. Call ahead: (619) 444-3800.

Recognition for research is given to James H. Graves, grandson of James A. Harris, El Cajon's first mayor.

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