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The San Diego Union

Union and East County go way back — to 1

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The San Diego Union began its East County involvement in 1886, and the newspaper, which breathes its last under that title today, has been there ever since.

Even in those inaugural days, there were lemon growers in Lemon Grove and settlers in La Mesa who frowned on the *Union's* choice of El Cajon, "raisin valley" in those days, as the hub of

the backcountry.

Some suggested that the paper's interest was prompted by the purchase of extensive advertising by land developers — specifically, the Pacific Coast Land Bureau.

At least one news story in *The Union*, on March 14, 1886, confirms that suspicion: "The Pacific Coast Land Bureau will commence the auction sale of business and residence lots in the Town of El Cajon that has been laid off on a part of

the Uri Hill tract," the story said. "An advertisement of these lots appears in *The Union* this morning. Town lots in El Cajon will be sold at public auction on April 25."

And, for the record, it was apparent that El Cajon was accorded the lion's share of news coverage in the early days.

On Sept. 24, 1888, the paper noted: "A new saloon has been opened in the valley, under the management of Mr. and Mrs.

Jobs, a brand-new two-story building having been built for that purpose; El Cajon can now boast of three saloons, one general store, one drug and stationery-store, two hotels, two livery-stables, a blacksmith-shop, a meat-market, a barber-shop and a real estate office."

By Jan. 23, 1890, as *The Union* noted, outside interests, represented by "a St. Louis merchant, Mr. J.L. Ford," had discovered the val-

ley. He declared his raisins among the most beautiful

On Aug. 2 story describing put" of raisins that "hundred children will care of the valley By 1891, "p

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had it made, as *The Union* of Feb. 23 blessed it by proclaiming, "The valley is worth a trip from town."

In September 1896, *The Union* was still praising El Cajon "whose fields are fair and its people hospitable," but also worked in a mention of the "oases" of Lemon Grove and La Mesa.

New Year's Day of 1897 brought even more praise of "marvelous El Cajon, where raisins are produced, best of all; but all other products grow in amazing quantity, including lemons, oranges, pears of superb quality and tobacco as good as ever grown."

All of this praise was not falling on deaf ears. By 1899, with *The Union* proclaiming that "El Cajon Valley is the finest in San Diego County," merchants and businessmen started urging the paper to open an East County office for the

And that demand was met — some 59 years later.

The first office, for both *The Union* and its sister afternoon paper *The Tribune*, opened in July 1958 on the second floor of the Hall Building at East Main Street and Julian Avenue — six years after *The Union* first permanently assigned a reporter to cover East County.

The late Larry Freeman was named to head the El Cajon office. In addition, he wrote agricultural columns about the area, and later insisted that they were the first actual news stories produced by *Union* personnel based in East County.

However, better remembered by many East County residents are the columns of the late Frank Rhoades. Rhoades lived near the ocean, but loved the backcountry, Imperial and Mesquite

where he hunted birds, and Tijuana. He is recalled by dozens of East County residents today as "real people."

Beatrice La Force of Sky Ranch, Alpine, author of the 520-page book, "Alpine: History of A Mountain Settlement," says Rhoades visited the hardware stores, restaurants, feed stores and remote East County areas. "Other reporters just took information from the local Chambers of Commerce," she says.

The La Force family — including Bea and her late husband, J. Clayburn La Force, and their ranch — received a fair share of mention in Rhoades' column, mainly due to its involvement in local and state affairs and because of its collection of Western memorabilia, including buckboards, covered wagons and other wheeled vehicles of frontier

But Rhoades wrote more than feature stories.

One of his columns pointed out the desperate situation of Indians on a remote East County reservation because of lack of water. They had pooled what little money they had to hire a well-driller who rewarded them with a dry hole. County residents responded to the column nobly with help.

Rola Williams also is regarded as "real people" to many East County residents because he "really knows lake fishing" and manages to get that knowledge into his outdoors columns.

to support her belief: On at least two occasions in the '70s, *Union-Tribune* advertising representatives set out to meet, in person, some of the backcountry advertisers. Much later, long after dark and hopelessly lost, they called the East County Office, begging for directions back to El Cajon.

According to La Force, the challenges that backcountry residents had to surmount just to get the newspaper delivered were so great that most gave up trying.

For years, she says, *Unions* would be dumped on the main road at the clusters of mail boxes in very early mornings. If the newspapers were not rescued almost immediately, they would be ground to tatters by passing traffic. Only in "the last couple of years," she adds, "have the papers been thrown, at least, into the drives leading to homes."

To La Force, the newspaper still regards East County as "a stepchild to the city of San Diego."

As the East County Office moved from the Hall Building on Nov. 20, 1961, to its present location at 185 W. Madison Ave., the cries for more East County representation in *The Union* were more frequent.

On occasions, community meetings were called to petition that the newspaper start performing more of the duties required of one circulated throughout their area.

For numerous East County residents, *Union*-watching became a regular duty.

Two of the closest watchers were Charlotte Camp Holcomb and Granville "Granny" Martin, both of whom died last year.

Holcomb's family settled along the border in the Dulzura area when neither Mexicans nor Californians

on Jan. 11, 1991.

Martin started life as a cowboy driving herds of cattle from summer pasture in the Lagunas down to the packinghouse on the bay in San Diego. He died last Dec. 5.

Martin wrote frequent letters to *The Union*, patiently explaining the facts of life in East County and how they ought to be covered by the newspaper.

Holcomb had a love-hate relationship with the paper. She was a member, and usually president, of every backcountry organization from the Cattlemen's Association and CowBelles to 4-H, community betterment clubs and the volunteer fire department.

For years, she was the best news source available, and she loved giving information to *Union* reporters. However, she usually was disappointed because the information never appeared in print, appeared well after an event she had tried to promote was held, or was buried on back pages. Several years before her death, she sadly said she had "given up" on *The Union*.

But others have taken up her

cudgel.

"People always have expected *The San Diego Union* to be a participant, rather than a spectator," says Marilyn Murray, executive secretary of the Mother Goose Parade Association.

Sure, she adds, the paper always prints a photo of a float in the parade, but fails to cover the sale of association memberships and such other fund-raising events as the pre-parade golf tournament. "*The Union* covers but never helps," complains one parade association board member.

Not infrequently, East County reporters have felt like participating in such protests. Several times, after a particularly good story was completed, reporters eagerly awaited the East County edition were devastated by "production problems" that resulted in the Metropolitan edition being distributed to all East County readers.

But most East County residents liked *The Union's* coverage of the Great Laguna Fire of 1970, and many have saved copies of that paper. The fire burned for five days, was responsible for the deaths of eight people, and enveloped even downtown San Diego in

smoke and ashes.

Many residents, in fact *Union* both as it is and

Gordon Austin, long time secretary of the Chamber of Commerce nationalism major, says he enjoys the paper. "I like its layout, its columnist coverage," he says.

Elmer Vierkant, a mechanic has been in East County years and has been deep in the community, a past of the Mother Goose Parade and the El Cajon says *The Union* is "a very beneficial newspaper lot of reading, and I feel written for us.

Says Charles Cordell, a businessman and the pert on airports and *San Diego Union* is vital. It comes with breath starts the day by reading, who's fired, and that