

## EL CAJON: FROM EXPLORATION TO RANCHO

The arrival of Spanish Catholic missionaries at San Diego Bay in 1769 marked the beginning of recorded history in Southern California. In 1868, Isaac Lankershim purchased the El Cajón Rancho from the Pedroarena family and by 1869 the 'settler' era in the El Cajon Valley began. Records of agricultural activities and settlement in the Valley during the one hundred year period between these two events are often conflicting or totally absent. The Mission records for the first fifty years which have survived fire and neglect are particularly intriguing but usually brief and often vague. It was not laziness that caused the missionaries to neglect their journals; they were men who exhausted themselves working in the fields as well as fulfilling their perceived roles as pastors and 'fathers' to a people they thought uncivilized and in danger of hellfire.

Surely the local Kumeyaay Indians continued hunting, gathering and cultivating their traditional ground allotments until driven out by the encroachment of the white man's cattle and crops. These times are amply recorded by anthropologist Florence Shippek and discussed in the writings of Viejas Reservation Chairman Anthony Pico.

Within a month of their arrival in May 1769, Spanish soldiers were dispatched up the San Diego River valley looking for a reliable source of water. Franciscan historian, Fr. Zephyrin Englehardt, in his history of the San Diego Mission includes a letter by Fr. Juan Crespi describing the exploration of the San Diego River as 'far as the sierra' (in the vicinity of present-day Lakeside) and finding that it was largely dry. However, along the way, Fr. Crespi found 'much land and good pasture,' which he speculates would be suitable for cereal crops. The missionaries found the area so suitable, that when they decided to move the mission church from the presidio in 1774, they considered establishing it in the Lakeside area. Their suggestions were overruled by the Royal authorities, who pointed out that such a distance from the fort would preclude any hope of defense in the event of an Indian attack.

It's uncertain when the missionaries established the Rancho Santa Monica, also known as El Cajón, and what they did there. It is generally accepted that they moved livestock into the Valley and may have planted some crops. The actual location of these activities is unknown. It has been suggested that it was in the Santee area, taking advantage of the river water.

In 1821, during the transition from Spanish to Mexican rule, an inspection party conducted by a Franciscan official spent the night at the Rancho Santa Mónica. Although seeking a site for another mission "in the interior where pagans were said to be very numerous," there was no suggestion of establishing one in the El Cajón Valley. The party continued north to visit the Asistencia at Santa Ysabel where a large cattle ranch had been in operation since 1818.

It appears that ranching and agricultural work in the Valley also continued with some success until 1845. In 1826, Fr. Fernando Martin suggested that 'gentiles,' that is unbaptized Indians be given food if they will join the Christians who work at Santa Mónica and Santa Ysabel. The following year, the Mexican government requested that the missionaries state the extent of Mission lands. Their reply in December 1827 reported:

**"On the way to Santa Mónica or El Cajón are the territories called San Jacome de la Marcha and San Capistrano de Motamo. In these districts pasture the**

**horses and mules and the sheep of this Mission. Adjoining them are the rancharias of said gentiles.**

**“In the territory of Santa Mónica or El Cajón, wheat, barley, corn and beans are raised, the greater part depending on rains and the rest on irrigation from the dam. The water comes from a grove called El Chocolate, which lies below the sierra of Cuyamat. The whole tract lies five leagues from the Mission. Contiguous to it are the rancharias of the said gentiles.”**

Agricultural activities certainly continued, for in 1839 Mexican Governor Juan Batista Alvarado appointed his friend and teacher William Hartnell to make a survey of mission properties. Alvarado strongly favored secularization of the mission lands, and was probably gathering data to support a move in that direction. Hartnell stated:

**“The Rancho of Santa Mónica has a vineyard with 8,000 vines two years old and well kept. In addition it has a field planted with two and one fourth fanegas of corn and two fanegas of beans.”** (A fanega equals about 1 ½ bushel.)

This description, of course, is more tantalizing than informative. The location of the twenty acre vineyard and the fields of corn and beans are unknown, and, more importantly there is no mention of the people, probably neophytes, who tended them. There is, however, an undated scrap of paper of the period, signed by Fr. Martin, giving the population of Santa Mónica as “116 souls.” The missionaries generally referred to baptized Indians as ‘souls;’ there is no mention here of “gentiles” or “pagans.”

The break-up of the mission system was inevitable; it had been established as a *temporary* ‘civilizing,’ educating and settling instrument of the Spanish government. Both Spanish and Mexican laws decreed that when the missions were discontinued that the Indians they served would be given lands to farm, the Indians would become colonial citizens and the ‘regular’ clergy would be replaced by parish priests. There was no money, no stated plan, and no clear-cut incentive for anyone to follow those ideals.

The process of secularization, begun in 1834, quickly degenerated into chaos driven by the near-bankruptcy of the province of Alta California and the social vacuum caused by the sudden reduction in the authority and guidance of the missionaries. Many Indians who were given lands were quickly cheated out of them or lacked the skills to manage them successfully.

In an attempt to rectify the growing confusion and mollify the increasing pressure from potential land owners, the provincial assembly passed legislation authorizing the rental or sale of all mission property. Only a house for a parish priest, a church, and a few buildings were to be retained by the Catholic Church; the rest of the mission holdings were available for distribution.

Sensing the growing threat of war with the United States, Pio Pico, the last Civil Governor of Alta California, settled debts, bolstered loyalties and the supplemented the treasury by a series of sales and land grants. In 1845, he granted the nearly 49,000 acre Rancho El Cajón to Antonia Maria Estudillo de Pedroarena in payment of a stated \$500 debt owed her husband by the Mexican government.

The ranch (alternately called ‘Santa Mónica’ and ‘El Cajón’) was managed from the Pedroarena home, a large adobe house in what is now the center of Lakeside. There were other smaller buildings, too; one in the area of western Santee, and at least one north of the present El Cajon Civic Center. There were corrals for the livestock and provisions made for flocks of sheep, herds of horses and cattle and the men who tended them. As

with the other ranchos, cattle provided the ‘money crop;’ hides and tallow supplied to the ‘Boston’ traders in San Diego Bay.

There are several references to large crops and the rich soil, such as found in the report of Lt. Ariel W. Whipple, the topographical engineer who surveyed the newly established international border between Mexico and the United States. Lt. Whipple, accompanied by a company of soldiers under the command of Lt. Cave J. Coats, traveled from the San Diego Mission to the ‘Rancho Santa Mónica’ on September 11, 1849. His observations and spelling are retained in his description of the journey and the ranch.

**“Our route leads over steep hills, uncultivated and barren excepting a few fields of wild oats. No trees, no water in sight from the time of leaving the mission until we again strike the valley of the river of San Diego, half a mile from Santa Mónica, the rancheria of Don Miguel de Pederina, now occupied by his father-in-law, the prefect of San Diego, Don Jose Antonio Estudillo. The hill-tops are white with coarse quartzose granite, but as we approached the rancho of Don Miguel the foliage of the trees that fringe the Rio San Diego formed an agreeable relief to the landscape. Here the river contains a little running water; but before it reaches the mission it disappears from the surface, and at San Diego is two feet below the bed of micaceous sand. Maize, wheat, barley, vegetables, melons, grapes, and other fruits, are now produced upon this ranch in abundance. With irrigation the soil and climate are suitable for the cultivation of most of the productions of the globe. But the mansion houses of such great estates in California are wretched dwellings, with mud walls and thatched roofs. The well-trodden earth forms the floor; and, although wealth abounds with many luxuries, few of the conveniences and comforts of life seem known. From fifty to one hundred Indians are employed on this ranch in cultivating the soil, doing the menial household service, attending the flocks and herds. Their pay is a mere trifle, and Sundays are allowed to them for holiday amusements – attending mass, riding, gaming, drinking.”**

Miguel Pedroarena died in 1850 and his wife died in 1851, but their heirs continued to operate the Rancho El Cajon until after the American Civil War.

When the Pedroarenas offered the Rancho for sale in the late 1860’s, the ultimate purchaser was Isaac Lankershim, a San Francisco businessman and entrepreneur looking to expand a huge wheat-growing and shipping consortium operating out of Los Angeles. With this purchase, settlement began; and the astute men Mr. Lankershim hired to manage his purchase set the course for the El Cajon Valley’s next 100 years and beyond.

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