

Our valley: 'You've come a long way'

By Chloris Scott

Guest Columnist

"You've come a long way, baby."

Most people probably recognize those words and associate them with a well-publicized cigarette commercial, but it also can be said about the area where many of us live.

El Cajon Valley no longer has the same look of 300 years ago when early residents, the Indians, camped here as they migrated back and forth from the mountains to the sea coast.

Then the valley was known as Amut-Tar-Tu (level ground center). Grass covered the valley floor. There were no roads, only paths made by the Indians; no buildings, only temporary shelters they might have made for short stays in the valley; no crowding or loud noises. The area was free to all.

The Spanish padres named the valley the Vale of Santa Monica, honoring a patron saint, when they explored it after 1776 when San Diego Mission was founded by Father Junipero Serra. It later became a grazing area for mission cattle and some crops were planted. Some of the valley's earliest grape vines were started by the padres.

It was El Cajon Rancho when the Mexican government took the land away from the control of the church and gave it, in 1845, to Maria Antonio Estudillo de Pedrorena. The grant of 11 square Spanish leagues, nearly 49,000 acres, was made my Mexican Gov. Pio Pico in payment for a \$500 debt owed to her and her husband, Don Miguel Pedrorena.

The area involved included all of what is now the cities of El Cajon and Santee plus Johnstown, Glenview, Lakeside and part of Grossmont. If you do a little arithmetic, you'll find that the Pedrorenas obtained land valued at just over one cent per acre.

The price of land was higher when Isaac Lankershim of San Francisco bought the major portion of El Cajon Rancho in 1868. He's supposed to have paid \$27,000 for 7,000 acres, plus \$1 an acre for the balance. The total purchase price was \$64,000.

However, clear title to the land had to be obtained from the U.S. government since

MY OPINION



Chloris Scott is a longtime El Cajon Valley resident and has developed a keen interest in its history through her association with the El Cajon Historical Society. The building that is home for the El Cajon Girls' Club, which she served as executive director for a number of years, was dedicated in her honor.

California was now a state. It took Lankershim's lawyer, Major Levi Chase, seven years before clear title was obtained. Chase's payment, instead of cash, was a gift of 7,600 acres on the south side of El Cajon Valley.

Lankershim planned to subdivide this acreage into wheat ranches. Amaziah Knox was hired in 1869 to build a ranch house, still standing on Trenton Street, and supervise the planting of wheat. It is said his payment was a 10-acre plot, now the southwest corner of Main and Magnolia. Here he built a seven-room, two-story hotel, started late in 1876, as a stopping place for teamsters hauling gold ore and supplies between Julian and San Diego. This frame building cost \$1,000.

There aren't many such buildings that can be constructed for that price today.

That first commercial building built in El Cajon, in an area once known as Knox's Corners, is now the Knox Hotel Museum, owned by the City of El Cajon and operated by the El Cajon Historical Society. Now situated at Park and Magnolia avenues, it is open for public visits the first and third Saturdays of each month from 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The second edition of The El Cajon Valley News (now The Daily Californian) was published March 19, 1892. W.H. Somers, the editor, was also a horticulturist and sold real estate. On the front page of the eight-page

second edition (six pages were in the March 12 first edition) Somers offered for sale several real estate bargains.

One offering was 391 acres in the heart of the valley, with 142 acres of fine bearing vineyard, large orchard of choice fruits including several hundred large olive trees, large packing house and one of the oldest raisin vineyards in San Diego County. Price reduced from \$225 to \$150 an acre.

If you wanted to own 8½ acres adjoining the village of El Cajon, all improved with house, large barn and orchard for only \$4,000, then you would have a real bargain.

One early land purchase, which stayed in the family for more than 70 years, was the seven acres on East Main Street that W.D. Hall and Charles Kessler bought in 1897 for \$60, with plans to start a lumber yard.

Six years later Hall bought out his partner. The land and business stayed in the Hall family until 1971 when those seven acres, plus four belonging to other people, were bought for \$1.3 million for today's Superblock.

W.D. Hall wouldn't recognize his Main Street property, now occupied by the East County Performing Arts Center. And what else is on that 11 acres? A six-story city administration building, city council chamber, a senior citizen high-rise and a county regional center, now under construction.

Another site that wouldn't be recognized by a former owner is a portion of today's Parkway Plaza. Josephus Asher, San Diego's first nurseryman and a promoter of the first county fair, bought 34 acres for \$1,025.55 in gold coins in 1878 from R.G. Clark. Asher's family lived in a house on land now occupied by Sears, and grew nursery stock along what is Johnson Avenue now paved to provide shopping center parking.

Yes, the City of El Cajon has come a long way from a grassy area, from a few scattered farms to a metropolitan area filled with 73,000 people and a busy industrial center. Early residents would react in amazement to the growth and price if they could return. Yes, we've "come a long way, baby."