

Colorful History of Early Days Found In Story of Valley's First Settlers

By W. S. Head

There are a number of persons in El Cajon Valley today, who are properly described as "pioneers." They are long time residents of the Valley and Mountain Empire, but in most cases they have come to the Valley from other parts of the country.

In the case of Mrs. Julia Flinn de Frate we find a 2nd generation descendant of the first white family that settled within the El Cajon area, the Jesse Julian Ames family. She was born at the Los Coches (koh-chays) rancho nearly 75 years ago.

Mrs. de Frate has a memory that dips back into 70 some years ago and recalls with delightful clarity, the early life of this historically rich land.

Mrs. de Frate has spent very nearly her entire life within San Diego County. For more than 50 years she taught history in County schools, both grammar and high school.

The first school in which she taught in about 1900, was on the Colorado River in the small mining town of Picacho, which at that time was a part of San Diego County. Her first class consisted of 72 pupils, of whom only five were white children. She was asked to teach in Spanish by the student's parents. However, she decided on English, in favor of the rapid expansion of its use.

Now retired from active teaching, Mrs. de Frate is spending her time writing books telling the story of the Los Coches and Flynn Springs. She recently published her first book, "This Was Yesterday." Although privately published, it has been in heavy demand. Copies are still available through Mrs. de Frate.

According to Mrs. de Frate, the story of Julian Ames' settling on the Los Coches rancho began nearly 100 years ago.

The story begins in about 1820, when Jessie Wilbur Ames went from his home in Plainsfield, Connecticut, to ship as a member of a sailing vessel's crew, bound for distant California. Here, Ames met and fell in love with the 16 year old daughter of the Commandant, Perfecta.

Commandant Don Espinosa opposed the match until April 1838, when he at last gave consent provided Ames was converted into the

PIONEER



Mrs. Julia Flinn de Frate, granddaughter of the first white settler Captain Jesse Julian Ames, tells her grand daughters many fascinating stories of the old Los Coches Rancho. 75 year old Mrs. de Frate only recently retired after more than 50 years of teaching in San Diego public schools.

Roman Catholic Apostolic Church. This event was recorded at Mission San Diego de Alcalá. The once Protestant Jesse Wilbur Ames was baptised Jesse Julian Ames. Perfecta and Julian were married shortly thereafter.

The new family lived at Rosario, Mexico, where Ames engaged in hunting otter for their pelts, a most profitable business at that time. Here the couple's first child was born. Shortly, after this, hostilities broke out between the United States and Mexico. Ames packed up his family and hastened to San Diego. He enlisted with the American volunteers under the command of Captain Alexander Bell. Ames was awarded commendations for his services.

At the termination of the war, Ames settled in old San Diego, which then was a sleepy little adobe village, huddled at the foot of Presidio Hill.

Ames went into the blacksmith

trade, putting up his own shop.

Perhaps the most important feat of his blacksmithing career was the construction of the first spoked-wheel wagon seen in the Southwest. Where ever he would take the wagon, he would be surrounded by a cluster of curious people who had never known any other vehicle than the carretas, clumsy cart with wooden axel and wheels cut from the cross sections of large trees. Often one could hear the groans and squeeks of these wheels for more than a mile.

Julian Ames is credited with building the first all wooden, two story house in Old Town. It was located two blocks from the Plaza on Garden Street, now known as San Diego Boulevard.

Julian Ames served as a San Diego City trustee in the years 1853, '55, and '59.

As the years passed and the army pulled their troops from the area, San Diego ceased to prosper. It became a serious problem for Ames to earn enough money to support his eight children. Instead of being satisfied to go broke in town, Ames decided on a new start. He sold his home, blacksmith shop, and all of his possessions with the exception of his famous wagon, a few tools, and a good four horse team, and set out for the "back country." He headed for the 28 acres of the abandoned Los Coches Rancho.

Ames was 56 years old (1859) when he took his family into the Los Coches. Within a short time he became a good friend of the Indians. This friendship proved a big help to Ames. They helped him in nearly every venture he attempted.

Ames constructed a hut from trees, reeds, and brush for his family, and provided a door made from cured cow hide. The children of the family gathered acorns from under the oak trees, and gathered wild grapes and berries for fresh fruit, and ate the roots and bulbs that the Indian taught them were palatable. Wild game was plentiful.

With the help of his Indian friends, Ames constructed an adobe house with several rooms, and a large lean-to kitchen. To protect his home and gardens, Ames planted a double fence of cactus, parts of which are still visible. Next there came a barn,

and a workshop.

When the house was complete, Ames constructed a mill for grinding wheat and corn grown in the flat lands of the Valley. The grist stones of this mill were hand-hewn from granit slabs found in the creek. Horses who trod in a never ending circle were the power.

Another strange venture which won Ames considerable prestige was in his manufacture of soap. He processed wood ashes brought to him by the Indians for miles around in order to make the lye necessary in making the soap.

Perfecta Ames, not to be outdone in winning funds for the family, made a cheese, which won wide acclaim.

driver introduced himself as Wil-

liam Flynn, and said the people in San Diego had told him to see Ames if he wished to settle in the back country, for he would know the best place. Ames showed Flynn the place once used by one of his sheep herders, Ben Cole. Flynn decided to settle there. Thus the two families became great friends as the years went by. In some cases the Ames and Flynn children were married.

Julian Ames, in 1866, met his death. He had headed for town to get a doctor for Perfecta, who was about to give birth to a child. It started to rain in torrents as he went through Spring Valley. The wagon dropped into a deep hole and became so mired in mud that the horses could not pull it. Ames climbed from the

wagon, placed his back to the wheel and lifted the wagon from the mud. As the wagon went free, the great frame of the rugged Ames crumbled to the ground, dead. The exertion of this great heave was too much for his heart.

The Rancho passed into other hands, and during the years many exaggerated stories of buried treasures in the well built, three-foot thick walls of the house brought those who hunted for this non-existent fortune. The bricks were taken apart and cast aside, until today all that remains is a mound of weathered adobe. The only possession which still is in the hands of the Ames' family is the small cemetery, which is owned by Mrs. de Frate.