

Al Miller Recalls 40 Years Of Selling El Cajon Land

By W. S. Head

To define a pioneer, we might use several definitions listed under the word in Webster's Dictionary. "Person who goes first, or does something first" or as a verb, "Prepare or open up for others."

The later definition we can easily associate with Al Miller, when we say he is the pioneer real estate man of El Cajon Valley.

There are a lot of old timers who did much for the Valley in their own particular way, but it can honestly be said that Miller did more to promote the Valley from a wide wheat field and sheep grazing range into the thriving community which it is today.

Al Miller is reputed to have been instrumental in the selling of more than 3000 pieces of property throughout the Valley during his more than 40 years in business here. A record which is crammed with satisfied customers and friends.

Miller came to California in 1887, first in Los Angeles. He was born in Kansas but was raised in Missouri. His first job in Los Angeles was a clerk-salesman for the Southern California Music Company. In 1906, the music company expanded into San Diego. Al Miller had been most successful in his trade and was rewarded by the position of manager in the new store.

COMES TO VALLEY

Miller had been in San Diego for only a very short time when he met a Mr. D. C. Collier, one of the top real estate promoters in San Diego. It didn't take much to convince Al Miller that the real opportunity in this country was real estate. His friend Collier was an expert in the business, and told Miller much of the El Cajon Valley district that was just waiting for a real salesman to come out there and make his fortune. Al took a trip out the valley one Saturday afternoon, and went back to town and resigned his position with the music company. He had left pianos for acreage, a move that lasted the rest of his life.

Miller opened his first offices in the U. S. Grant Hotel in the later part of 1906. It was here that Miller met a great number of new comers, and with the approach taught him by his friend Collier, usually by the time the late morning train left the 2nd Street station Al Miller had a prospective

customer at his side headed for the Valley.

SOLD BEAUTY

Miller's routine was well arranged. When he and the prospect arrived at the El Cajon station, there was a fine buggy from the Knox Hotel Livery Stable waiting for them. Once they were aboard the buggy, Miller settled back, telling the customer, "Have a look at El Cajon Valley, the Valley of Opportunity."

The route followed a road that went very nearly all the way around the Valley. Miller refrained from any sales talk, for he felt that the Valley would sell itself. The trip usually ended at Sally Knowles house, on North Magnolia just behind the Corona Hotel. Here Miller would treat his prospect to a real western meal consisting of a steak dinner or a stew that only Sally Knowles could make. As Miller says, "It was the best twenty-five cents I ever invested. When my customer had his stomach full of that good food, it was an easy matter to convince him of the buy I offered him."

Miller was a businessman and at the same time he was human in his dealings. One story which is told about Miller by those who know him, reveals the reason why Miller was a success.

HONESTY HIS VIRTUE

It seems that an elderly couple approached Miller, one day at his Grant Hotel office. They wanted a California ranch, possibly one with a citrus grove. That was Miller's specialty. Within the hour they were on the train headed for El Cajon to get the Miller treatment.

As always, the Knox Livery buggy was at the station. A few words from Miller, and the driver was off for the regular circuit and the silent treatment. Two hours later they arrived at Sally Knowles. Another hour later on the train back to San Diego, Miller had a down payment check on a small lemon ranch. It was a Saturday afternoon when they arrived back in town.

The following Monday morning

when Miller arrived at his office in the Grant, he found the old gentleman waiting for him.

"Mr. Miller," the old fellow started. Miller noted the red eyes and the sorrow that was in the man's face. "I am sorry, but I shall not be able to go through with that deal we made on the train last Saturday evening. I realize that I must forfeit that deposit I made. But, you see, sir, we have just received word of the death of our daughter back home. We shall leave tomorrow."

"I see," replied Miller, thoughtfully. "Those things will happen. But that is all right. I have not seen the owner of that property yet, and I have not deposited your check for the banks were closed. The owner shall never be the wiser. Here—," Miller took the contract and check from his pocket and tore it to bits. "How's that? Maybe we shall get together again."

The old gentleman was taken by surprise. He was not used to such treatment. He would not leave until Miller agreed to take five dollars to pay for the trip and meal.

It was nearly twenty years later, Miller was sitting in his office. It was in the Lyons Building on the north-east corner of Magnolia and Main Streets. A young, good looking fellow approaching him.

"Are you this Mr. Miller?" The young man handed Miller a well worn, much handled business card. Miller was amazed as he took the card. It was one of those he had in San Diego more than 20 years before.

"Why yes, Son," Miller replied, "But where in the heck did you get that card. I haven't seen one of those for more than 20 years?"

In a matter of a few moments the young man had recalled the incident of 2 decades ago. Those were my grand parents. The person who had passed away was my mother at my birth. Grandmother took care of me all of these years. She is still alive. When I said that I was coming out west she told me about El Cajon Valley. She convinced me it was where I wanted to live. She insisted that I see you and gave me this card she had kept all these years. I have a little better than \$25,000 to invest in a rancho. Can you take care of me, sir?

Yes, Miller took care of the deal. Now he sits in his study on South Orange Street he muses, "It is true. Bread cast upon the waters does return."

One of the largest deals in real estate that Al Miller handled here in the Valley was that which he did for Charles Chase, the son of the famous Major Chase. The Chase Rancho Subdivision consist-

ted of nearly 2000 acres. The best of this was the "A" tract which consisted mainly of that portion we know of today, starting at present todays Claydell Street and extended to Jamacha Road, and from Main Street to Chase Ave. This subdivision was laid out into 5 acre plots when it first started to sell. The price was \$200 to \$250 per acre.

MOLLISON TRACT

While Miller was selling the Chase Rancho tract, he was approached by a Mr. J. D. Mollison who represented a mid-western syndicate, who wished to invest in the Valley's land. There was a considerable deal worked out by Mollison and Miller. However just about the time the deal was to be closed, the syndicate suddenly went broke. Miller was thus put back into the development of the area. Oddly enough Mollison Street still

carries the name of this real estate man.

One of Al Millers' regrets was that he never joined any of El Cajon's Service Clubs. He still recalls how his old friend W. D. Hall became a member of the Rotary Club.

"You know, I never did see such a change in a man. "W. D." was a hard businessman, with no more than a mild interest in community activities. When he joined that outfit there was a complete change in the man. From that day on, "W. D." was in on all the activities. Yes, I guess I did miss out on some of the better things by not being a part of one of these service clubs."

PRICES THEN —

Miller has to smile now when he recalls the time he subdivided the area along Sunshine and Orange Streets. He remembers when he

started the price at \$250 for a lot. Before he had finished selling the last lot, they were bringing nearly \$1000 apiece.

One of Al Miller's prized possessions is a very ornate hand carved desk which sits in an honored spot of his den. The desk once belonged to the honored citizen Father Horton of San Diego. Later it went into the hands of Charles Chase who used it at his office in the San Diego Chamber of Commerce. When Chase retired from business he called Miller and asked him if he would like to have it. Miller was delighted with the gift and still uses it constantly.

Now over 80, Al Miller sits in his comfortable little study filled with pictures and scrap books telling of the many, many years he spent here in El Cajon, watching what his part has done in the development of his home town.