EL CAJON VALLEY-GENERAL PAGE 1 OF 2

A slice of history
It starts on Page 15

El Cajon Valley grew from $500 debt payment

By Del Hood
of The Daily Californian

The written record of El Cajon Valley does not begin until the arrival in 1769 of Father Junipero Serra and his hardy band of padres who founded the Mission de Alcala in what is now Mission Valley.

Sometime after that date the padres, seeking fresh pasture lands for their cattle, set out in an easterly direction and eventually caught sight of the valley floor with its lush covering of grass.

In the years that followed, the valley floor was to support as many as 25,000 cattle and provide a fertile spot for vineyards, citrus orchards, cornfields and beanstalks.

The Mexican government seized the mission lands in 1834 or thereabouts, ostensibly for the purpose of giving them back to the Indians. Instead, they were parceled out to friends, influential politicians and individuals to whom the Mexican government owed money.

One of these grants went to Dona Maria Estudillo Pedorena in 1845. It was called the El Cajon Rancho and consisted of some 48,799 acres, the land now roughly encompassing the communities of Lakeside, Santee, El Cajon, Bostonia, Johnstown, Glenview and a portion of Grossmont.

One Mexican government land grant went to Dona Maria Estudillo Pedorena in 1845. It was called the El Cajon Rancho and consisted of some 48,799 acres, the land now

One of the early arrivals who settled in El Cajon Valley was Jessie Wilbur Ames. He had encountered financial problems in San Diego, where he ran a blacksmith shop, and decided to start a new life in the back country.

The site he chose was the abandoned Los Coches Rancho. Assisted by Indians, he built an adobe house, a barn and a workshop on the 28-acre plot, becoming the first American settler in the area.

Westward expansion began to put pressure on the dons. Their vast land holdings did not necessarily assure prosperity. Don Miguel was nearly destitute when he sold a large chunk of El Cajon Rancho to a preacher, Elder Jacob Knapp, for $1 an acre.

The financial arrangements for this transaction are not too clear, but apparently Elder Knapp had to borrow the money. Eventually the property fell into the hands of Isaac Lankershim.

It was about this time that the U.S. government opened mission lands not owned by grantors of the Mexican and Spanish governments to settlement. Squatters and land-grabbers, fleeing the memories of the Civil War, moved west and began creating problems for the legal owners.

Lankershim was one of the victims. In an effort to protect his property, he hired Major Levi Chase to launch the legal battle that would evict the squatters.

Difficult fight

It was not an easy fight. Chase discovered that the 1845 land grant to the wife of Don Miguel was not recognized by the U.S. government. Only after seven years of litigation, which went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, did Lankershim gain clear title to his land.

Legal fees apparently were steep, even in those days. Lankershim turned over

From New England also came Amazial Lord Knox, who was chiefly responsibl for the founding of El Cajon as a center o commerce.

Lured to West

Aboard the clipper sailing ship "Golde Rocket," Knox and his wife left thei home in New Hampshire sometime i 1856, lured like thousands of others by th promise of a new life in the West.

The next year Mrs. Knox decided t return to her home. She and her husban said their farewells as she boarded a stag bound for Ogen, Utah — and they neve saw each other again.

After working for a time in norther California, Knox learned of San Diego – now almost 100 years old — and he cam south, only to be disappointed by what h saw.

Looking around for something better, h made his way to El Cajon Rancho and g a job as a ranch hand at $30 a month. H soon outgrew that job, leaving the ranc as foreman and accepting the challenge o guiding national telegraph lines throug the mountains to the desert.

In those days (1875-77) the road fro San Diego came through Grossmont Sum mit and dropped to the valley floo turning north at a point where Main Stre and Magnolia Avenue now intersect an stretching into the mountains to Julian where gold mining was in its prime.

Hotel site chosen

Knox observed that drivers of mul teams hauling ore from the mines ofte stopped at the corner, waiting until th next day to complete their journey to Sa Diego. It was that corner he chose as th site for his hotel.

The hotel was built in 1876. A portion o the original structure has been saved an stands serenely in Judson Park o Magnolia Avenue, one of the few lan marks preserved from El Cajon's past.

Many weary travelers were to find re and relaxation at Knox's Corner, one the early names for El Cajon.

With the hotel doing a brisk busines the nucleus of a community began to tak shape. Vineyards that had flourished du ing the time of the padres were sti thriving. By 1888 more than 3,000 acres grapes were harvested. Six years later, carloads of raisins were shipped out of the valley by the El Cajon Vineyard Co.

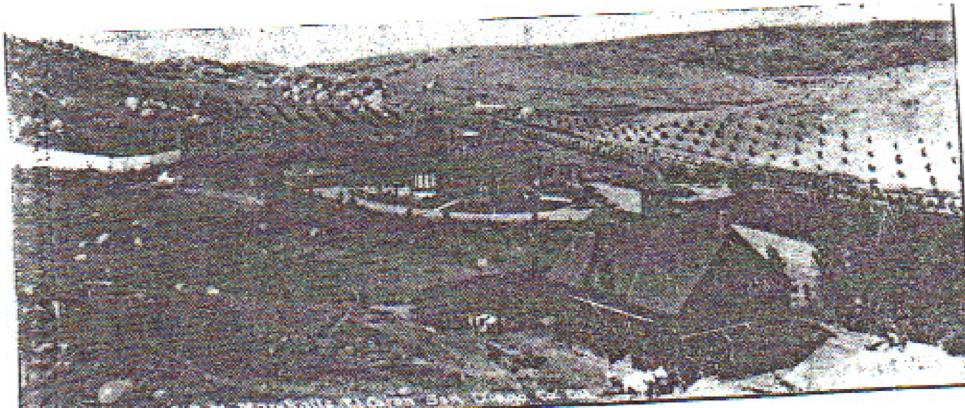
The influx of settlers to the valley wa pushed by real estate broker Al Miller who told his customers, "Have a look at E Cajon Valley, the valley of opportunity."

Bringing prospective buyers to the val ley by train, he usually treated them to meal at Sally Knowles' house, one of th "in" places to eat at the time. Miller' sales pitch and Sally Knowles' food ofte were sufficient to get the required signa tures on a sales contract. In 40 year Miller was credited with selling 3,00 parcels of property.

CHAPTER 2: 1912-1949

Small farms and acreages, separated b vast expanses of open space, character ized El Cajon Valley geography at the tur of the century.

But sufficient numbers of people ha



San Diego Historical Society — Title Insurance & Trust Collection

This 1885 photo shows S.M. Marshall's ranch.

Citrus crops flourished in the valley, and the El Cajon Citrus Association was formed in 1918, giving farmers a stronger voice through collective action.

Progress was not long in coming. By the next year El Cajon had a city engineer, and he was instructed to grade all the streets. A sprinkling cart was purchased to settle the dust. Ordinances were approved to forbid the raising of hogs near the center of the city and to keep livestock from running loose on city streets.

With progress came a new effort to enforce law and order. Horse racing on Main Street was outlawed as presenting too great a danger to women and children. The Woman's Club campaigned for stricter enforcement of liquor laws and a crackdown on rowdyism. To back up their authority, trustees asked for a rifle and 5,000 rounds of ammunition from the Board of Supervisors, the crime-fighting arsenal to be turned over to the city marshal, who was assigned a deputy paid $3 a day for 13 hours of toil.

Apparently the valley was prospering, but not the city's treasury. Owners of five-acre farms outside the city limits were netting a profit of $2,000 a year. Avocados were selling for $4 to $6 a dozen. Muscat grapes were shipped by the carload to the East, and one of the area's ostrich farms reported its yield as three crops of feathers a year.

Still, the struggling city experienced a shortage of funds. The volunteer fire department complained that it needed hose. The city engineer was dismissed to save some money.

By 1917 the population had risen form 550 when the city was started to more than 700. El Cajon had two hotels, two garages, three general stores, two drug stores, two barbershops, two harness shops, a blacksmith, a bank, a bakery, a meat market and a shoe store — virtually all the commercial enterprises needed to sustain life in those days.

The opening of Camp Kearny, a major

The war had shaken the country out of its complacency, causing increased awareness of the need for education beyond the eighth grade.

Valley residents, like other Americans, decided it was time to start a high school. The Grossmont Union High School District was formed in 1920, and two years later the cornerstone was laid for Grossmont High School, a structure that still stands, serving as a district administration center.

Post-war prosperity pushed the price of general farming land in El Cajon Valley to $100 an acre, truck gardening farms to $200 an acre. Land with standing citrus groves brought as much as $1,000 an acre or more.

Minor annoyances

There were still minor annoyances. City trustees asked the marshal to put a stop to all-night dancing in a local entertainment spot called Tin Hall. And there was a smallpox epidemic to contend with, following not far behind an influenza outbreak that had prompted the passing of an ordinance instructing people to wear masks to avoid contracting the highly contagious and often fatal illness.

In succeeding years there was new evidence of the town's growth and sophistication. The first mobile firefighting equipment, a man-powered chemical hose cart, was purchased in 1923. Rexford Hall, son of a pioneer and later to become a trustee of both the Grossmont Union High School District and Grossmont College, was appointed fire chief the next year.

The city's tax rate soared to $1.60 in 1924, the same year W.D. Hall Co. started construction on its store and office building. It was probably this high rate of taxation that started some of the townspeople grumbling about the cost of city status. Six years later, in 1930, a petition with 200 signatures requested dissolution of the city.

El Cajon survives

El Cajon survived — but just barely. Of the 392 ballots cast, 204 votes favored the status quo; 182 were for disincorporation. Six ballots were invalidated.

Strange as it may seem, some old-timers felt as early as 1929 that the valley had absorbed about all the people it could. They could not foresee the time of tract housing and postage-stamp lots.

Progress, then and now, was not univer-

Depression hits

But there were less cheerful notes, too. Valley families, like other victims of the Depression, lined up for free government flour and the Rev. Charles Richardson, who had been appointed the city's health officer, suggested that his salary be reduced.

After much controversy, the widening of Main Street in El Cajon was completed in 1935, a telephone was installed at city hall, the police chief's salary was raised by $25 a month (from $75 to $100) and the council relaxed its frugal ways long enough to authorize purchase of a moving fire siren if it cost no more than $24.

By 1940 El Cajon's population had swollen to 1,150, and the business district was three blocks long. It was still a country town, largely oriented to agriculture and the kind of quiet, unhurried life typical of small communities across the country.

World War II was to change all that. Thousands of Navy men discovered paradise while stationed in San Diego and vowed to return when the war ended. They did.

Growth anticipated

Toward the end of the war, civic leaders in El Cajon began to anticipate the surge of returning veterans and their families. They saw the need for planning — and named David Raeburn, Andrew Ballantyne, R.L. Swearingen, George Sears, Claude Kenyon, Abe Weinstock and Roger Beatty as members of a planning committee.

The war had left its mark on the community. Much of the still-vacant area of Fletcher Hills was used as a military training camp. Gillespie Field airstrip was built in 1943 and served as a Marine Corps facility for training paratroopers.

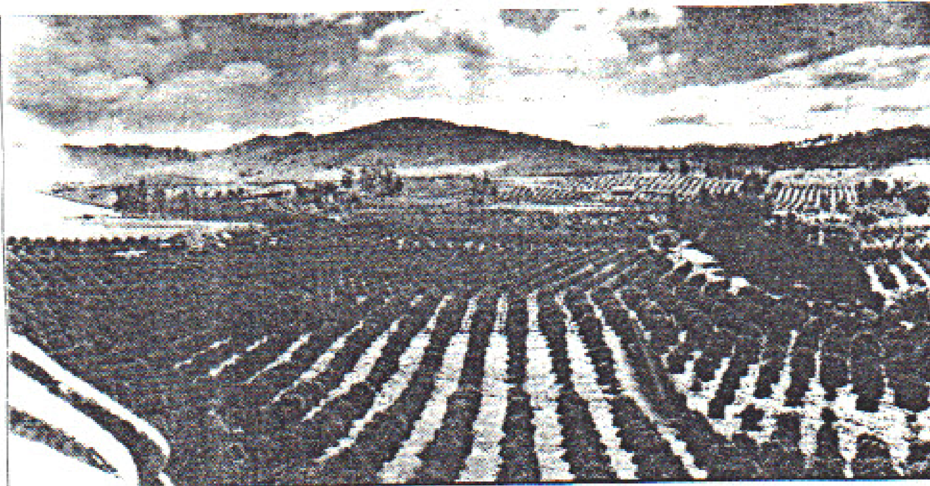
Preparing for the postwar boom, Tom Jackman conceived the idea of establishing an industrial park in the northwest part of El Cajon, which at the time was still being used as grazing land for livestock. The post office moved to larger quarters, El Cajon Theater put up a new structure to replace one that had burned and a collection was taken to build a new firehouse.

Three houses had been completed i[illegible] Fletcher Hills in 1946, an area subsequently to be annexed to El Cajon. Retail sale[illegible] climbed to $11.5 million in 1947, with th[illegible] population of the valley and environ[illegible] estimated at 12,900. Full-time fireme[illegible] were hired, and 20,000 gathered that yea[illegible] to watch the first Mother Goose Parade, [illegible] colorful spectacle that originated as a[illegible] idea in the mind of Thomas Wigton J[illegible] while he was putting on a Christma[illegible] display. In later years the parade was [illegible] attract crowds of close to a half a milli[illegible]

New government system

The problems associated with a growi[illegible] city grew too numerous for the may[illegible] council system devised in 1912. In 194[illegible] study of the city manager form of gover[illegible] ment was launched, the third paid firem[illegible]

EL CAJON VALLEY GENERAL



San Diego Historical Society — Title Insurance & Trust Collection

Fruit trees were still abundant in 1929.

In 1950, however, responding to the population pressures that were beginning to build, El Cajon got its first city manager and adopted civil service procedures for filling positions.

The old way of managing city affairs had to be abandoned, signaling the end of one era and the beginning of another.

It seemed like an appropriate time for the changeover. Fletcher Hills was becoming a prized spot for homebuilding, boasting more than 600 homes in 1951, when five years earlier there had been only three. The Sunnyslopes tract was annexed to El Cajon, and there was heady talk of blasting a tunnel through the mountains to create a low level highway that would speed products from San Diego ports to the South and beyond.

Area residents clearly were starting to think big.

A new building was built in 1952 for the city's fire department and its five-man police force, headed by Joe O'Connor, who later became San Diego County sheriff.

Plans for a new city hall were proposed the next year and in 1954 that structure, adjacent to the fire department on Douglas Avenue, was completed at a cost of $95,627.

It wasn't all roses and sunshine. As early as 1954, the city council was worrying about smog and instructed the planning commission to pay careful attention to industrial plants seeking sites in the city, making sure they did not emit excessive pollutants into the air.

The face of El Cajon changed rapidly in the 1950s. Grape vineyards and citrus groves fell before the blades of bulldozers, making room for hundreds of new families. The El Cajon Citrus Association, which had served valley farmers for 37 years, finally was forced out of business in 1955 because there were too few farmers left.

El Cajon's land mass increased by 4½ square miles with the annexation of Fletcher Hills Tract No. 2. The industrial park began to fill up, and in 1958 the building boom reached its peak when permits valued at $24.5 million were issued, including those for 2,287 homes.

Everywhere the signs of growth were

Astounding expansion

A few statistics reflect the general trends of those years. The official census listed El Cajon's population in 1950 as 5,418. By 1960 it had soared to 37,618.

Building permits issued in 1950 totaled $2,194,262, including those for 266 dwellings. In the last year of the decade, the valuation of building permits had climbed to $18.8 million, and the number of single and multiple-family dwellings built in 1959 stood at 1,141.

The city was to gain another 14,655 residents in the 1960s, pushing the 1970 population figure to 52,273. While growth continued, it was clearly nothing like the breathless pace of development that had occurred in the 1950s.

But the slower rate of building allowed some catch-up work to be done. During the 1960s, several major street-widening projects were undertaken — Broadway, Johnson Avenue, North Second Street and East Main Street.

Appeals rejected

City fathers worried about the lack of adequate drainage facilities and went to the voters three times asking for money to improve the system. Each time their appeals were rejected.

Besides, the population increase had put a heavy burden on the schools and their capacity to accommodate growing enrollments. There was a new community college to finance, one which had been started in 1961 at Monte Vista High School in Spring Valley and moved into a permanent facility in 1964.

The Grossmont Union High School District had to build its eighth high school — Santana — in Santee where many newcomers had chosen to live. Elementary schools had to be built as families with young children swarming into the area. Public-owned Grossmont Hospital was constructed.

Both to improve the tax base and to give El Cajon more prestige and a larger purpose, community leaders began to think of the city as a future regional shopping center, the major commercial hub of the East County.

A general plan

The machinery was set in motion for a idea of converting the downtown area into a mall, following the examples of several other Southern California communities. But the decision was made to follow another course.

Eighty acres had been reserved for a major shopping center at the southeast corner of Johnson Avenue and Fletcher Parkway stretching all the way to Magnolia Avenue. Acting like a magnet, development started flowing that way. The city's new police station, built on the premise that El Cajon's population eventually would reach 100,000, went up on Fletcher Parkway. The big K-Mart discount store located there, too. Sears settled on a spot where the shopping center was to go.

If the business district was moving north, what was to become of downtown El Cajon with its Spanish-style storefronts and the smaller shops bearing familiar names?

The concept evolved of a "superblock" whose purpose was to change not only the face of the center city, but also its function. Instead of trying to compete as a commercial district, it would be the home of government offices, financial institutions and specialty shops.

Parkway Plaza opens

On Oct. 3, 1972, the 80-acre shoppi[ng] center known as Parkway Plaza opene[d] providing space for more than 100 bus[i]nesses, including such giants as May C[o.] and Woolworth's — supplemented [by] Sears, which started its operation sever[al] years earlier.

Construction began in 1975 on the downtown "superblock," last year renamed E[l] Cajon Civic Center. It has as one anchor a 1,200-seat community auditorium, jointly financed by the Grossmont Community College District and the City of El Cajon and a six-story, $5 million building t[o] house city and county offices and a new city council chamber.

El Cajon has come a long way since [it] was an overnight stop for muleskinners o[n] the bone-tiring journey form the go[ld] mines of Julian to San Diego. There isn['t] much that El Cajon doesn't have. Unless, of course, some wandering padres were [to] climb to the top of a nearby hill — as t[he] first ones did two centuries ago — a[nd] expect to see below them a pasture f...