

"THE CORNERS" - EL CAJON'S FIRST SHOPPING CENTER

The Story of the Early Development of Main Street  
Compiled by Hazel Sperry  
(in about 1969)

The information for this story has been gleaned from both written sources and personal interviews. Written sources of information were: Early issues of "The El Cajon Star" (a weekly newspaper published in 1889); Early issues of "The El Cajon Valley News" - 1892 - 93 - 94 - 97 - 98 - 1911 and more recent issues with reprints of earlier accounts; Early issues of "The San Diego Union" and more recent issues with reprints of early accounts; El Cajon's "Once-A-Week" papers of 1899; Elliott's 1883 "History of San Diego and San Bernardino Counties"; Douglas Gunn's "Picturesque San Diego" - 1887; San Diego Magazine - July 1958; The Southern California Rancher - July 1957; and "History of San Diego Ranchos" by Union Title Insurance Company.

First hand information was gained from "old time residents". Also, certain bits of information written or saved by earlier members of their families were contributed. Such information was related by the following persons: Miss Kate Rea, Miss Mabel Knox, Mrs. Marian Stough Kelleher, Mrs. Roger Beatty (Leslie Stell Beatty), Mrs. Harry Hill, Mrs. Minnie Harris, Mrs. Andrew Ballantyne, Mrs. Harold Ross, Mrs. E. O. Essex (Enid Perdue Essex), Mrs. W. H. Ward, Mrs. T. L. Corey, Mrs. Josephine Asher Vacher (now deceased), Col. M. A. McFadden, Mr. Norman Hawley, Mr. Forrest Bascom, Mr. Rexford Hall, Mr. Paul Weinstock, Mr. Gail Wright and Rev. W. H. Clark.



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Before the coming of the white man into this area Indian trails had crisscrossed the El Cajon Valley as Indians passed from one hunting ground to another between the seashore and mountain areas.

Then during the period of the Missions (1769-1821) the Mission Fathers found the El Cajon Valley a natural and suitable place for some of their cattle grazing.

In 1845, at the time when large grants of land were being made to certain of the early Spanish residents in California, this area (48,799 acres) was granted to Maria Estudillo Pedrorena. It was called "Rancho El Cajon" and was used simply for cattle grazing during the Pedrorena period of ownership. (1845-1868).

In 1868, Isaac Lankershim, a San Francisco Capitalist, purchased the greater portion of Rancho El Cajon for the purpose of subdividing it into wheat ranches. He engaged the help and services of a San Diego lawyer, Major Levi Chase, in this venture. And so the year 1869 saw El Cajon Valley open for settlement and wheat fields beginning to appear. In the hill sections surrounding the Valley, bee apiaries were being started by Mr. Harbison and Mr. R. G. Clark. Soon wheat and honey were among the leading exports from San Diego County.

With San Diego being the nearest shopping center and with only "horse and buggy" transportation, El Cajon's few ranchers purchased their staple food supplies in large quantities; and each one provided his own supply of milk, eggs, fresh vegetable, etc. on his own ranch.

Although it had originally been thought that the soil and climate here would not produce much except wheat and grain, it was soon learned by experimentation that this area was ideal for most every kind of garden produce and for grapes and fruit trees. Thus with the passing of a few years the wheat fields began to shrink and the vineyards and orchards grew.

In 1877 there were twenty five white families comprising ninety individuals in the entire Valley.

Let us focus our attention now on the year 1876. That was the year in which the first place of business was established here on the main Valley floor. It was a two story seven room hotel or tavern built by Amaziah Lord Knox at a cost of \$1,000 on a ten acre plot of ground near the southwest corner of the present Main and Magnolia Streets in El Cajon. It was to serve as a stopping place for the teamsters carrying mining supplies and gold ore between Julian and San Diego.

In 1869-70 gold had been discovered near Julian and for a number of years after that there was much travel on the road between San Diego and Julian. This road passed through El Cajon Valley - coming over Grossmont Pass and down the road (now Main Street) to the present corner of Main and Magnolia. Here the road made a sharp turn north to the Santee area, then east again to Lakeside, Foster, up the old Mussey Grade (now covered by the waters of San Vicente Dam), and then on to Julian.



It was here near the corner of the present Magnolia and Main Street that the freight wagons would camp for the night while enroute to or from Julian. They referred to this location simply as "The Corners". It was here at "The Corners", too, that the teamsters hobbled some of the mules and left them in the field while they continued on their trip to San Diego. Fewer mules were needed for the trip between El Cajon and San Diego. The mules were used again on the return trip between "The Corners" and Julian.

As Amaziah Knox observed this situation he decided that it would be an ideal location for a hotel and a corral. Mr. Knox had come to El Cajon Valley in 1869 to work for Isaac Lankershim.

The hotel proved very popular with both the wagon teamsters and stage passengers. More rooms were added to the east. Too, there was the corral for the horses and mules - and a livery stable.

Very soon the hotel also served as El Cajon's first Post office when Amaziah L. Knox was appointed as El Cajon's first postmaster - a position he held for some ten years. Also his Livery Stable served the transportation needs of the community for many years.

In the 1915 era, the Knox Hotel was remodeled with a still newer addition to the east. The original seven room structure was moved further to the rear. In still later years this original seven room structure was moved by the S. H. Mathews family to 105 E. Lexington where it still stands as their residence. In 1967, the Illa M. Knox Chapter #320, Native Daughters of the Golden West placed a commemorative plaque on this historical building. The Thrifty Drug Store at 125 W. Main Street now stands on the original location of this early hotel.

In 1870 - six years before Mr. Knox built the hotel - another event of historical significance had taken place at that same location. "When El Cajon School District was formed in 1870 their first meeting place was in a squatters cottage on the site of the Knox Hotel. The name of the squatter was Hooker". This information was given to us in the year 1936 by Mrs. Herbert Chase (Della Hill). She and her brother Clayton, were two of the six pupils enrolled in the school in 1870. They had come to El Cajon Valley with their parents, Uri and Renette Hill in 1869. Between 1870 and 1878 school was held in at least two temporary locations before their first school building was erected in 1878 on North Magnolia near Park Street (where Long's Drug Store is now located).

In the year 1877-78 the John Rea family came to El Cajon and established El Cajon's first grocery and hardware store. He came here from Foster where he had been in the "bee and honey" business until the terrible drought of 1876-77 caused a complete failure of that season's honey crop all over San Diego County and much of Southern California. Here at "The Corners" he bought ten acres on the northeast corner of Main and Magnolia. He built the store right on the corner. His residence stood northeast of the store. A sketched picture of the Rea store and residence may be seen on page 180 of Elliott's 1883 History of San Bernardino and San Diego Counties.

In about 1889 John Rea sold his store to E. E. Burgess who had been appointed postmaster in December 1888, but the Rea family continued to reside here until the mid 1890's. During that time (in addition to being a deputy assessor for this area of San Diego County) John Rea was also developing a ranch in Anaheim, California. Mr. and Mrs. Rea had two daughters. They named their Anaheim ranch "The Katella Ranch" for their two girls, Kate and Ella. Katella Blvd. is now the approaching road to the entrance of Disneyland.



E. E. Burgess continued ownership of the El Cajon General Store through the 1890's. His brother John Burgess became his partner in the store and about 1899 the store took the name of John G. Burgess. Soon William Stell became associated with John G. Burgess and the store was the Stell-Burgess General Store.

Each of these men served a time as postmaster. During each of those periods of time the post office was situated in the store. E. E. Burgess was postmaster from December 15, 1888 to July 20, 1890. John G. Burgess served as postmaster from March 2, 1899 to February 23, 1906. William Stell was postmaster from 1906 to 1914. → and again from  
March 14, 1891  
to  
March 6, 1895.

During all of this sequence of ownership the old general store was at the same location - N. E. corner of Main and Magnolia. Across the street on the southeast corner stood the big old barn or warehouse for all of the hay and grain.

In the 1890's the store also housed the central switchboard for the few telephones from San Diego to El Cajon Valley. The branch offices in the Valley were at the residence of Dr. Johnson, The Boston Ranch, and the Lakeside Hotel. H. P. McKoon, president of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce had an independent line. In 1887 "three lines of telephone connected the Valley with the city".

The Burgess store maintained a delivery service. One description of this delivery service was that of a closed wagon with regular stock of groceries enclosed - pulled by two horses. The delivery man would both solicit and deliver staple groceries or supplies most often needed.

In about 1880 Duncan B. McFadden, a young man trained as a blacksmith, horse shoer and carriage maker, came from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia to El Cajon Valley. Here he "took on the job of blacksmith on the Santee Ranch in the north end of the Valley which is now Santee". In 1882 he sent back to Cape Breton for his sweetheart, Christy Morrison, and upon her arrival here they were married.

They purchased ten acres on the northside of West Main Street. The west boundary of their property was the present Chambers Street. The east boundary was just west of the present Orange Avenue where some of the row of old Eucalyptus trees still stand. Here Mr. McFadden built a three bedroom home (where the El Cajon Theater now stands - 330 W. Main Street). To the east of the house - along Main Street - he built El Cajon's first blacksmith shop. His barn, stables, and corrals were north of his blacksmith shop. The well, windmill and water storage reservoir were behind the house. "The property was planted to muscat grapes and fruit trees, hedges and shrubs".

In 1886 during a real estate boom year, Mrs. Anna S. Knowles, wife of Capt. Amos F. Knowles, purchased the ten acre northwest corner of Main and Magnolia and built the Corona Del Cajon Hotel which had forty rooms, a cupola and sky veranda.

According to an April 1954 copy of the Southern California Rancher, "the Corona Hotel figured prominently in many real estate deals in the area for its tower provided an ideal vantage point for land buyers who wished to view El Cajon Valley". Mrs. Anna Knowles was owner and manager of the hotel for about four years before selling it and moving to San Diego.

The Corona Hotel continued on for some thirty years before it was destroyed by fire. For a part of those years the management of the Corona

(The Corona Hotel burned in the Fall of the year 1920.)



Hotel was consolidated with that of the Knox Hotel.

When El Cajon's first physician, Dr. <sup>L.</sup>Derbyshire, took up residence here in the late 1880's, his office was in the Corona Hotel. Soon he started a little drug store (El Cajon's first) in order to have medicine more easily available for his patients and then he had his office in the drug store.

A few years later two doctors who divided their practices between La Mesa and El Cajon, each held office hours two days a week in the Corona Hotel.

Advertisements in the El Cajon Star newspaper (1889) show that the El Cajon Barber Shop with Hot and Cold Baths was in the Corona Hotel - and also D. S. Hubbell had a Billiard Parlor there.

After El Cajon was incorporated as a city on November 12, 1912, the first meeting of the Board of Trustees with Mr. J. A. Harris as president, was held in the City Club Room of the Corona Hotel.

In the 1920's another family by the name of Knowles (Mr. and Mrs. David Knowles) had a very popular restaurant here in El Cajon. It was called "The Knowles House".

Aside from the two hotels, the grocery and general store, and the McFadden blacksmith shop, there was little more building along Main Street until the very late 1880's and in the 1890's. (For a few years beginning in 1889 when the Cuyamaca railroad was constructed through El Cajon Heights at the west end of the Valley, a few little businesses pertaining to shipping sprung up near the railroad tracks.)

With the construction of the San Diego Flume through El Cajon Valley (1886-89) and with the completion of the Cuyamaca Railroad in 1889, real estate activities in the Valley increased; and several men engaged in real estate sales found office space near "The Corners". For many years Uri Hill (early Valley settler of 1869) had his little real estate office just east of the El Cajon Hall.

It was about 1890 when the block on the southeast corner of Main and Magnolia began to develop. Duncan McFadden whose home and blacksmith shop were on the north side of West Main Street invested in property on the South side of Main Street between Magnolia and Prescott. He developed the center section of this block. E. E. Burgess had his general store warehouse on the southeast corner of Main and Magnolia. At the other end of the block on the southwest corner of Prescott and Magnolia the two story El Cajon Hall was built. In the center section of the block Mr. McFadden built five buildings. To the west near the Burgess warehouse, he built his new blacksmith shop. To the east near the El Cajon Hall, he built a two story building with a store downstairs and a three bedroom residence upstairs - with a porch across the front - and an outside stairway. Between these two buildings he built three small connected shops.

Mr. Albert Brouwer, a druggist, moved to El Cajon in 1891, purchased the recently established Derbyshire Drug store, and occupied the downstairs store in the two story McFadden building. Later he moved his drug store to the north side of the street.

The three little shops were occupied by F. E. Garvin, the painter; I. Lindstrom, the shoe man; and Otto Brennecke, the barber who installed two bath tubs in his shop and advertised "five baths for \$1.00".



Mr. D. S. Bascom came to El Cajon about 1889. He had his meat market between McFadden's Blacksmith shop and the Burgess Warehouse. Bascoms delivered meat all over El Cajon Valley. In 1892 they were slaughtering an average of six beeves per week which increased to about fifteen beeves during the grape harvest. In 1899 the Bascom Meat Company said the meat consumption per week was about as follows: seven beeves, seven sheep, three veal, and two hogs. Bascom Meat Company served the entire Valley and La Mesa, Spring Valley, Jamacha, and Dehesa.

The El Cajon Hall (east of the two-story McFadden building) on the corner of Prescott and Main Street served as a meeting place for many groups in the 1890's. It is still standing. Since 1932 it has been the home of Weinstock's Radio and Appliance Store. Abraham Weinstock had come to El Cajon in 1919. He purchased the Charles C. Clark Grocery and Dry Goods Store which stood just a little to the west of the El Cajon Hall. Although he purchased the El Cajon Hall building in 1925, he did not move into that building until 1932.

In 1892 when the El Cajon Valley News (a weekly) was started with W. H. Somers as Editor, the news office was to the rear of the El Cajon Hall. (El Cajon's very first newspaper - a weekly - called "The El Cajon Star" was first published on May 18, 1889. The editor was Francis Whaley and his newspaper printing press was by the railroad tracks at El Cajon Heights.)

In 1906 the Home Telephone Company established an office in El Cajon and occupied the upper floor of the El Cajon Hall. There they had a switchboard and living quarters for the telephone operator. An assistant was employed to relieve the head operator for certain hours during the day or night. Mrs. Emery was one of those early operators and Marian Stough (now Mrs. Marian Stough Kelleher) was her assistant. Another early operator was Enid Ferdue (now Mrs. Enid Ferdue Essex).

In 1907 El Cajon's first bank, The Cuyamaca Bank, was organized. It occupied the lower floor of the El Cajon Hall building. In 1912 the Cuyamaca Bank moved to the southwest corner of Main and Magnolia (where one of El Cajon's three saloons had been previously located).

After the bank moved from the El Cajon Hall, the Hall next served as a meat market.

In September of 1898 great tragedy struck when the five McFadden buildings on the south side of Main Street were destroyed by fire. The fire started when the Japanese owner of a little restaurant in one of the small McFadden shops (which had then been vacated by Garvin, the painter) came home late at night and tipped over a coal oil lamp. With the fire having started in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep, and with buckets of water being the only fire fighting equipment, the buildings were a complete loss. At that time the McFaddens were living in the residence above the Drug Store. Everything was lost with the exception of a few articles that were thrown to the street from the upstairs porch - or the few that were carried down the outside stairway.

The year 1898 had spelled double tragedy for the McFadden family. Six months earlier - in March of 1898 - after a monetary depression had struck - Mr. McFadden had turned his blacksmith shop over to Mr. John McKinnon, who had been an employee of his for a number of years and who had started his own shop in 1896. At that time Mr. McFadden, with three other El Cajon men left for the Klondike, Alaska in an effort to obtain gold with which to save their properties here. Illness overtook Duncan McFadden there and he died and was buried in a cemetery at Skagway, Alaska.



In 1894 E. B. Wright had built a two-story building on the north side of Main (at 124 E. Main) with residence upstairs. He had a harness shop. One could always get the right harness, accessories, or bicycle at Wright's Shop. Later the Wright sons, Gail and Homer Wright, operated Wright's Super Service Station at 134 W. Main Street for many years. Following Mr. Wright, Mr. Adams had his harness shop in or near the Wright building and John Lindstrom's Shoe Repair and Shoe Shop was close by. Lindstrom had moved his shop to the north side. For many years J. J. Brenner had a barber shop and pool hall near the Wright building. In the late 1890's, L. H. Smith had a second hand store and repair shop across the street from the El Cajon Hall; Thomas Hancock had a Confectionery Store in the McFadden block; and Charles Balthaser was taking care of the fresh bakery goods needs of the community.

In 1897 Wilson D. Hall who had first come to El Cajon with his family, the J. P. R. Halls, in 1886, returned to El Cajon with his wife, Florence, and their two young sons, Rex and Julian. While purchasing lumber for a home from the Russ Lumber Yard which was situated down by the railroad tracks in El Cajon Heights, he learned that they wanted to sell out their entire stock of lumber. So W. D. Hall purchased the entire stock and the little building which had served as its office. He then enlisted Charles Kessler as a business partner. After purchasing land on East Main Street, they moved the little office building up from the railroad tracks and "Hall and Kessler" were in business as dealers in lumber, gasoline engines and mill work.

For several months during 1898-99 Charles Kessler also published a little weekly newspaper called "Once-a-Week". This paper was soon purchased by the El Cajon Valley News.

In 1905 W. D. Hall purchased Charles Kessler's interest in the business and since that time it has continued as W. D. Hall Co. W. D. Hall passed away in 1951 but the business carries on manned by his children and grandchildren.

The original little office building which they moved from down by the railroad tracks in 1897 has served faithfully in various capacities these many years. In 1923 when El Cajon City acquired its first mobile fire fighting equipment which was a two wheeled chemical hose cart, it was housed in that little W. D. Hall building which was altered slightly for that use. In more recent years it was sold and now serves as one of a group of buildings at the Homestead Sanitarium.

Before the turn of the century - in the area just north of the W. D. Hall property - there was a training track for race horses. El Cajon race track fans had installed it for training purposes. Most of the ranchers and business men of the Valley were interested in that outdoor sport. Nearby race tracks were at Escondido, Coronado, Pacific Beach, and National City.

In the late 1890's the Brouwer Drug Store moved to the north side of Main Street and in about 1915 Mr. Brouwer sold his drug store to Mr. Frank. In 1916 Mr. and Mrs. Harry Hill moved to El Cajon and Harry Hill purchased the drug store. In about 1921 Harry Hill moved his drug store into the newly constructed W. E. Lyons Building at the northeast corner of Main and Magnolia on the original site of the "Rea" - "Burgess"- and "Stell" general stores. Upstairs in the Lyon's Building were the offices of Dr. Charles Knox - son of Amaziah Knox, builder of El Cajon's first business building in 1876 - The Knox Hotel.

In about 1913 W. L. Grabb had a drug store at 113 W. Main Street. When the El Cajon Library was established in 1913 the library was in the drug store. That location seems to have been occupied almost continuously



by druggists. In 1932 Chet Hardin started his drug store in that building, and now for a number of years it has been the M. H. Smith Drug store.

In the 1890's - prior to the establishment of the El Cajon Library - El Cajon residents had a "Reading Room" open a few designated hours during some days of the week. It was largely the product of the local Christian Endeavor Society and its leaders. Its operation was simply a Volunteer Service.

In about 1914, Mr. Charles C. Clark bought partnership in the Stell Burgess store and it became the Stell-Clark Store. They erected a new store building across the street on the southeast corner of Main and Magnolia where the Burgess Warehouse had stood for so many years.

In 1916 C. C. Clark sold his interest in the store and bought the Rumsey Bros. Grocery and Dry Goods Store which the Rumsey's had started in about 1899 and which was located in the newer building which had replaced the McFadden store building after the big fire of 1898. In 1919 Mr. Weinstock bought this store from C. C. Clark.

John McKinnon continued to serve with his "Valley Blacksmith Shop" and with the coming of the automobile, he expanded his services to include a machine shop. In 1911 his shop became the "McKinnon - Ballantyne Shop" with Arthur and Andrew Ballantyne as partners. From 1914 to 1922 Andy Ballantyne was in business in Lakeside but in 1922 he returned to El Cajon and to his former location with the agency for Chevrolet and Buick cars and operating a garage. He served at this 131 E. Main Street location until 1956 when he moved his shop to 300 El Cajon Blvd. - down on "Automobile Row".

At 131 E. Main Street he built the new building which on February 27, 1958 was to be occupied by J. C. Penney Company who were rapidly outgrowing their location at the corner of Main and Magnolia.

Before 1947 El Cajon had been served only by local merchants with the exception of the Safeway Store which had slipped in about 1929. It was in 1947 that J. C. Penney Company, Cornet, and Thrifty Drug Store joined El Cajon merchants.

Before the coming of J. C. Penney Company in 1947 Homer Dow had occupied that southeast corner location with a Ford Garage and Ford Agency. A little later Marek Motors took over the Ford Agency.

In 1921 D. R. Raeburn purchased the Stansfield Store and soon expanded it into a department store which served the community for many years. Nearby stood the building which was to house the Seymours Store - operated by the Altshulers for some twenty five years beginning in about 1934. The building occupied by Seymours had been moved there in the early 1920's. It was that old Stell-Burgess building. It had been moved up from the corner when the Lyons building was to replace it on the corner. After being moved to its new location - 120 E. Main - it was first used as a theater. (El Cajon's very first movie shows had been held in a corrugated iron building on North Magnolia near the present location of the Southern California First National Bank). Later a theater was built at 140 S. Magnolia but it was destroyed by fire in 1945.

The story of El Cajon's Post Office, as it moved up and down Main Street in those early years, was covered in a former exhibit; but since it seems to have been so very much a part of the development of Main Street it might be well to here complete the sequence of postmasters.



In addition to the postmasters already mentioned, Mr. A. J. Derbyshire served as postmaster from July 20, 1890 to March 14, 1891. J. H. Dodson was postmaster from March 6, 1895 to March 2, 1899 and again from 1914 to 1940. Jackson C. Roether was postmaster from 1940 to 1960. It was during his period of service (1945) that the post office finally moved off Main Street and onto Magnolia Avenue. Thomas C. Smith served as postmaster in 1960 and Guy Clark in 1961. Mr. LeRoy Stewart, our present postmaster took office in November 1966.

Church activities in El Cajon followed close on the heels of the first buildings in the village. Before that, the scattered settlers traveled by horse and buggy to San Diego to attend church. For this trip it took about three hours each way. From the time El Cajon's first two room school building was constructed on North Magnolia in 1878, Sunday School services were held in the upstairs room. In 1883, El Cajon's first church - a Presbyterian Church - was organized; and their first church building was built in 1886 near the present Farragut Circle. Since it served all Protestant worshippers it was referred to as the "Community Church" for many years.

In the very early years Catholic services were held once a month in El Cajon by Father Uback from San Diego. Then when El Cajon outgrew their first two room school house on North Magnolia it was purchased by the Catholic Church and was used as their church building.

And so the life story of the building of Main Street continued to be woven - up and down the street and around and around - with more specialty shops and with additional drug stores, groceries, bakeries, garages, banks, furniture stores, restaurants, feed stores, medical and dental offices, real-estate offices, etc.

Looking back for a moment - Horse troughs and hitching posts had gradually disappeared as automobile transportation took over. Too, the "Tally Ho" which had added so much of pleasure to "party travelers" and "sight seers" slipped away. Sprinkling cans and sprinkling carts which had been used for settling the dusty road became unnecessary with the paving of the street. Gradual street widening necessitated cut-backs on store fronts and with that - arches and covered walkways appeared along the north side of Main Street between Magnolia and Julian Streets. The year 1911 had brought electricity. Gas came in 1929. The few telephone poles and fence posts which had successfully brought El Cajon's first phone service became more numerous.

At this time so very many interesting stories must be left in the ink bottle to await a later sketching.