

THE STORY OF THE URI HILL FAMILY IN EARLY EL CAJON
(By Hazel Sperry)

It was just 100 years ago (1868) that Isaac Lankershim with the aid of Major Levi Chase purchased the greater part of the large 48,000 acre Spanish Rancho El Cajon from the Pedrorena family - and soon opened it for settlement. (1869)

It was in 1869 that Uri Hill and his wife, Renette, and two children, Clayton and Della, arrived in El Cajon from Blue Earth, Minnesota to take up residence in this newly opened section of San Diego County. They established their home ranch in the area between Washington and Chase Avenues and bounded on the East by what is now Avocado; and they called their place "The Claydelle" - naming it for their children, Clayton and Della. Another son, Harry, was born here in 1875.

Life for the Uri Hills in Minnesota had been rich in Christian service - and it must be the same here. In Blue Earth, Minnesota, Uri Hill had organized a Sunday School there, and took the lead in organizing the Presbyterian Church in that town. In 1868 he attended the Presbyterian General Assembly as the delegate from Blue Earth, Minnesota.

So upon arriving here in El Cajon in this newly opened settlement, the fact that there was no school and no church here simply spelled out to them their responsibility in helping to attain these things. Hence, El Cajon School District was formed in 1870 with Uri Hill as one of the trustees. There were six pupils in attendance. Two of the pupils were their own children. In those early years, usually a teacher from the East who desired to try out California climate for a year or so would be hired, and usually the teacher boarded at the Uri Hill home.

The first meeting place for the school was in a squatter's cottage near Magnolia and Main Streets. After meeting at two or three different locations in available cottages, El Cajon built their first real school building in 1878 on N. Magnolia near the present Park Ave. It was a two room building - one room upstairs and one downstairs. School was held in the downstairs room. The upstairs room was used for meetings, etc.

Uri and Renette Hill had also started a Sunday School here. When the public school was built, the Sunday School was held in the upstairs room of the schoolhouse. Mr. Hill was Superintendent of the Sunday School and he had a record of never missing a single service for over three years.

By 1883, Uri Hill was greatly instrumental in organizing the first church in El Cajon - the Presbyterian Church, with eight charter members representing six families. The eight charter members were Uri and Renette Hill, William and Sarah Emily Flinn, Mrs. Maggie Perkins, Mrs. Illa N. Knox, Mrs. C. McPadden and Mrs. A. Clark. Rev. R.V. Dodge of San Diego officiated at the organizational meeting. Uri Hill was the Senior Ruling Elder. Church was held in the El Cajon School at first. Before the organizing of the Presbyterian Church in El Cajon, the nearest protestant church was in San Diego - a three hour drive by horse and buggy.

They built their first church building in 1886-87 on Highland Ave. - just across the street from Farragut Circle and just north of where the Episcopal Church now stands. The Uri Hills had an additional cottage which always served as a parsonage for those early ministers. In later years (about 1918) when some of the Hill family were trimming a Pepper tree in the yard of the house which had served as a parsonage, they found a silver spoon engraved with "A" embedded in the fork of the tree. The Rev. Abernathy and family had lived there from 1905 - 1910.

In 1902 the church building was destroyed by fire. Uri Hill called the Elders together and offered to exchange that church property for the property on Farragut Circle at no additional cost. And so the church was rebuilt on Farragut Circle in 1903. A church manse was built on the Circle also in 1911.

In 1903, Uri Hill passed away suddenly with a heart attack. His wife, Renette passed away in 1914. Old Timers, in reminiscing of the early days in El Cajon always remark of their beautiful dedicated lives. Too, they remember the great attention given by Renette Hill to the growing of flowers which graced the church for every occasion and meeting.

Uri Hill's occupational activities in El Cajon were varied. He was farmer, realtor, mercantile operator, and land developer. He engaged in raising grain, grapes, citrus fruits, and also in the raising of fine horses. In addition to acreage on the Valley floor, he developed land for the growing of citrus fruits in the area south of El Cajon referred to as Hillsdale. He laid one and one-half miles of pipe from the big S.D. Flume to this area "to bring Hillsdale an irrigation system to encourage the planting of citrus groves on that fine tract of land". (1892)

In 1898, he purchased the Bostonia General Store which he operated until his death in 1903.