

SCOTT MILLER'S

A look back/ Eucalyptus trees rooted in county history

Ever wonder what El Cajon was like in its infancy? How streets or areas came to be named? Who were the important people in the early growth of the community?

Anybody who has lived in the area for even a short time has probably been curious about these subjects.

This column aims to help answer those questions and instruct us a little bit about our history. It is being presented by the El Cajon Historical Society and The Daily Californian. Many of the photos and artwork shown with each column are from the society's collection on display at the Knox Hotel on Magnolia and Park avenues in El Cajon.

The feature appears monthly.

By Chloris Scott

El Cajon Historical Society

IF YOU'VE SEEN one grove of eucalyptus trees you probably wouldn't get excited about a second grove, or even a third. And if you have even one such tree in your yard you may wish you could get rid of it.

However, you may be wondering why there are stands of eucalyptus scattered in various areas of the valley and throughout the San Diego County, particularly since they aren't native to this climate.

At one time, around 1906, it was believed that wood from the eucalyptus trees would make good railroad ties. If you're in the Rancho Santa Fe area and notice the stands of trees there, they are the result of a massive planting program carried on by the Santa Fe Railroad and its subsidiary, the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company. It's said that within three years some 3 million trees were set out, from seeds and seedlings imported from Australia and New Zealand.

The idea was great, for re-forestation, but as railroad ties, the wood wouldn't hold spikes.

But eucalyptus (or blue gum, as these trees are also known) is supposed to have been introduced in to the San Diego area in 1850, soon after the American occupation of the county began. Many of the trees died, since they're not drought resistant, but there were thousands of acres planted during the years in various areas of the county.

R.G. Clark has several "firsts" to his credit. One is that he and J.S. Harbison brought 110 hives of honey bees to the area in 1869. Another is that Clark started his 230-acre Centennial Ranch, at what is now Johnson Avenue and Fletcher Parkway, in 1876, putting in the first eucalyptus in the valley and the first grapes for raisins, using a sub-irrigation system.

It was the eucalyptus grove that extended from Johnson to Magnolia avenues and owned by the Bradleys, who operated the El Cajon Riding Stables, that had to be cleared out in the 1950s and '60s for the construction of the new Interstate 8 freeway.

In a Nov. 14, 1914, news item in The El Cajon Valley News (today's Daily Californian) an account is given by Amaziah Knox, who had built El Cajon's first commercial building, a seven-room hotel, on 10-acres of what is now the southwest corner of Main and Magnolia in 1876. He said that in the spring of 1877 he went to Paradise Valley, bought a considerable planting of eucalypti, planted some on both the north and south sides of Main Street west of his hotel. He gave one tree to a Mrs. Lamb who planted it on the southwest corner of Main and Magnolia. In 1914, the board of trustees (city council) decided that tree had to be removed. John Rios had the contract. The tree was toppled northward, the only damage was breaking a few telephone wires.

A Dec. 5, 1914, item tells of an automobile getting mired in the hole left by the removal of this tree and having to be pulled out by a team of horses. It seems it had rained earlier in the week and, since the hole left by the tree's removal had been filled with loose dirt, the "rain made a bog of the place."

Harold Stell, who now lives on Eucalyptus Drive, has lived in El Cajon since his birth in 1902. He remembers a fair being held in the eucalyptus grove north of town, in the area of what is now Greenfield and Magnolia. His father, Henry Stell, would meet the train and carry fair-goers to the site.

ED FLETCHER JR., of Fletcher Hills says he helped his father, the late Col. Ed Fletcher, plant the eucalyptus trees from the present Grossmont High School to Main Street in 1906; later planting more in the Fletcher Hills area as subdividing was started in 1924.

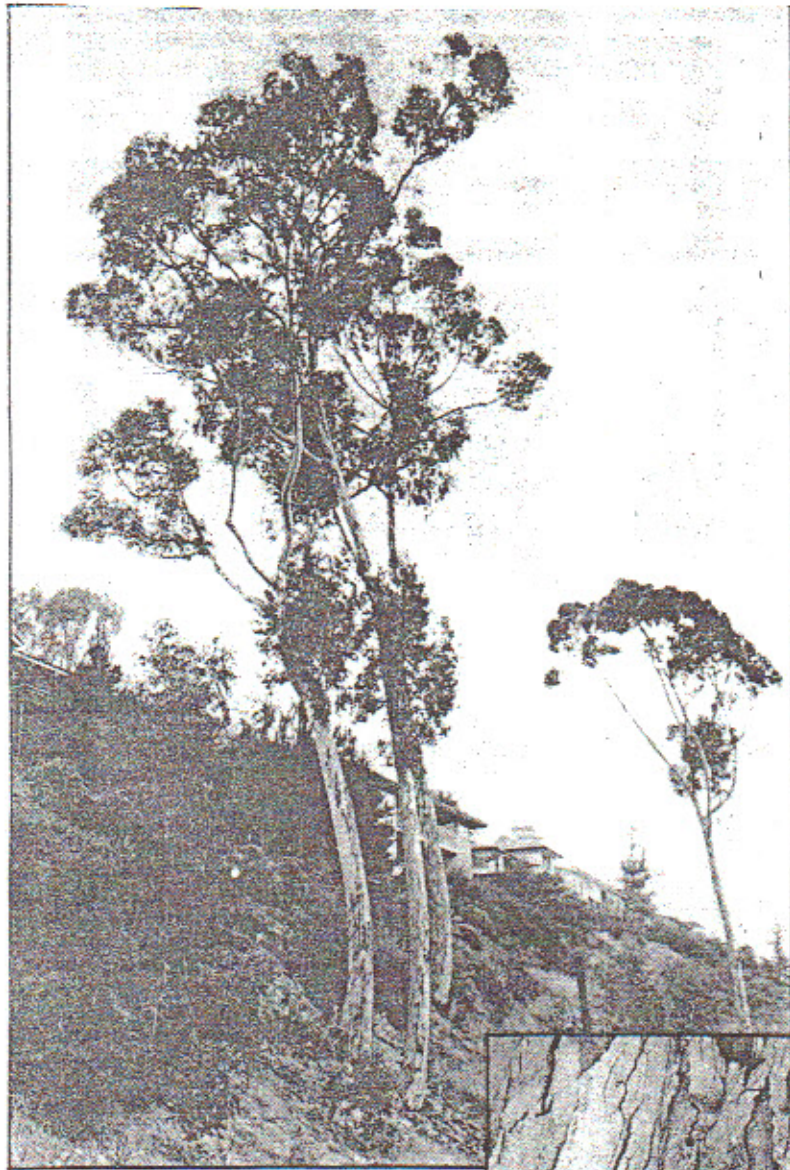
Fletcher remembers a 20-acre tract of eucalyptus on the south side of Chase Avenue, around Hardin Drive, as being full-grown when the Fletcher family owned and lived at Villa Caro, west of the grove, between 1904 and 1908. During World War II, this grove was the site of an army camp. Another grove was in the area of the present Cuyamaca School until the late '40s. Houses now occupy the sites of these two groves.

Then, there's the Nov. 22, 1929, item in The Valley News which is a "thank you" from Mrs. Alzada Snyder who wished to "express her appreciation of the promptness and efficiency of the El Cajon Fire Department in putting out the fire in the grove on the Snyder estate near Chase and Magnolia." Some of those trees are still there.

Use of trees branching out

IN THE FILES of the Knox Hotel in El Cajon is a post card from 1908, which has a picture on the

The card comes from the El Cajon Valley Improvement Club



These eucalyptus trees (top photo), on the 600 block of Travelodge Drive in El Cajon, might be some of the ones planted by the late Col Ed. Fletcher in El Cajon in the early part of this century. Acres of eucalyptus were planted in other spots of the El Cajon Valley because it was thought they would be good for railroad ties. They weren't, but became useful for timber and as ornamentals, and the intricate beauty of their trunks (photo right) is still appreciated.

John Sheppard photos/The Californian