

A look back/ Schools have come a long way.

Ever wonder what El Cajon was like in its infancy? How streets or areas came to be named? What kinds of people were important to 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 Californian. 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 will appear monthly.

By Cloris Scott

of the El Cajon Historical Society

STUDENTS AT El Cajon Valley High School and at Meridian Elementary School, as they return to their studies this week, have a right to be proud of their buildings, their campuses, their teachers and their many activities. And although they may not realize it, there were schools with the same names in existence in El Cajon before the turn of the century.

Back in the those early days of schools in El Cajon valley, each area had its own grammar school since there weren't school buses or cars to transport students to a central location. A school had to be close enough for students to walk to it, ride a horse or maybe take a horse and buggy.

Before 1890, any boy or girl in the valley who wanted an education beyond eighth grade had to take the train daily back and forth to San Diego to attend Russ High School (now San Diego High) or live in San Diego during the week to attend school.

The first El Cajon school was held in a squatter's cottage near what is now the southwest corner of Main Street and Magnolia Avenue. The school district was organized Oct. 4, 1870, with six students. The first El Cajon school house was built, 1878-1879, on the northeast corner of what is now Park and Magnolia avenues.

The Meridian School District was formed in the latter part of 1887, to accommodate children in the east end of the valley. Students met in a one-room building, about 14 feet by 20 feet, on the east side of Meridian Road (now Third Street) and north of Main Street (near the intersection of what is now Third and Naranja). The name Meridian was chosen for the school since it was located on the meridian, a term used to describe property boundaries.

Julia Kellogg was the first teacher, beginning in January 1888, at a salary of \$50 a month. She resigned in April, succeeded by T.A. Ross, who was given \$60 a month for teaching the remaining five weeks of the school term.

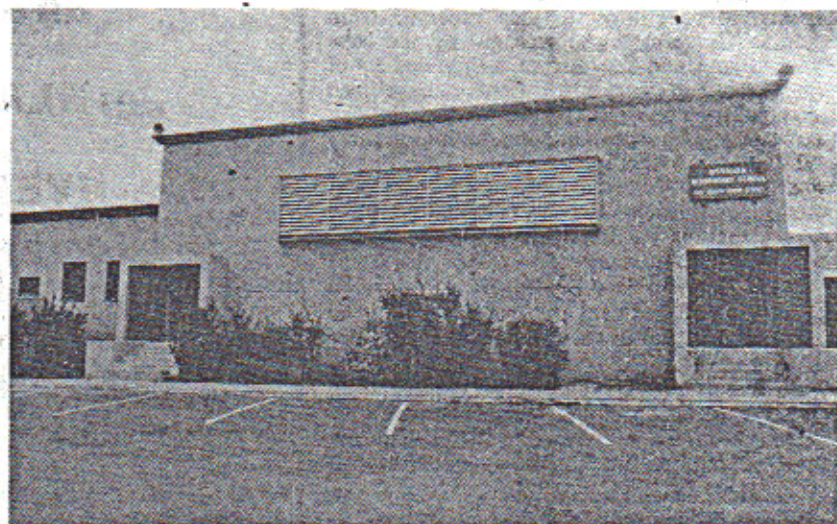
That same year, the school trustees (Meridian district had its own school board as did the El Cajon school) decided they needed a larger school since the number of students had increased, so they "voted to erect a two-story building having two rooms 30 by 40 feet with a hall and tower similar to the design of the school at Del Mar," according to publications of the day.

This new Meridian school was on the west side of Meridian, across the street from the one-room building. Thirty students attended that new two-story school in its first year, 1889.



Courtesy of El Cajon Historical Society

The original Meridian School was this structure from circa 1889. It was the first school house in El Cajon.



Joel Zwink photos/The Californian

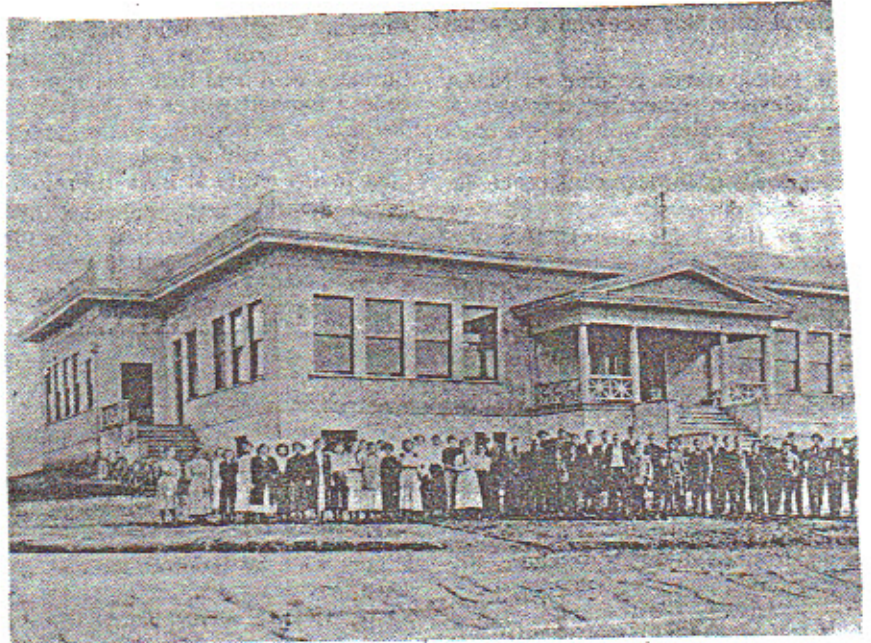
Meridian Elementary School on Third Street in El Cajon. It was built in 1949.

THE TRUSTEES finally decided, in August 1893, to use the Meridian school facilities with the high school students taking over the second floor classroom.

By 1907, a 15-acre lot at what is now Third Street and Broadway had been donated to the El Cajon Valley Union High School District by Francis B. Wilde and students took possession of a new building the following year. By 1913, a 30-by-60-foot temporary building was added because of more students.

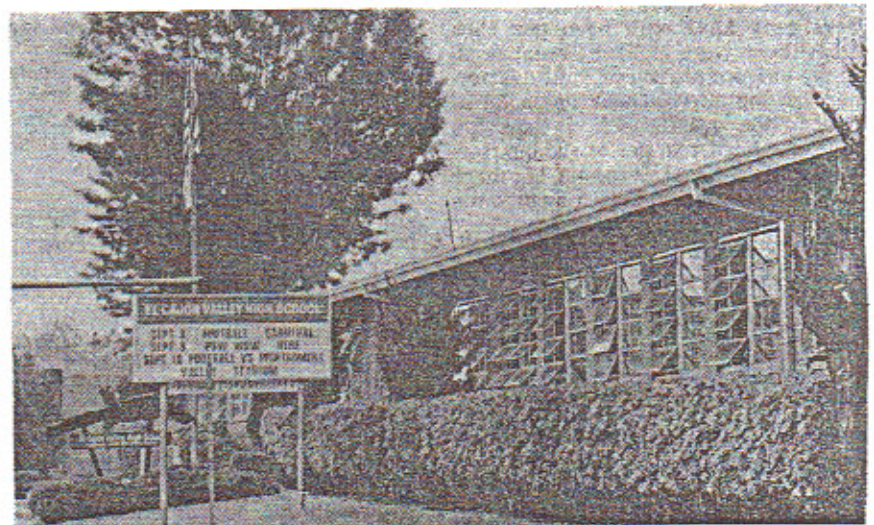
The high school was accredited by the University of California and by Leland Stanford University.

SCOTT, CLORIS



Courtesy of El Cajon Historical Society

In the early part of this century, this El Cajon Valley High School was the only high school for the entire East County.



The current campus of El Cajon Valley High School opened in 1955 and was the third high school in the Grossmont Union High School District.

assignment: senior history and civics, health education, advanced and beginning cooking and sewing, girls athletics and also managing a cafeteria serving 40 to 60 people each day: Her salary was \$99 a month. In addition, the requirements were that teachers had to live in El Cajon.

In 1920, El Cajon, Meridian, Hillsdale and Jamacha grammar school districts combined to form the El Cajon Valley Union School District with all students moved into a new building on Main Street, facing Lincoln, the following year. Grossmont Union High School District was formed and all high school students started classes there in 1921-22.

What happened to the first El Cajon High? In 1927, it was converted into the "Rainbow Gardens," a dining and dancing establishment with rainbow lighting effects. It caught fire the following year. The Third and Broadway site is still vacant.

What happened to the two-story Meridian School? The top floor was removed. Mary Wendt, who now lives in Auburn, says her husband Arnold bought a house in 1954 at 1484 Marline St. with a board and batten living room which was the school's first floor classroom. She said, when they first moved there, they didn't realize the significance of the place. At that time her husband destroyed an outhouse ("because of the smell") which was a four-holer with two doors and a wall dividing the building for use by boys and girls. She said school buses would drive slowly by the house which was pointed out as the early

The third school to carry the Meridian name was built in 1949 by El Cajon School District at Third (the same street as the first two schools) and Washington Avenue about a mile south of where the original schools stood. It was the fourth grammar school built in the newly consolidated district.

And, just for comparison, consider the attendance at yesterday's and today's Meridian and El Cajon Valley High Schools.

In 1892 Miss Neylan, the only teacher at Meridian (in fact, the entire staff), had 40 pupils in eight grades. Today there are 18 teachers at Meridian with 509 pupils in six grades, plus the principal and various other supporting staff. Also consider that Meridian is only one of El Cajon's 18 elementary schools, three junior highs, and one middle school, with a combined