A look back/Visiting historic landmarks

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?

Anyone 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. The photographs 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.

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If you're interested in local history and want to know, and visit.

The plaque wasn't ready in time for the ceremony, but a rubbing of the marker was put in place and a Bear State flag promised to fly with the American flag from the newly installed flagpole. This is to be dedicated following services on Sunday, July 5, when the church members and members of El Cajon Historical Society will join for a picnic and program on the church lawn. This will be the annual historical society's picnic honoring early residents of El Cajon and their descendants. It will also be the annual election for the society.

In their May 1 ceremony, the Native Sons used sand and gravel from all the counties of California, cement from all the state's mills and water from the early missions to make the mortar to set the plaque in place.

'Los Coches'

One of the older historical landmarks dedicated by Guamaca Parlor, Native American, and later families. Los Coches was the smallest of the land grants made during the Mexican period. Only 28.39 acres, it once was part of the large El Cajon Rancho during the Mission period. It was granted in 1845 to Apolinar Lorencana by Gov. Manuel Michillonda, and was held for the Mission when all church lands were being parcelled out to land seekers.

Long before any part of El Cajon Valley was settled by easterners, Capt. Jesse Wilbur Ames sailed into San Diego, married his Spanish sweetheart, and, in the 1850s, obtained this Los Coches ranch. He planted a double cactus fence, raised sheep and cattle, constructed a dam, erected a flour mill, and opened a blacksmith shop. The ranch was also a stop on the San Diego-San Antonio mail route, better known as the "Jackass Mail."

Ames died in 1866, leaving his widow and 10 children.

A succession of owners brought Mr. and Mrs. W.W. Wheatley to Los Coches in 1895. They were the ones who built the Windmill house for which the area is widely known and which is still occupied.

Needless to say, there's an absence of hogs.
There was no regular caretaker during many of the early years of the cemetery
except when members of El Cajon’s Cuyamaca Parlor of the Native Sons took it
upon themselves to clean up the area periodically. This was especially true
around the annual May 30 Decoration Day observance, now known as Memorial Day.
A 1965 newspaper item said that the Native Sons had been doing this cleanup for about
10 years.

The official dedication of the cemetery, and the placing of the marker, took place on
Aug. 21, 1971, with five state officials of the Native Sons, two past grand presidents and
all officers of the Cuyamaca Parlor taking part.

Wooden flume

There are some long-time residents of the valley who can remember when a wooden
flume, starting from a small dam on the San Diego River above Lakeside, crossed
hills and valleys carrying water from the Cuyamaca mountains to a reservoir in La
Mesa.

This flume, whose completion was celebrated in February 1889, traveled 35
miles, over 315 trestles and through eight tunnels to Eucalyptus Reservoir and then to
La Mesa Reservoir, now known as Murray Dam. The last remaining portion was
removed in 1937, although rights-of-way for the flume still exist.

A restored portion of the flume can be seen at the R.M. Levy Treatment Plant on
Lake Jennings Road. This was erected by Cuyamaca Parlor of the Native Sons, in
cooperation with the Helix Water District, successor to the San Diego Flume Co. Grand
President Joe Efremovitchel of the Native Sons and other state officials took part in
the Aug. 22, 1981, dedication of the historical monument at the treatment plant. John Montgomery, past president of
Cuyamaca Parlor, was master of ceremonies.

This memorial is just inside the gates of the treatment plant, can be seen from Lake
Jennings Road when the area is closed.

Bancroft House

Just over the hill, on Memory Lane in Spring Valley, is the Bancroft Ranch
House, named for its third owner, operated as a museum by the Spring Valley
Historical Society, and having three historical designations.

This adobe house was built in 1856 by native Diegueno Indians from the land on
which the house stands. The owner was Squire Augustus Ensworth, a native of
Connecticut and one of California’s first
assemblymen and a justice of the peace.
After Ensworth’s death, the ranch was
taken over in 1864 by Rufus Porter of San
Pedro who used it as a boarding house for
literary celebrities, enlarged the spring and
built the wall.

Hubert Howe Bancroft was the next
owner, taking possession in 1885, renaming
the area Spring Valley. He is best known for
the many volumes of California history
which he wrote here.

In 1940, the Spring Valley Chamber of
Commerce purchased the adobe house and
three and one-half acres. It was opened as a
museum in 1943, named after Bancroft, its
most known owner.

The house is State Historical Landmark
No. 656, proclaimed in 1958; it was made a
United States National Monument in 1964
with dedication held in May 1965, and was
dedicated by the Daughters of the
American Revolution two years ago.

Knox Hotel

There’s one historical marker in El Cajon
that you’ll need to go inside a building to
see.

This plaque was given during dedication
 ceremonies in May 1897 by Ella Knox
Parlor, Native Daughters of the Golden
West.

It was placed on the outside of what is the
oldest commercial building in El Cajon,
constructed in 1876-77, and known as the
Knox Hotel.

At the time when the plaque was
installed, the building was owned and was
the home of the S.H. Mathews family and;
located on the southeast corner of
Lexington and Magnolia avenues.

When the city bought this old seven-room
building in 1973 to preserve it and had it
moved to park land at the corner of Park
and Magnolia, the plaque was removed.

When the Knox Hotel was restored as a
historical museum and operated by the El
Cajon Historical Society for the past 10
years, the plaque was remounted on an
inside wall, along with names of those who
are life members of the society or who have
had memorial gifts given in their names.

The plaque can be viewed during the
museum’s regular visiting hours: the first
and third Saturdays from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30
p.m.; the first and third Sundays and the
first and fourth Thursdays, from 12:30 p.m.
to 3:30 p.m. Special group tours can be
arranged at other times.

These are just a few of the historical
landmarks around El Cajon. Many more
can be found throughout San Diego and the
entire county, so, when you’re out driving
and happen to see a historical marker sign
by the side of the road, why not stop and
enlarge your knowledge of county history?