Orange County Before It Was A County

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This historical keepsake and limited first edition commemorating the one hundredth year centennial anniversary of Orange County is one of twenty-five copies of which this is:

No. 4

The Author
Dedicated to:

My aunt and uncle, Marion Knott
and Anthony Burton Montapert
CHAPTER ONE

The Land

The historian might wonder and imagine what it was like in Orange County before it was organized as a county. To do so one must go back over 200 years ago to 1769 when Portola and his Expedition explored the area for the King of Spain.

The historic record of that first overland expedition from San Diego to Monterey was kept by Father Fray Juan Crespi in his famous diaries and letters. Crespi had been a student of Junipero Serra on the island of Mallorea. Both came to Mexico in 1749. It was only natural that Crespi would serve under Serra who was head of the Franciscan missions in California. The Portola Expedition was the result of a royal order "to resist any aggressions the Russians" might make on the Pacific Coast.¹

The first recorded description of what is now Orange County was made by Father Crespi. On July 22, 1769 the first religious ceremony in the area took place as two dying Indian infants were baptized near San Clemente in Cristianitos Canyon. The next day the explorers came to a very pleasant green valley, full of willows, alders, live oaks, and other trees not known to us. It has a large arroyo which at the point where we crossed it carried a good
stream of fresh and good water, which, after running a little way formed in pools in some large patches of tules.

Near that location the Franciscans would establish Mission San Juan Capistrano in 1776.²

"On July 24, 1769 we pitched camp on a very long mesa of earth" [the Trabuco Plain] "which runs to the foot of a high mountain range," [Santiago and Modjeska Peaks of the Santa Ana Mountains] "from which flows an arroyo of good water" [Alisos Creek]. "Instantly the Indians from a village in the valley came to visit us. They came without arms and with a friendliness unequaled; they made us presents of their poor seeds and we made return with ribbons and gew-gaws."³

The next day Fray Crespi observed that the Indians "have houses made of willows, and large baskets of reeds so tightly woven that they hold water."⁴ On July 26th, the expedition followed a shallow canyon and "crossed the head of Oso Creek and soon reached Aliso Canyon where they found wild grapes and the beautiful roses of Castile."⁵

So we went on over very open country, with hills and broad mesas, ascending and descending through three or four little valleys of good soil well grown with alders . . . and we entered a large plain. At the beginning of it we pitched camp near a dry lagoon on a slope [Lambert Reservoir, a mile north of the El Toro Marine Air Station], from which we examined the spacious plain, the end of which we could not see⁶ [the Santa Ana Valley section of the Los Angeles Basin].

Two days later the Portola Expedition arrived at the banks of the Santa Ana River. Father Crespi
called this place the sweet name of Jesus de los Temblores, because we experienced here a horrifying earthquake, which was repeated four times during the day. One of the heathen who were in the camp, who doubtless exercised among them the office of priest, alarmed at the occurrence no less than we, began with frightful cries and great demonstration of fear to entreat heaven, turning to all the winds. This river is known to the soldiers as the Santa Ana. 

One of the soldiers was Jose Antonio Yorba. Forty-one years later he would receive one of two Spanish land grants in what today is Orange County. The 62,500 acre grant which he shared with his nephew Juan Pablo Peralta was known as the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. 

"The Yorbas and Peraltas, the Santa Ana Valley's first" [European] "settlers had long irrigated the land north and west of Orange with water brought from the Santa Ana River by enormous irrigation ditches. The Yorbas probably irrigated the largest area of any place in old California." Jose Antonio Yorba had four sons. The most prosperous and well known was Don Bernardo Yorba. He received a Mexican land grant Rancho Canon de Santa Ana in 1834.

On July 29, 1769 the Portola Expedition crossed the Santa Ana River "with great difficulty, on account of the swiftness of its current." 

Orange County rested in a natural valley which was higher when the Santa Ana River emerged from its canyon. Water was much more plentiful before the first mission settlements in California due to the massive destruction of
brush and timber because of forest fires in the mountains and hillsides.  

The watershed of the Santa Ana River extends from the mountains of San Bernardino and the famous waters of Arrowhead to the hinterlands of the San Jacinto Mountains and the peaks of Santiago and Modjeska that form the well-known Saddleback.

River beds and creeks such as the Santa Ana and Santiago that seemed parched and barren in the summer and early fall could become raging uncontrollable torrents in the late fall and winter. On January 29, 1851 the Diary of Judge Benjamin Hayes records, "the mail rider from San Diego arrived in this city" [Los Angeles] "on Wednesday, having been 10 days on the road, including a detention of 7 days at the Santa Ana, that river being impassable for that length of time."  

The Santa Ana River which during the American Period was deemed by the Army Corps of Engineers as the worst flood threat west of the Mississippi changed her course many times. Although it generally emptied into the Pacific just west of Newport Bay, during the flood of 1822 it changed its course and flowed through the San Joaquin Ranch and the upper Newport Bay creating the Balboa Peninsula, and the sandbars that later would become Balboa, Lido, Harbor and Linda Islands.

This over abundance to summer dry river beds puzzled many early travelers in Southern California but not the
pioneers of Orange. In 1886 they wrote the first native play known to be staged in the Santa Ana Valley. In the benefit satire *The Plaza* produced to raise money to beautify the Orange Plaza, the local rivers were discussed:

Act I - Scene I

"Ignorance Bliss: Water in the river! I thought that was the place for water.

Glibb: You're right my young friend, but then you see in the East the wet water runs on top of the bed. Here nature is so kind as to keep it running under the bed most of the time, so as to save us the expense of bridges."\(^{14}\)

The Orange County of the pre-railroad day was one of pastoral splendor. In the 1870s the wildlife was so plentiful that the pioneer residents of that day could have wild duck or geese for dinner by merely taking aim at one flying overhead in formation a few steps from one's front porch. C. E. Utt states that when his family moved to Tustin in 1874 thousands of geese were nesting just a few hundred feet from downtown Tustin.\(^{15}\)

The pioneers found the "vast valley" a "semiarid land, where quill and hawks, eagles and turkey vultures, and the lordly California condor circled gracefully over plains of tall mustard and wild grasses."\(^{16}\) The condor was particularly venerated by the local Indians. Its feathers
were used by their priests particularly in their initiation rites. Wildlife—badgers, coyotes, "jackass" rabbits and, in the mountains, grizzly bears, deer, gray wolves, mountain lions, and wildcats—was plentiful and the climate temperate, except for the intermittent hot dry, gale force winds the indigenous Indians called "wind of the evil spirits" or "devil's wind." 

The wind which the Spaniards and later the Mexicans would call the 'Santanas' has raised havoc down through the years. During the Boom of the 1880s El Modena was proud of their new sanctuary for the Quaker's El Modena Friends Church. David Hewes, a San Francisco made multi-millionaire who had developed a vast ranch nearby, had donated a large bell which hung in the church tower. History records that not only did the "Devil Winds" blow down the church and its heavy bell but several years later the two-story, newly built Earlham Hotel.
A reproduction of a pre-1900's postcard showing a "typical Mexican Peon Home and family." Photo courtesy of Special Collections, California State University, Fullerton.
CHAPTER TWO

The People

What were the people like that settled in what is now Orange County. One can only guess as to the exact racial make-up of this small region. However, in 1850 in California as a whole

nearly one fourth of the population was foreign-born. Persons born in Great Britain and Ireland, Germany and France constituted nearly one-half of this foreign-born population. Between 1850 and 1860 the foreign-born population increased sharply, accounting for 39 per cent of the population of California. Thereafter the foreign-born population of California declined, constituting a steadily decreasing proportion of the total population. The proportion was 30 per cent in 1890, 22 per cent in 1920.

Prior to statehood the area which was later to be called Orange County had a primarily Mexican and Indian population. San Juan Capistrano had the largest population. Visitors to the area called the mission town a large Mexican-Indian village. By the time of U.S. Census of 1850 its size had been reduced to 400 inhabitants.

Judge Hayes thought that Los Angeles had its own slave system in 1850. The Indians would be jailed for drunkenness on the weekends. Then prospective employers such as the major domo of Rancho Los Alamitos would bail them out. The peons' future weeks' wages would pay the
bail, the rest of their pay would be in wine and sometimes a few dollars. This was usually repeated weekly until the Indian died.

In 1868 Titus Cronise in his classic *Natural Wealth of California* wrote:

Anaheim is the name of a village settled by a company of German wine-growers on a dead-level plain, about twenty-four miles east of Wilmington. In 1857, the site where the village stands was a barren, dry, sandy plain, similar to that extending around it, for miles, at the present time. In the summer of that year a company of Germans... purchased 1,265 acres of the plain at $2.00 per acre... This land was divided into fifty rectangular lots, of twenty acres each, with streets between them. A town site was laid out in the center, with sixty building lots—one for each shareholder and ten for public purposes. The lots were all fenced with willows, sycamores and poplars, and about ten acres of each planted to vines.

After all the expenses were paid, each share of twenty acres fenced, partly planted in vines two years old, with a town lot, 100 by 200 feet, cost $1,400. Each of these shares is worth a small fortune to the owner, at the present time (1868), and will be worth a great deal more a few years hence. There are nearly 1,000,000 vines growing in this village, about 750,000 of which bear fruit. There are also 10,000 fruit-trees of various kinds, the whole place resembling a forest and flower-garden, divided into squares with fences of willow, poplar and sycamore, which shelter the fruit from every wind. Nearly every lot contains a comfortable homestead, and the inhabitants of the village number about four hundred. There is a good public school, several stores, and a post-office in the town, but neither a lawyer, doctor, nor minister.

Anaheim has been well known as the German colony. Lesser known but having a larger impact in Poland than America was the utopian Polish "Brooks Farm" established in
1876 just outside of Anaheim near the present day intersections of State College Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue. Among the eleven Polish intellectuals were Shakespearean actress Helena Modjeska, and Nobel prize winning Henryk Sienkiewicz.22

Although the socialist colony was a dismal failure, the experience in California matured Sienkiewicz' writing and propelled him to later literary triumphs. It also led Modjeska to establish a home in Modjeska Canyon which became a gathering place for intellectuals and artists, Polish and non-Polish.23

When California achieved statehood in 1850 the American boundaries of Los Angeles County were determined. Orange County's present boundaries lay at the Southern end of much larger Los Angeles County. The area was mainly known for its ranchos. San Juan Capistrano had a crumbling mission, a few adobes and "a few Indian huts."24

El Refugio was Don Jose Sepulveda's headquarters in present day Santa Ana just east of the Santa Ana River. It was the site of lavish fiestas which ended when alternating floods, droughts and Yanquees hit the ranchero cattle owners hard after the Mexican American War. Sepulveda and Pio Pico were rivals in 1851 in Southern California's most famous horse race where a reputed $50,000 changed hands.25 Although Sepulveda's horse won the race, he lost the Rancho San Juaquin in 1864. The 50,000 acre rancho was sold to well known wealthy sheepmen Irvine Flint and the Bixby
Brothers for $18,000. In 1876 James Irvine bought out his partners which by then included the 47,226.61 acre Rancho Lomas de Santiago and part of the Ranch Santiago de Santa Ana. Originally 110,000 acres, the Irvine Ranch remained in the hands of the Irvine family for over 100 years and dominated Orange County geographically and agriculturally.26

Another settlement which in later days was known as Yorba centered the hacienda of Don Bernardo Yorba. Bernardo's adobe and surrounding rancho buildings became the center of a self-supporting community. It was one of the largest settlements contained on any one rancho in Southern California.27

By the 1880's when the vineyardist of Anaheim, McPherson (near Orange), El Modena and Santa Ana were looking forward to sitting back to enjoy the rewards of the back-breaking labor of the earlier years, the "Anaheim Blight" destroyed all the grapevines of the Santa Ana Valley.28

By 1850 the Hacienda de Las Yorbas was the social and business center of the Santa Ana Valley. The master's house became a two story structure of about thirty rooms, not including the school, harness shop, shoemaker's room, and other places occupied by dependents. In all there were more than fifty rooms arranged about a court or patio in the rear of the main residence.

According to a descendant of Bernardo Yorba, the tradesmen and people employed about the house were: Four wool-combers, two tanners, one butter and cheeseman who directed every day the milking of from fifty to sixty cows, one harness maker, two shoemakers, one jeweler, one plasterer, one carpenter, one major-domo, two errand boys, one
sheepherder, one cook, one baker, two washerwomen, one woman to iron, four sewing women, one dressmaker, two gardeners, a schoolmaster, and a man to make the wine. . . . More than a hundred lesser employees were maintained on the ranch. The Indian peons lived in a little village of their own. . . .

The rancho had two orchards where various types of fruit were grown, and some wheat was raised. . . . Ten steers a month were slaughtered to supply the hacienda.

"Bernardo Yorba became known as the largest and most reliable farmer" of his day in the Santa Ana Valley. Although he owned several ranchos and supervised the raising of thousands of cattle, he raised enough grain that the Yorbas were the first in the valley to have their own mill.

By the time the Southern Pacific Railroad had extended its lines to Anaheim in 1876, the tough long-horned Spanish and Mexican cattle had disappeared. The great Mexican and Spanish Land Grants were being subdivided into farms and townsites. Only from the San Joaquin Ranch south were the large land holdings being preserved. On the Irvine holdings sheep had replaced cattle during the wool boom of the 1860's.

The pioneers of Anaheim and the Westminster and Gospel Swamp area had survived floods and the ravages of starving cattle and unbridled horses. Anaheim, Santa Ana, Richland (later Orange) and Tustin City had weathered the droughts, rattlesnakes, the unpredictable plagues of grasshoppers and the endless forages of innumerable rabbits and other
wildlife. The McFaddens had a partial solution to one of the plagues.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1873 Robert McFadden in South Santa Ana concluded that if he and his family were to be successful farming on the 5,000 acres that they owned, it would be imperative that a fence be built. They were constantly warding off loose stock and "bands of horses or hogs."\textsuperscript{33} Robert met his brother James in San Francisco and procured a boatload of lumber which was shipped directly to Newport.

Before they could get it onto the land it was nearly all sold to new settlers who needed it for buildings on their newly bought lands. Consequently it was necessary to have more lumber shipped and in a short time the brothers were engaged in the lumber business.\textsuperscript{34}

A third brother, John McFadden, joined them and in 1874 Newport Landing was reopened. It had been closed for a few years after the collapse of the wool market. To enhance their booming lumber business the McFaddens ordered a specially built steam schooner, \textit{The Newport}, which was specially designed to cross Newport harbors' sand bars.\textsuperscript{35}

The Santa Ana River of 1870 and 1880 followed its present bed rather closely except a sand bar prevented it from emptying into the Pacific and it wound a tortuous path through Newport Bay and emptied at Rocky Point now known as Corona del Mar. Not only was the current from the river dangerous, but the tide and the changing sand bars resulted in the death of five men in 1878.\textsuperscript{36}
In 1887 an accident occurred which induced the McFaddens to move the location of their shipping wharf to the present day Newport Pier. Their harbor-pilot and close friend, Tom Rule, drowned while marking the Newport channel for the steamer The Newport. Tom Rule made state history for single-handedly trouncing the "sand lot agitator" Dennis Kearney. He attracted a statewide following of vociferous anti-Chinese and workingman's party adherents. Kearney made the mistake of making false accusations against the McFadden brothers in a Santa Ana speech. Rule confronted Kearney the morning after the slanderous speech, and Kearney drew a gun on Rule. Tom threw a heavy blow which landed Kearney against the side of Santa Ana's Layman Hotel. Then the bully of San Francisco retreated through the bar, through the dining room and across the street into the drugstore.

It was there where he was overtaken by the now thoroughly aroused Rule, who pinned him to the floor and pummeled him quite severely. By a strange coincidence Kearney was rescued from his mortifying position by one of the McFadden brothers, neither of whom had known of Mr. Rule's contemplated raid on their slanderer. This incident which was at once heralded over the state, had the effect of immediately diminishing Kearney's power and influence to an alarming extent and he soon passed into history as a mere blatherskite.

Samuel Armor, in his 1911 History of Orange, labeled "the most notable event in Santa Ana's history was the physical undoing of Dennis Kearney, in the fall of 1879."
In the boom of the 1870's and 1880's, zealous real estate investors and promoters and tourists published glowing books and pamphlets throughout the United States and Northern Europe on Southern California and Los Angeles County in particular. "Eager homeseekers came to buy land and hopeful invalids came in search of health."^40

When writing about Southern California in 1886, Theodore Van Dyke wrote,

It is a land of solid realities and glittering frauds. As usual, the trash floats on the surface, the good lies beneath. One's first contact is apt to be with the frauds. It takes longer to find out the realities. When you stay long enough to see them and find out that the country is not to blame for your overwrought imagination, the unwise enthusiasm of friends, or the deliberate lies of others, you will begin to like it. Year after year an affection that you cannot and would not resist winds itself more closely around your soul. Life comes so easily and naturally; time flies so swiftly, yet so softly! You feel the thread of life fly faster from the spindle, yet you hear no whizz. There are so few breaks or jars in the train of comfort, as the long line of cloudless days rolls on; appetite and sleep hang around you so wooingly in the constant out-of-door life that you are enthralled before you know it.^^41

Carey McWilliams, in his book Southern California, describes the Los Angeles Basin as the "land of the paisano, or road-runner, the horned toad, the turkey buzzard; a land of dry brush and shabby-looking cactus."^42

Not all the observers of life in Southern California have been universally optimistic about the future of the region. In Southern California McWilliams quotes one writer about the Los Angeles Basin: "There is something
disturbing about this corner of America," wrote J. B. Priestley,

   a sinister suggestion of transience. There is a quality, hostile to men in the very earth and air here. As if we were not meant to make our homes in this oddly enervating sunshine. . . . California will be a silent desert again. It is all as impermanent and brittle as a reel of film. 43
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