

The Southern California Rancher
Circa 1946-1948

EL VALLE DE LAS VIEJAS

By Dorothy L. McDonald
The Bar J. F. Ranch
Descanso, California

When the winter snows lay heavy in the mountains and the hunt sometimes took them far afield, it is said to have been the Indians' custom to make an encampment for the old people and the children beside a big spring in a sheltered draw near the south end of Viejas valley. There in the big boulders by the spring are innumerable little depressions where the squaws ground their acorn meal. Such a sight, perhaps, met the eyes of the first Spaniards who entered the valley and accounted for their naming it "El Valle de las Viejas"—the Valley of the Old Women.

Local legend says that the Mission herds once grazed in its wide fields and that the old Brawley dam was built upon the ruins of a much older one built by the padres. However, the first record of Viejas is that the original grant of 13,314 acres was made by Governor Pio Pico in 1846 to Ramon and Leandro Osuna (sons of the grantee of Rancho San Dieguito, now Rancho Santa Fe). The Viejo grant was not confirmed by the American government, the allegation being that it was one of Pio Pico's fraudulent gifts.

However, there is in the files of the San Diego Historical Society a deed dated 1848 and executed by Ramon Osuna and his wife Susanna and Leandro Osuna and his wife Francisca, conveying to one Aguirre for the sum of \$900 "that part of Viejas not conveyed to Wm. Williams and Robert Robinson." Leandro Osuna had fought against the Americans—had, in fact, saved the life of Andreas Pico at the Battle of San Pasqual. The story goes that Leandro, disheartened when his claim to Viejas was rejected, and allegedly under the bewitching spell of some Indian enemies, committed suicide in 1859, and that his ghost still rides through the valley of the San Dieguito river on dark and stormy nights.

An interesting little footnote on the Spanish era at Viejas was furnished by Mr. Granville Martin, to whom I am indebted for much of this information regarding the valley, in the story an old Indian named Leno told him when he was a little boy living there. Old Leno had worked for the Spaniards when he was a young man and he told Mr. Martin, "We worked, all of the Indians, from the first light of day until it was too dark to see the grain any more. The days are very long in summer, and we had no water except what the young squaws would sometimes bring to us, though of course they had to work too. We had a small canvas apron on the front of us, and we reached out and pulled the grain toward us and we cut it with a reaping hook and piled it, and the sleds came through the fields and picked it up—and all day and every day we worked so, for many weeks. And the pay was fifty cents a day. But the land was better then than it now is ("now" was about 1900) and we did not have to bend down to the grain."

As early as 1851 Viejas, or some part of it, had been claimed by William Williams and his wife Ramona, and their Declaration of Homestead was filed on August 24th, 1860. By 1870 the John Treat dairy, the Clendening and the Clark Brawley ranches and the Harbison apiary was already established in the area and during the '80's and 90's several American families

homesteaded in the valley. The Viejas Post Office was established in 1887 (estimated population 300) and the school two years later, in 1889, according to the Historical Society records.

By the turn of the century the whole west end of the valley, where now a line of Indian cottages curves along the hillside, was known as "the Campbell place." It had originally been homesteaded by Mrs. Campbell's brother, a Mr. Gregory, who was buried just east of this line of cottages—long ago his grave was marked by a "little brown jug" but eventually this was broken and the grave is now lost. Mr. Martin recalls that when he was a boy, a clump of Chinese lilies grew up through the broken shards of the jug—probably they had once been planted in it. Near the center of the Valley, where two fine old houses are set well back from Highway 80, was the Havermill homestead.

The upper end of the Valley, where the Brabizon ranch now, is was originally the Clendening homestead—this is the same Clendening who followed Judge Pearce down a San Diego street and shot him in an altercation over the Judge's having granted a divorce to Mrs. Clendening. His homestead later became a part of the Brawley and Lockwood dairies.

Well up in the canyon that parallels the Highway was the homestead of a school teacher named Ed Warren. He later lived over in the Corte Madera where one of the old places there is still known as the Ed Warren place. Of his ranch on Viejas nothing now remains save a part of the outline of his corral, where the green elderberry posts, he used to build it, took root and grew into what was for many years an interesting hollow square of old trees.

At the extreme western tip of the valley was the Wendell place, The Poplars, which for many years now has been the Anderson ranch. It was to The Poplars that Mr. Martin came as a small boy when his father, who had been caring for the stage horses at Alpine, moved from there down into Viejas to farm the Havermill place for D. H. Ogden. Before buying the Havermill holdings, Mr. Ogden had owned or leased the El Monte ranch near Lakeside. He eventually sold Viejas to Baron Long in 1924 and moved to San Diego.

Mr. Martin remembers that on hot summer afternoons Mrs. Ogden used to drive her old grey horse and buggy around the valley, collect all the youngsters and take them over to the Brawley dam, on what is now the Lemmon ranch, and that it was in the slightly green waters of this little dam that all the children of Viejas learned to swim. The Viejas school, which they all attended, stood by the big boulder just above the old highway near the west end of the valley.

Mr. Martin says that when the east wind was blowing, they used to spread their small jackets and fairly fly to school in great eight or ten foot leaps, but that the return home against the wind was often a pretty hard ordeal. They had an old dog who had been trained to draw a cart, and they all used to pile their lunch pails in the cart—which worked out fine except when the dog went off on his own private rabbit hunts and scattered lunch pails all up and down the valley.

Although under the Spaniards, Viejas had been considered "fine grain land" it had been pretty well worked out before 1900, and never did produce very good crops for Mr. Ogden, although one exceptional year a man named Fields leased it and took a \$3000 crop off the valley, considered practically a fortune for that time. Much later, after Baron Long had bought the ranch, he brought in big tractors and subsoilers and chiselled these old fields and since that time they have consistently produced good crops. In fact, the first year after they had been subsoiled the oat hay stood as tall as a man's shoulders.

Although the valley itself had been pretty well worked out prior to 1900, the long flat at the west end—where now a great erosion ditch cuts parallel to and eventually crosses Highway 80 at the Viejas Creek bridge—was then a fine alfalfa field. This ditch, incidentally, was not the product of gradual erosion but sprang into being almost overnight—as did many of the great ditches in these mountains—during the 1916 flood. Old Leno the Indian was then living at Los Conejos on King Creek and he said that when the flood came and the hills started to slide down into the valleys, he ran into his little house and laid down on the floor and prayed as loud as he could, because “any sensible person could see the bad spirits mad at people on earth.”

The road up into the mountains at that time followed the old toll road built by the Stonewall Mine, a very severe grade up Viejas Mountain itself. Many people do not realize that the present easy “Viejas grade” on Highway 80 is built not on Viejas but on Descanso Mountain. During windy weather it was often nearly impossible for the stagecoaches to make the turn out across the valley floor without overturning, and it became the custom to keep a big pile of stones near this bend, to be used as ballast for the trip across the valley floor—they were unloaded at the foot of the grade and piled in readiness for a windy return trip.

Mr. Martin’s father eventually moved over to what is still known as “the Lippman hundred and sixty” at the foot of old Viejas grade, where for many years he took care of the stage teams. Even after the stage coaches and the big old eight horse freight wagons had been replaced by a fleet of right-hand drive Model T’s and a couple of Stanley Steamers, they kept a team or two and a saddle horse for emergencies when the horseless carriages could not get up the grade and the mail went through by team or even on horseback.

Just below where the Indian Church now stands was the big old barn of the Joe Foster stage line, where the relays of horses were kept for the trip from rail’s end at Lakeside up to Cuyamaca. For many year’s, until about 1919 in fact, this line was owned by Jim McCain. I have been told that at one time, too, it was run by members of the Greenleaf family, some of whom still live in Japatul Valley.

Mr. Martin recalls that often after school (and perhaps sometimes when he should have been in school) he used to ride on the great freight wagons and listen to the stories of the old days as told by the drivers. Sometimes he would grow sleepy on the long trip and then he would crawl back on the load and sleep for a while and awaken in the strange, frosty world “up the grade.”

Much of the early history of Viejas he learned during these trips from Jim McCain, who had farmed the valley for many years before he became a freighter. Jim it was who told him that during the bad drought year of ‘93, the starving coyotes grew so bold that if a man dropped a leather glove or quirt or a reata they would run off with it before one could turn around to pick it up.

He recalls that once when the Sweetwater river was in flood, a stagecoach and a team were lost at the crossing in front of the Oak Grove store, near where the present Descanso store stands. The mail bags, heavy with money for the payroll of the Stonewall Mine, were found months later by Johnny Ellis in a clump of willows just back of where Billy Ryan’s service station at Descanso Junction now stands.

There are wide gaps in the history of Viejas—the history, for example, of the great mill-

stone set into the gable of the old stone house on the Brawley place and the shattered bits of its mate that are still occasionally plowed up on the hillside below the old dam. They are said to have been brought around the Horn by sailing ship, but no one now remembers how they reached Viejas. And there is the bullet-scarred old cottonwood tree where two of the earliest settlers are said to have fought it out to the death in a dispute over boundaries. And there is the stone deep in a cave down in King Creek, marked simply "Dewey and Bert." This is said to mark the burial place of a father and son named Armstrong, and to date from some time prior to 1900.

All these and the other small mysteries of the old land are settling into the peace of a valley once more given back to its original owners. Baron Long was the last white man to own Viejas Rancho; for about nine years between 1924 and 1933 his white-painted paddocks enclosed some of the finest race horses ever bred in the west. Cherry Tree, Blind Baggage, Hand Grenade, Sir Lanny, Run Star, Runnymede and Iron Crown—the list of famous stallions that stood at his ranch included all these grand horses. Here, too, was raised Ervast—the horse for which Jack Dempsey is said to have offered \$100,000.

When it was decided to move the El Capitan Grande and Canejo Indians because their churches and graveyards were on the El Capitan watershed, the Government bought most of the valley and settled them there. There are still a few white families on Viejas, especially in a strip along the south side of the valley. There, too, near the upper end is the Brabizon ranch, one of the really fine peach orchards of San Diego county. Mrs. Brabizon was Edwina Smith and she and her sister grew up over on the Deep Spring side of Viejas. Mr. Brabizon's father was "Capt." Brabizon, who for many years owned and operated the old Alpine winery.

But for the most part, it is again "El Valle de las Viejas" where old wrinkled squaws sit nodding in the sun, and small brown children scamper shyly into the brush at a white man's approach.

The plat map (diseño) for the 1846 rancho "Valle de las Viejas y Mesa del Arroz" indicates a "pera de agua" in the "Willows" area, suggesting a pre-existing dam and pond. It was probably washed out by the 1916 flood.

The extensive legal file does not mention fraud. It does mention negligence on the part of an attorney for assignees of the grantees. The correct area was four square leagues, over 17,000 acres. The legal file is referred to as case 249SD and in Mexican records as Expediente 509. Both assignees died without having the case resolved.

"Cockney Bill" Williams bought Viejas Valley (one square league) for 500 dollars. A wealthy shipowner, José Antonio Aguirre bought the Alpine area (three square leagues) for 900 dollars.

The suicide, described in the San Diego Herald April 9, 1859, mentions his "fits of insanity" and a rash of suicides. The situation of Mexican-era rancheros under U. S. rule was certainly depressing, but he had long ago sold Viejas.

Old Leno probably remembered working for the "Spaniard" Aguirre or his Spanish-speaking associates and employees. Viejas was a major grain supplier to the U. S. Army for supply of Fort Yuma and other outposts.

An excellent photograph of the Viejas School exists.

A portion of the San Diego Julian Toll Road survives, just above Viejas Grade. Construction of that portion is described in the San Diego Union, March 16, 1872. It was built by G. W. Webb.

The author may be referring to the Tanahill-Barton property dispute. Tanahill shot Barton in the leg for stepping over the property line. Later, Barton bashed in Tanahill's head with a fencepost. Royal Barton was convicted and then pardoned of murder.

The Alpine vineyard and winery was situated southwest of the Arnold Way/Olivewood intersection.

Collected and endnoted by Albert Simonson.
Typed and submitted by Carol Walker.
Alpine Historical Society
February, 2005