

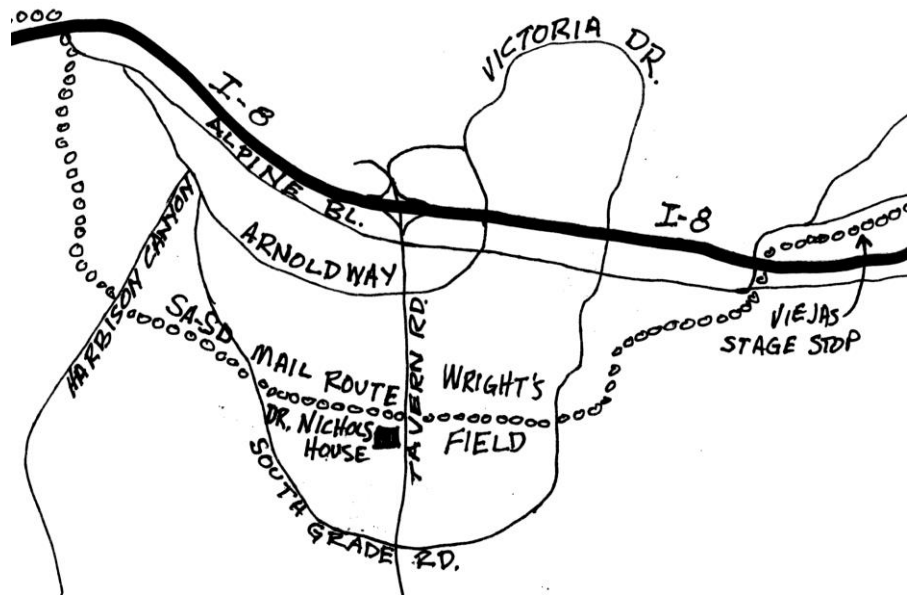
An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

San Antonio – San Diego Overland Mail

August 2015

In 1857, when the US Post Office awarded a contract to James Birch for the overland mail route between San Antonio and San Diego, “Cockney” Bill Williams was about the only settler living in this area that was called by the very long name of *Rancho Valle De Las Viejas Y Mesa Del Arroz*. You might recall that Cockney Bill purchased the 17,000 acre “*Rancho*” in 1848 and here he started making hay and growing grain to sell to the Army at San Diego and Fort Yuma. Now Cockney Bill was pretty quick to seize an opportunity, so when he learned that James Birch was planning his stage route he jumped right on the chance to put a stage stop on his property where he could provide Birch’s Stage Line with fresh mules, feed for the animals, and some limited food and beverages for weary travelers. And so in 1857, Williams established his livery and called it the Viejas Stage Stop.

What’s all this got to do with Alpine? Well, when we look at a map of the route taken by Birch’s stage line, we see that it passes through the area that in 1885 became known as Alpine. The road used by this stage company crossed the present day Tavern Road just north of where Dr. Sophronia Nichols built her house in 1886 and from there it passed through Wright’s Field and continued northeast to cross through the Viejas Valley.



Imagine what it was like to be a passenger traveling in a stage coach, pulled by a team of mules, on a long and difficult trip of nearly 1,500 miles over dry dusty roads, through the Colorado Desert in California, and over rock-strewn mountain passes as it worked its way from San Antonio to San Diego. Traveling by day and camping at night was the norm since only three of the 87 stage stops had substantial buildings, so it was little wonder that travelers didn’t easily part with the \$190 fare for the 30 day road trip. Financially, the SA-SD Line was a disaster. In its first year of operation the Post Office Department reported total earnings on the route of \$601 but the contract cost and subsidy paid to operate the stage line was \$195,399.

In 1858 the Post Office shifted some of the mail to the new Butterfield Company which started operating over much of the route established by Birch, but swinging up north through Warner Springs as it headed for Los Angeles. And as competitors will often do, supporters of the Butterfield Line started calling the SA-SD Mail Line by an unflattering nickname – “The Jackass Mail”. We don’t know how much the nickname contributed to the declining popularity of this company, but we do know that, although the company terminated its service in 1861, history buffs still call the San Antonio – San Diego Overland Mail Company by its nickname, “*The Jackass Mail*”.