

Bill Williams grew up on the rough side of town –London town that is. He must have had a lot of spunk even as a lad, because when he was just 15 years old he signed on to be a cabin boy with a merchant sailing ship. It was then that he went forth from London and sailed around the world, stopping in many ports along the way.

The sea-faring life toughens up a lad quickly and while some make it a life-long career, others eventually jump ship. And so it was in 1836, when Bill's ship sailed into San Diego. Bill liked what he saw and decided to take a job at Captain Fitch's Hide House, giving up the storm-tossed seas for good. He apparently picked up the trade because he was eventually put in charge of the operation while Captain Fitch sailed back & forth to the Sandwich Isles.

But Bill's wanderlust was not yet satisfied. He continued to move around Southern California and try new things. He became the Indian subagent at Mission San Luis Rey de Francia and superintendent at Rancho Santa Ysabel. He explored all around what was to become San Diego County establishing his Rancho Volcan de Santa Ysabel, and working as a guide for the Army. Along the way he learned to speak Spanish and the Kumeyaay language but with the heavy accent of an English sailor. This earned him the nickname "Cockney Bill". Although he was well thought of by many it is reported that others thought him to be "lying, drunken, goodhearted, but little to be believed."

In 1848, Cockney Bill purchased 17,000 acres of land called Valle de las Viejas y Mesa del Arroz, for the whopping sum of 500 pesos, or about 3 cents an acre. Here, in 1853, he built a two-story adobe just east of the site of the present day Viejas Casino. He set up farming on the land and became the prime grain supplier to the army, producing more grain on his rancho than was produced in all the rest of San Diego County. In 1857, he established the first stage stop in the area, providing fresh horses, mules and feed for the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line, and meals for the passengers.

Although he had become very successful and had met many fine folks along the way, something was still missing in Cockney Bill's lonely life. He very much wanted a wife and family. That was a tall order in the back country of the 1850's. Most of the pioneers this far east were men, and just finding a woman willing to live on a rancho in the back country, several days ride east of San Diego, was a daunting task. But Cockney Bill was a clever man. He came up with an ingenious scheme to find a wife – and it worked! As far as we know, no one had tried this before. But what did he do? That is our mystery question for the month. How did Cockney Bill find his wife?

You can solve this mystery by searching for Cockney Bill on the website: www.alpinehistory.org or by coming to the Open House at the Alpine History Museum on November 23 or 24 from 2 to 4 pm. The museum is located at 2116 Tavern Road and admission is free.