

**“COCKNEY” BILL WILLIAMS WAS BACK COUNTRY’S SALTIEST CHARACTER**

William Williams was one of the saltiest characters of our back country. A true mountain man, he was respected by the Indians and got things done in spite of his weakness for wine. Bill arrived in this area around 1836 aboard an English merchantman. He deserted ship, soon learned to speak Spanish and headed for the mountains of San Diego. He spoke Spanish with a terrible cockney accent—thus he became “Cockney” Bill. He was the pioneer ranchero of the Volcan Rancho, which is now Julian, and one of the major purchasers of Viejas Valley. Bill’s original 1850’s two-story adobe house was situated by a spring southeast of the intersection of Brown’s Road by Willows Road.

On December 4, 1846 the Army of the West, under General Kearny, arrived at the mission chapel at Santa Ysabel. Bill treated them “with the most distinguished hospitality,” wrote John Griffin, Army surgeon, “turning out his mutton, grapes and tortillas in great profusion”—but there was no fire to warm them and the wine was abominable! Because Bill knew the desert, Kearny hired him as a guide. The next morning they set out on a wrong trail—perhaps because of Bill’s friendship with the Californios. Bill, having drunk rather freely the night before, felt inclined to chase wild horses and, after getting thrown, determined he would go no further. Kearny repaid the prior evening’s hospitality by remounting Bill in the saddle with a skin of wine and issuing him an order to find the trail. It did Kearny no good. The next day the California Lancers defeated the U. S. Army at the Battle of San Pasqual.

After the war ended, Cockney Bill managed the San Luis Rey Mission, checked up on Chief Geronimo and drove cattle across the desert to Camp Yuma where he provided counsel to Major Heintzelman. In 1848, he paid 500 pesos to the Osuna brothers for Valle de las Viejas—about eleven cents an acre! In February of 1852, Bill and his band of Santa Ysabel Indians drove most of the livestock from Volcan Rancho to his Viejas Rancho. By 1856, he was a prosperous ranchero and the old ox-cart road from San Diego to Williams’ rancho at Viejas was declared a public county road.

In 1857, the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line reached Old Town. Subsequent runs took a shortcut through Williams’ Viejas. Bill provided fresh mules and horses, feed and meals for passengers and the mail line advanced funds to him for the purchase of a Pitts thresher. A new sawmill near Bill’s home made stone and adobe houses seem relics of the past. The County Board of Supervisors appointed Bill to explore a possible route for a road to the east from his Viejas rancho. He had become the proprietor of one of the county’s most productive and mechanized businesses.

It appears that he was also lonely. On September 5, 1857, Bill placed an advertisement in the *San Diego Herald* for a wife “free from those extravagant notions and airs so peculiar to a large portion of females of this part of the country.” Within a month, he married Doña Ramona Machado de Curley. *The Herald* trumpeted the union as proof of its advertising power.

Various legal expenses, falling beef prices and drought forced Bill into debt. To protect the rancho, he filed the first homestead declaration in the county. The winter of 1861-1862 brought flooding followed by severe drought. Throughout California, the drought marked the end of the ranchero era. This was also the end of Cockney Bill’s prosperity. He died at his ranch, with his wife at his side, in March, 1863. Ramona took his body down the deserted ox-cart road, away from their valley of broken dreams, to Old Town.

Sincere thanks to Albert Simonson whose research and writings enable us to produce this column! Please join us in our effort to preserve Alpine’s rich history by joining the Alpine Historical Society, and check out our new website: [www.alpinehistory.org](http://www.alpinehistory.org).

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