

LOST TRAILS TO ALPINE'S PAST

The following article written by Albert Simonson was published in the Mountain Empire News Monthly in September, 1997. The Alpine Historical Society is looking into the process of documenting the historical trails in the area and it seems fitting to reprint Albert's work—since it would be the basis for this project.

So there are no funds in your kitty for a vacation to Old Spain this year? Not to worry!

Try a trip to New Spain instead. No funds required; just bring a child, or at least the imagination of a child.

A good place to start is on Alpine's South Grade Road, a little north of Calle de los Compadres. You would be standing on the old Camino de Secuan, mapped by Royal Presidio Ensign Velasquez, in 1783. The sinuous grassy corridor is the old camino, which ran through this mission land.

When you have found enough silence among the trees and rocks, imagine that the year is 1820. The presidio horses are many; six for each leatherjacket soldier, plus a mule. It is summer, and pasturage at Rancho del Rey (National City) is exhausted. Try to hear distant calls behind you, in Spanish and Kumeyaay, and the plodding of hundreds of hooves on the Mesa del Arroz. There was no Alpine then, just the open grassy "Rice Mesa," the grassy corridor which formed a natural highway to the mountains.

The "Caballada" passes; the nostrils of the horses flare in expectation of cool water at the spring ahead, to the northeast. But you cannot follow them for the spring is now a duck pond, and you can only see it from the fence next to Oak View Place.

If you will, in your imagination, follow the horses of years' past, they lead you eastward through today's Lazy A Ranch, along Viejas Creek and the deep-green marsh of Viejas Valley, up the "Sierras to Na-Wa-Ti-E (Council House, Descanso). There the pastures are still green and lush, and the mission has allowed the grazing of presidio horses.

Turning back to where you began, the camino heads due west through a well-worn notch in the saddle of two low hills. There the camino splits into three trails by a silted-up lake.

The trail to the left crosses South Grade Road, just west of Via Viejas Oeste, then roughly parallels Sycuan Village. This was the "Camino Alto." Another branch, curving gently left, leads us over a "represa" (catchment dam), down Via del Torrie to Dehesa Road. This was the "Camino Bajo," by 1846 called the "Camino para Secuan."

This crossroads is a place of solitude, peopled only by memories of men who loomed large in the San Diego of the mid-1800's, men like violinist "Indian" Leandro Osuna, "The Saint" Aguirre, "Cockney Bill" Williams and Manuel, the Indian vaquero. And sweet Ramona, who had been lured up this trail to a dangerous frontier of cattle raiders by the wistful verse of legendary Cockney Bill. It is also the trail of the famous Jackass Mail, San Diego's first overland connection east to Fort Yuma and San Antonio, the granddaddy of all western stage lines.

At this crossroads, if you follow the branch due west, it takes you to a mysterious great stone enclosure, laid up in the style of New Spain. The enclosed field is older than even the 1846 map which first indicates it. The Spaniards called this place "El Portesuelo," a passageway between two flanking hills where vaqueros could stand guard against cattle raiders, while mission longhorns grazed below. The stone walls look just like field walls near the "Mother Mission" of Loreto in Baja, California. Not

surprising, really, because the first landowners here, the family of San Diego's first mayor, came from Loreto.

Beyond the trail crosses Tavern Road at White Oak Drive, then crosses South Grade Road near Big Red Road, and passes two grassy mesas on the way to the "Lomas Muertas," or "dead hills" of Harbison Canyon, where the school is now. Portions of the trail are still visible in the brush. The southerly trails led to the ranchos of Apolinaria the Pious; Capistrano de Secuan (Singing Hills Golf Course) and Santa Clara de Jamacha (Rancho San Diego Golf Course).

The Camino de la Sierra, through downtown Alpine and Midway Drive, led down the canyon where El Capitan Reservoir is now, toward the mission rancho of Santa Monica (Lakeside). Some trails were so accurately mapped in 1872 that we can track them through the empty land that was El Cajon, La Mesa and San Diego, all the way to the Indian village of Chollas, so precisely as to follow them street by street.

The Mesa del Arroz was a contested Christian frontier of the 1830's beyond which soldiers ventured only with greatest caution, according to Presidio Sergeant Vicente Romero. He knew. His large detachment of soldiers and Indians was overwhelmed by Jacum Indians, and they had to trudge back in disgrace to the Presidio without ammunition or horses. At that time, the mesa was mission land, but it was also an open corridor for marauding Indians, who resented soldiers and missionaries alike, often with good cause.

These are trails of hope, fear and tragedy. But they are not indicated on the new subdivision maps which now prescribe their future. Not even their names are commemorated. That is another reason to show a child, very soon, a glimpse of the broad span of his heritage, peopled by Indians, Spaniards and native-born Californios. These were people of fame and noble stature, who knew how to get along with each other despite differences. Soon we will get to know and like them.

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