



## Local students get awards for outstanding essays

The 33rd Annual Third Grade Essay Contest awards were presented June 2 in the Greenfield Middle School Theater. Held at a new location, this year's awards ceremony drew a large crowd of teachers, parents, friends, and city leaders to applaud the third-graders' efforts.

Several ECHS members dressed in historical attire greeted attendees and posed for pictures with children and family as well as Deputies Shorty and Slim from the Olaf Wieghorst Museum.

A list of award winners is included in this newsletter on page 5.

ECHS would like to thank the Cajon Valley Union School District which has partnered with ECHS for 33 years to foster a love for history in local children. And special thanks to ECHS Co-Chairpersons Alice Rodriquez, Rebecca Taylor, and Jonna Waite who spear-headed the contest and the many other helpers who contributed to a successful event.



*President Carroll Rice, left, presented a farewell bouquet to Jonna Waite who has co-chaired the event for seven years.*

## Weather to highlight quarterly meeting

Our next quarterly meeting will be held at 11:30 a.m. Thursday, July 31, at Coco's Family Restaurant, 1025 Fletcher Parkway, El Cajon (near Parkway Plaza).



Formerly of El Cajon, meteorologist Todd Hall will be our guest speaker on "Weather History and Climate of El Cajon." Todd is Senior Meteorologist at NOAA/National Weather Service Los Angeles/Oxnard and co-author of *The Weather Calculator*. Todd is also

a descendent of W.D. Hall, owner of the former lumber company on Main Street that supplied the El Cajon Valley from 1897 to 1971.

Three lunch entrees are available: Cheeseburger Combo with salad and sweet potato fries, Country-Fried Steak smothered in sausage pepper gravy with mashed potatoes and vegetables, or Sam Adams Beer-Battered Fish & Chips. All entrees come with a slice of apple pie and coffee or ice tea. The cost for the meeting including lunch remains \$15 per person.

Reservations are mandatory and must be received by Monday, July 28.

### July Meeting Reservation Form

Number Attending \_\_\_\_\_ (\$15 each)

Amount Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_ *Reservations not kept become a donation*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Lunch Choice:  
*(if more than one person, indicate number of each)*

Cheeseburger \_\_\_ C'Fried Steak \_\_\_ Fish & Chips \_\_\_

**RESERVATION DEADLINE  
MONDAY, JULY 28, 2014**

Mail reservations and checks to:  
ECHS, P.O. Box 1973, El Cajon, CA 92022-1973

## President's Message

# Let Others Know We're Still Here

by G. Carroll Rice

It's important that we members of the El Cajon Historical Society continue to remind East County residents and our County and State officials and representatives of our organization's existence – of our continuing dedication to preserving local history. To maintain their familiarity with us, we on the Board are reporting on some of the events at which the Society has been a part during the last few months.



In June, we responded to a request from San Diego's Save Our Heritage Organization (SOHO) to support Assembly Bill AB 1999. It provides tax concessions to owners of historic sites within official city and county Redevelopment areas. While we aren't aware of any qualifying current projects in El Cajon, your Board of Directors sent letters of support to Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins, State Senator Joel Anderson, and Meg Desmond of the League of California Cities. Doing so reminded our elected State legislators that *we are here*.

Also in June was the hugely popular 'America on Main Street' event. Our exhibit of photos and artifacts attracted a constant flow of visitors. Our docents made people welcome, answered questions, listened to their stories, and provided sample newsletters. A number of those visitors returned with their children and older relatives, wanting them to see how life here used to be. Now each of them knows that the Society is here.

Over 550 students submitted papers in our 33rd Annual Third Grade Essay Contest. The high quality of the essays about local history made the selection of winners challenging. El Cajon Mayor Bill Wells spoke briefly at the awards ceremony as did Cajon Valley Union School District Superintendent Dr. David Miyashiro and Assistant Superintendent Kari Hull, who presented 1st and 2nd place awards. Parents, friends, students, teachers, city officials, and school district administrators once more have expressed their appreciation to the Society for providing children with a research/writing local history experience. Now, a whole new set of families and educators know that we're here – each year – actively helping their children learn.

Your Society has a stellar reputation with other historical societies through our association with San Diego's *Congress of History* and events covered in our revitalized newsletter. There readers learn of our expanding collections of documents, photographs, artifacts and activities. They also see our members helping students, researchers and *Knox* visitors. All of these activities are done by volunteers, each of whom could use occasional back up. Should you want to loan a few philanthropic hours a month toward continuing the above-mentioned projects, please call us at (619) 444-3800 and leave us a message. You'll receive a jubilant welcome and immense personal satisfaction in working toward our common goals ... and be a vital part of keeping San Diego County– and Sacramento — aware that WE'RE STILL HERE!



*The beautiful quilt assembled by friends of Mary Berry.*

## **Special thanks..**

A big THANK YOU to the friends of Mary Berry for their generous \$770 donation.

Mary, a former ECHS member, was in a quilting class at Grossmont Adult School. After Mary died, her quilting friends found some of her unfinished quilt blocks. Her friends used these blocks to assemble the quilt pictured above to raise funds for ECHS.

Brenda Richmond, one of Mary's friends, sent us the donation and wrote "Mary always loved being a part of the Society and volunteering at the Knox Hotel."

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## **"Thinking of you" notes**

In an effort to reach more members of the El Cajon Historical Society, our current Corresponding Secretary is willing to send "thinking of you" cards to those of our membership who might need our positive wishes. Sharon Jarboe's telephone number is (619) 442-8339 and her email is [ssjarboe@aol.com](mailto:ssjarboe@aol.com) if you wish someone to receive a note.

## **Still in production...**

The Centennial issue of "Valley of Opportunity" is still in production and should be completed soon. The Heritage will contain information on how you can purchase a copy as soon as it's available.



# Grossmont High dedicates historic building

On May 1st, students, faculty, alumni, GUHSD and other local officials, and guests dedicated the renovation of Grossmont High School's original building. Built in 1922 and converted in 1958 to the school district office building, it has been empty for a number of years.

Superintendent Ralf Swenson applauded El Cajon Mayor Bill Wells, Council people Tony Ambrose and Star Bales, and Police Chief Jim Redman for the City's gift of its remaining Redevelopment monies that helped pay for the complete renovation of the 81-year-old building's exterior. The remaining balance for the new interior, electronics and furnishings came from the district's capital facilities fund and the public's support for Propositions H and U.



*A formal ribbon cutting ceremony was held by (from left to right) Mike Harrison of Congressman Duncan Hunter's office, Councilman Tony Ambrose, Ralf Swenson, Mayor Bill Wells, Robert Shield, Scott Patterson, Councilwoman Star Bales, Dick Hoy, and Priscilla Schreiber.*



*Attending the dedication in historical attire were (from left to right) Christy Klock, Becky Taylor, ECHS President G. Carroll Rice, Rick Hall, Richard Lay, Joseph Klock, Andrew Woodruff, and Eldonna Lay.*

## ECHS joins in celebration



*Members Rick and Sharon Hall created an exhibit for the America on Main Street event that showcased a huge (about 8 feet long) photo of Main Street in the 1930's.*

### EL CAJON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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# HISTORY OF THE EL CAJON FIRE DEPARTMENT

by Shane Bailey, Fuerte Elementary School

I wanted to do my report on the history of the El Cajon Fire Department because I had heard so many interesting stories from my Papa Joe who was a fireman at the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant and my Uncle Ian was an EMT.

The first known fire in El Cajon, CA was reported all the way on July 1, 1892. The fire started in a saloon, which we now call a bar. The fire was started by a cigar which is why today people are not allowed to throw cigars on the floor or out the car window. The first fire alarm was made from the wheel of a 1913 car. When there was a fire a person would use a hammer and hit the wheel and if any one heard it they would help fight the fire. Today a cars tire would not work because they are made out of rubber.

Now El Cajon had a fire alarm but still couldn't put out the fires. In 1923, the first piece of firefighting equipment, called the hose cart, was purchased by the city. Finally, the El Cajon Valley Fire Department was formed in 1923 and the first Fire Truck was purchased. It was delivered in 1924.

In 1941 ambulance service started but El Cajon didn't get its own ambulance until 1969! In 1938 the El Cajon Fire Department was located in a leased building until 1943 when the first new fire station building was built in El Cajon on Orange Avenue. The city was growing fast and two more stations were built, one in 1958 at Third and Peach Street and another in 1960 in the Fletcher Hills area.

The Fire Department didn't just fight fires. Over the years many other services were added to the fire department. In 1972 the EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) program started. The paramedic service started in 1980 and in 1997 the SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) program was set up. They also started using disaster

search dogs in 1998. All of these new services made the Fire Department stronger and more helpful to the people living in El Cajon.

In 2010 the cities of El Cajon, La Mesa and Lemon Grove all formed together to make a fire rescue group called Heartland Fire and Rescue. Heartland Fire has eight fire stations, nine engine companies, two truck companies, three paramedic ambulances and one Fire Chief. It serves 180,000 people and responds to about 20,000 calls for service each year.

The Fire Chief of Heartland Fire and Rescue, Chief Rick Sitta, is a good friend of my family. He answered lots of questions about being a fireman and the fire department.

Some of the questions I asked him were:

■ *How long have you been Chief?*

I was promoted to Fire Chief in August 2012. I have been a fireman for 14 years.

■ *What was your position before?*

I was Deputy Chief of Operations.

■ *Why did you want to be a fireman?*

I wanted to help people when they are in danger.

■ *What was the worst fire you've been to?*

The 2003 Cedar fire. The fire burned about 2,300 homes.

■ *How many people ride on the fire engine to a fire?*

Three people ride on the engine: the Captain, Engineer and the Firefighter. Every engine also has a paramedic.

■ *About how long does it take to get to the fire?*

Within 6 minutes or less.

■ *What was your best day on the job?*

I have a few. When my wife called me at work and said she was pregnant with our oldest daughter, when I was promoted to Chief and any day families come to visit.

■ *What was your worst day on the job?*

When somebody loses their life.

After the interview Chief Sitta gave me a tour of the fire station. I was able to see the dispatch room where the 911 calls come in, the paramedic office, the kitchen, the dormitory where they all sleep, the offices and best of all I got to climb in the fire trucks. They have definitely changed from the hose cart. And the fire alarm is a lot louder than the first one built. The El Cajon Fire Department has come a long way in the last 90 years.

I learned a lot from talking to Chief Sitta, my Grandpa and my Uncle about how fire departments run. The research I got from the library and the internet taught me how the El Cajon Fire Department started and how it became the great fire and rescue service it is today.



EL CAJON'S FIRST FIRE TRUCK





Many students enjoy posing with historical characters before the awards ceremony.

El Cajon Mayor Bill Wells, left, shows modern technology to WWII aviator Jean Landis

## 2014 Third Grade Essay Contest Winners

AWARD	STUDENT	ESSAY TITLE	SCHOOL
1st Place	Shane Bailey	History of the El Cajon Fire Department	Fuerte
2nd Place	Austin Criscenti	Cajon Speedway	W.D. Hall
3rd Place	Roman DeLucia	W. D. Hall	Vista Grande
Nettie Kersten Award	Ryan Daniel Haigh	Levi Chase in El Cajon	Fuerte
Virginia Stead Award	Patrick Reynolds	Gopher Snakes in El Cajon	Blossom Valley
Heritage Award	Elvira Georges	The Story When I Moved to El Cajon	Meridian
Olaf Wieghorst Award	James Renk	Olaf Wieghorst	Fuerte
Honorable Mention	Sura Ibraheem	Kumeyaay Indians in El Cajon	Naranja
Honorable Mention	Saveo Nissan	History of El Cajon	Anza
Honorable Mention	Kyle Medina	El Cajon Speedway	Fuerte
Kumeyaay Culture	Eh Decem Paw	The Kumeyaay's Life	Johnson
Originality	Liliana Flores	A Very Popular Place (El Cajon Cemetery)	Meridian
Neatness	Hannah Wood	El Cajon Tree History	Fuerte



Mrs. Knowles (builder/owner of the Hotel del Corona) aka Rebecca Taylor presented the Heritage Award to Elvira Georges.

## Best of School Awards

SCHOOL	STUDENT	ESSAY TITLE
Anza	Jack Butrus	El Cajon's First Mayor
Avocado	Nazima Abdiqadir	The Traveler's Stop
Blossom Valley	Jake Canaris	The Ranch
Bostonia	Lina Jasim	Schools in El Cajon
Chase	Diego Fabila	Why My Family Came to El Cajon
Crest	Braxton Johnson	The Knox Hotel
Flying Hills	Drew Perkins	History of Gillespie Field
Fuerte	Alexander Antoniades	A Gift for the Children of El Cajon
W. D. Hall	Brigitte Rudin	Olaf Wieghorst
Johnson	Maria Hernandez	Kumeyaay
Meridian	Janell Jamil	El Cajon Kumeyaay History
Naranja	Davion Green	A Day with the Kumeyaay
Rancho San Diego	Travis Henry	The Great Laguna Fire
Rios	Alyssa Porter	The Flume
Vista Grande	Conner Hurlburt	The Knox Hotel

The winning essays are posted at [www.elcajonhistory.org](http://www.elcajonhistory.org) (under "Education") and will be included in upcoming issues of this newsletter as space permits. Since the third-graders conduct their own research, the Historical Society cannot guarantee that all of the information is historically correct.

# CAMP GROSSMONT

## THE REST OF THE STORY

by Mike Kaszuba

Our previous issue featured an article on the history of Camp Grossmont. It described the reasons for its inception, its amazingly quick assembly, and closed with its surprisingly brief existence on El Cajon Heights, solely confined to the month of April, 1911. Now the reader may have been perplexed, as was I, by the U.S. Army's quick departure from an 8,000 acre site that had just been proclaimed in the local newspaper thusly: "There isn't a place in all USA better fitted for a purpose!" Here was a site that had been thoroughly scouted by Brigadier General Tasker H. Bliss, Commander of the Department of California, and determined to provide the perfect blend of level terrain suitable for large-scale encampment, combined with the abundance of divergent landscape composed of hills and valleys. The variable topography was ideal for training the troops in the art of reconnoitering, and for practicing and solving a great variety of situational maneuvers which were presented. The Army had negotiated a three-month lease, with an option for a one-year renewal. It had gone to great lengths to quickly install a railroad station, communication lines and a piped water delivery system to this formerly barren expanse. Yet scarcely three weeks into training, this assemblage of over 2,000 troops was marched back to the Point Loma base camp, only to be turned back eastward days later to the bucolic little town of Lakeside for a five-week encampment on the scenic shore of Lake Lindo. Very mysterious, indeed!

A search of the regional newspapers, The El Cajon Valley News, The San Diego Union and The San Diego Evening Tribune provided little help resolving this puzzle,



*One lucky soldier actually finds his tent! The meager shelter-half was standard army issue for field duty and doubled as a rain poncho.*



*Odd-looking squad of new recruits stand near Sibley tents.*

essentially having ignored the issue completely. As early as 14 April, the Union reported "A rumor in circulation yesterday was to the effect that the Thirtieth and Eighth regiments of infantry, which are encamped at Grossmont, would march to San Diego today and go over to the former camp at Point Loma." and "This rumor was not confirmed and is believed to be without foundation." The next day's Union reported that "Reports from Grossmont yesterday indicated that the soldiers spent a strenuous day scouting through the hills and engaged in mimic warfare ... Col. Charles W. Mason has been in command of the brigade." Very interesting ... so what had become of Brigadier General Bliss? (We now know that he was otherwise engaged, seeking out a new camp site.) No further mention is noted until the morning of 19 April, when the Union informs us that having returned to Grossmont from a 3-day, 36-mile "hike" through Alpine and Twin Springs "They were toughened and tanned ... but even the militia officers, detailed to observe the work of the regulars, bore the heat and burden of the trip like regulars." And further "It is expected that the entire command will break camp this morning and start on the road to Camp San Diego ... What their next move will be is not know (sic), but it is expected that maneuvers on a smaller scale will be held after they re-establish their camp on the bay shore." This, after the Union having reported only a month earlier that Camp San Diego (Point Loma) was entirely unsuitable for such maneuvers. Hmm ... the mystery deepens!

On 23 April the San Diego Union first describes Lakeside to be a preferred site: "1700 soldiers...will leave Camp San Diego in the next few days...and will march to the site of an encampment at some point in the county not yet determined. The purpose will be to accustom the men to conditions of actual field service." Really, now! "There

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is considerable speculation among the officers and men under General Bliss' command in regard to the site of the camp. The general, accompanied by his aide-de-camp Lieut. Arthur Polilion, Major G.M. Blakeley, and Col. Ed Fletcher started for the back country in an automobile yesterday, where they will inspect several proposed locations. Among these are Cuyamaca lake, Campo, Lakeside, a site near the customs house at Tia Juana, and one near National City. The officers are expected to return Monday morning and ... will decide on a site for the bivouac. It is understood that Lakeside is the favored location ..."

This article goes on to say "It is believed that General Bliss' command ... will engage in tactics similar to those which they carried out during their recent encampment at Grossmont. A comprehensive report of the work done by the troops during their stay at Grossmont has been prepared under the direction of General Bliss by Major O'Neil and forwarded to Washington. This statement, it is expected, will demonstrate to the satisfaction of the war department that Bliss' soldiers have already accomplished some of the most effective war maneuvers ever attempted in the United States. It is said that better results have been obtained by the soldiers of the Thirtieth and Eighth regiments than by the 20,000 United States soldiers along the Texas border." While both Major O'Neil and General Bliss refused official comment on this comparison, the Union article did continue with "The maneuvers at Grossmont have resulted, it is believed, in the solution of problems of actual warfare which are of vital interest to the government."

So, if I may then summarize, Camp Grossmont was the perfect siting for the training maneuvers of unequalled measure, having solved war department problems and produced results unparalleled anywhere else in the country, at any time, under any command, yet after just three short weeks it was abandoned!



YMCA tent provides a "reading room" for the soldiers.



Soldier experiencing a "close shave" in barber's chair.

Finally, a single brief paragraph discovered in Volume III of the Annual Report of the War Department for 1911 shone a beacon on this seemingly unanswerable mystery and resolved it completely. Contained within the report to the War Department prepared by Brig. Gen. Bliss for the Department of California were the following remarks: "The exercises terminated in a concentration of the brigade at Alpine, Cal., 21 miles from Grossmont ... Upon its completion the brigade returned to Grossmont, and thence to Camp Point Loma. While suitable in many ways for a camp, **it was found that the undersoil at Grossmont was exceedingly compact and impervious to water, such that great difficulty was experienced in disposing of excreta.** (emphasis mine) Attempts to find a more suitable site finally resulted in locating a brigade camp at Lakeside, 23 miles east of San Diego, to which point the brigade marched on May 2, arriving May 3. Exercises and maneuver problems for the command were at once resumed and continued as long as the camp was considered healthy. The water supply, always a serious feature connected with the establishment of camps in southern California, began to give trouble the latter part of May, and on May 24, after the completion of certain problems, which took portions of the command to Cedar Creek, Dulzura, and other points 15 to 25 miles from Lakeside, the brigade was ordered to return to Camp Point Loma, and by June 1 all troops were at the base camp there. Search was instituted for a new camp near the seashore where there were bathing facilities for the command, but before a site was definitely located instructions were received for the return of the command, except organizations on duty at points on the border, to their home stations. The return movement was made by water, the United States Army transport *Logan* being used for this purpose. Arriving at San Diego 8 a.m., June 15, the *Logan* completed her loading that night and sailed at 8 a.m., June 16, arriving at Monterey at 7 a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and at San Francisco at 8 a.m. the 19<sup>th</sup>."

And now you know ... the rest of the story!

# Pepper trees offer more than just shade

by Carroll Rice

Most of the oak trees that once graced the El Cajon Valley and gave the Native Americans shade, shelter, and food are gone; and gone are the streams that nourished them. As the Centuries progressed away from the 19th and into the 21st, the settlers and their descendents replaced the oaks with non-native species, primarily with varieties of eucalyptus and pepper trees.

The eucalyptus were imported from Australia in great numbers in the 1880s in the hopes that the twisty wood would prove ideal for durable railroad ties. However, the eucalyptus trees were best adapted for decorative accents, effective windbreaks and renewable sources of firewood.

The so-called 'California' pepper trees were introduced from Peru by Spanish missionaries, who substituted the dried and ground berries for scarce East Indian



pepper. Believed to be California's oldest pepper, its branches supported by crotches, one lone tree still casts its shade at the Mission San Luis Rey de Francia, east of Oceanside.

There is no record as to when the first pepper trees arrived in the El Cajon Valley, but it was probably by accident as the seeds are often carried by birds. In any event, once they arrived, the young trees were ideally suited to the soil and climate and multiplied. Pepper trees are often criticized as 'messy,' with falling leaves, berries, flowers, and occasional biting insects; but they are drought-tolerant, hardy and fast-growing. The disadvantages were quickly dismissed by many settlers who planted them around their homes and welcomed their lacy shade.

To those of us who have grown familiar with pepper trees over the years, they are not only beautiful, they are reminders of times long past.

Is there anyone who attended Cajon Valley Union Grammar School who doesn't remember the lunch benches and tables built around a massive pepper tree?

Do you remember when there were pepper trees on both sides of Highway 80 from Mollison east to Second Street? I know I rejoiced as I walked toward home in their shade after school or after a sojourn to San Diego on the bus...city bus service stopped at Main and Magnolia or at Main and Mollison during my school years.

And what about Pepper Drive? Originally planted to provide shelter from the sun for wagonloads of crops being hauled to the packing houses and the railroad, the lacy-leafed trees added to the charm of homes, farms and ranches along the way. They still do.

For nearly ten years, El Cajon had a 'Pepper Tree Market' tucked behind a rough-barked specimen on the north side of Main Street, opposite the Weinstock building. Named for the tree which had long served as a hitching post, the market under the ownership of Robert Fluornoy was a popular success from 1924 into the early 1930's.

Fluornoy, who had lost the use of his legs in a dam construction accident, was not one to let adversity get him down. He, with his wife, Mary, and daughter, Elizabeth, had arrived in the Valley in 1917, bought property and tried his hand in several enterprises. After acquiring a chicken ranch, a five-acre citrus and avocado ranch, and a small outlying store, Mr. Fluornoy brought his marketing skills into the Valley's business district. Stocking his shelves with vegetables and fruit from his own garden and orchard, and adding more by bartering and trading with other growers, his market enjoyed a marked success.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the Pepper Tree Market for its time was a lunch counter, offering chili con carne, hamburgers, and beef stew, as well as coffee and desserts. Lucille Fluornoy Loveday, Robert's second daughter, born in 1927, has vivid memories centered around a huge root beer barrel at the front of the store. As a little girl, she sat at the counter quaffing glass after glass of the rich-flavored old-fashioned soda, entranced by the activity in the store, the banter of businessmen dropping in for lunch, and the Indians tying their horses to the old pepper tree. What scenes to remember and cherish!

My own love affair with pepper trees began when the southern, eastern and northern boundaries of the Valley were marked by orange groves, and many 10-acre vineyards on the valley floor were bounded by olive trees. In those days, from the 1930's through the 1940's, houses



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were generally farther apart and many vacant areas were overgrown with 'wild' barley and oats, survivors of a time when the Valley was planted to grain. Agriculture was king, and dairies, produce farms, hog ranches, chicken ranches, and horse-raising properties could thrive without 'city' regulations...and the city of El Cajon's eastern edge stopped at the grammar school, west of Mollison Avenue.

About three miles east of the city, near the corner of Third and Lexington Streets, at the center of a ten acre orange grove, two giant pepper trees shaded our house and back yard. Together, those trees – one male (yellow flowers), one female (bright red berries) – not only created an oasis during the hot days and slightly cooler evenings, but day or night, established the distinctive character of our home.

Swings, one a tire-on-a-rope and the other a conventional board swing, were hung from the lower branches and a lawn swing was placed beside the trunk. On hot summer evenings we often moved outside and hoped for a cooling breeze. Neighbors and friends sometimes dropped by to enjoy a little time of gossip, conversation, political discussions and recollections. I, always the listener, frequently sat in a swing and absorbed every aspect of the yarning and casual remembrances...learning about the opinions, childhoods and youthful adventures of neighbors and friends. Over the years we built and rebuilt an outdoor fireplace of bricks, blocks or stones just beyond the tree's lower leaves and branches – a place to cook hotdogs, marshmallows, and even heat water when we butchered the pigs and beeves.

The trees had been planted about 1916 by the man who built our house from timbers from the 1915 Pacific Exhibition. Those trees had grown tall and wide by the time my grandparents bought the place in 1922 and when I was born in 1929, their branches had largely covered one half of the house and back yard.

The mild-weather whisper of breezes in their branches and the loud sighing and swishing when rain storms and Santa Ana winds blustered through their tops were the 'background' sounds that accompanied the first 23 years of my life. [On windy days when I was a little tyke my mother would sing, "Button up your overcoat when the winds blow free..." while she bundled me up like an arctic explorer to go outside.]

From my earliest days, my mind coupled the backdrop of pepper trees with events in the yard such as the horseback delivery of the Tribune newspaper by Blake Barton, Felix or Jean Landis, the Indians coming to the door to sell baskets and plant stands, the old man who sharpened scissors and knives, and the pleas by 'missionaries' from various religious persuasions. Even now, I've



*Pepper Drive is still adorned by massive pepper trees.*

never lost my wonder at our neighbor Earl Cunningham's childhood ability to climb one tree and come down in the other; clambering through the entwined branches high above. (I, myself, was afraid to climb above the first crotch.)

I learned the alphabet and numbers (including how to print my name) scratching the characters on the ground with a stick under those trees. Later, in the clear space between them, I pulled toy cars and trucks along the roads of imaginary kingdoms, played marbles, learned the rudiments of catching a ball from my father, hosted birthday parties, and after I was in college, directed play rehearsals. Like a one-ring circus, there was always something going on under that grand canopy including the antics of our dogs and cats, free-roaming ducks, geese, chickens, and human visitors (some on horseback).

Most recalled scenes are good for a smile, but some invoke frowns. For example, in the late 1930's my mother was suffering through a difficult pregnancy and my cousin Jack Vanatta put a loudspeaker in the crotch of one of the trees so that she could have music as she rested outside. One of the girls my father hired to help her just loved that arrangement. She would happily rock herself back and forth in the lawn swing with the radio playing at full volume while my mother lay in the house calling for help...that girl didn't last long.

I could go on and on, recalling Chuck Ahlee playing his mandolin for us on a warm evening, the artist Zahr Pritchard telling my sisters and me of his many adventures in India, Australia, Tahiti and Brazil, and so many more. A Sunday evening in summer would often find our friends, the Ellis and Conaway families, sharing pot-luck picnics under the trees. What fun we had, what memorable games we played, and how many gallons of iced tea and home-made root beer we consumed!

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**From:** El Cajon Historical Society  
P. O. Box 1973  
El Cajon, CA 92022

**Next  
Quarterly  
Meeting  
July 31**



*See page 1 for details*

**To:**

## **Welcome New Members**

99 Construction  
(owner Brendan Thiessen)  
The Diaz-Conti Family  
Patrick Papin  
Chuck & Barbara Schroeder  
Cathy Lee Zeman Lubak

*(continued from page 9)*

All things considered, however, perhaps the most memorable event was the night of the corn party.

When I got out of the Air Force in 1953, I couldn't find a worthwhile job, so my father suggested that I plant corn and sell corn and oranges beside the road, where our driveway joined Lexington Street. That worked for a while, but in the summer of 1954, after the nature of corn, it all began to ripen at once. It was corn party time!

I put up signs at the Globe Theatre and the Little Theatre at San Diego State where I had many friends, inviting one and all to a Saturday night corn harvest celebration. My father, God bless him, assumed the command of a large army-style kettle on the outdoor fireplace and began cooking corn. It was consumed with gusto by a crowd of at least 30 people. Not only was there hot, buttered corn; we gave all who wanted one a gunny sack and told them, "Go out in the cornfield and pick all you want."

I would say that the party was a signal success. Many years have passed and I am still occasionally asked (as late as a historic house tour last year), "When will you have another corn party?"

The days of corn parties and the lives of the trees were numbered. In 1955, the home place was sold and the land was cleared. That little ten acre ranch, like so many groves,

fields, and vineyards in El Cajon, is gone and the land parcels are defined by houses and streets. Yet, vast changes have not erased the memories and impressions of an earlier time. Years later and far from El Cajon, I once woke out of a deep sleep and troubled dreams with tears on my face. "They've cut down the trees," I said over and over again, "they've cut down the pepper trees!"



*Telephone lines have hampered many pepper trees along El Cajon's Pepper Drive.*