

May 1968.

THE HISTORY OF "CENTENNIAL RANCH" AND
"CASTLE ROCK RANCH" IN EL CAJON

Compiled by Hazel Sperry

Much of the information for this story and exhibit has been gleaned from first hand information, photos and mementos contributed by persons who were former residents of the properties being described here, or were personally familiar with that area and its residents. The several sessions of reminiscing and album browsing were most delightful occasions for all the participants - and something which greatly enriched our historical knowledge of "Early El Cajon". Contributions of information were made by the following persons: the late Mrs. Josephine Asher Vacher; her son, Mr. Eugene Vacher; her sister, Mrs. Dorcas Asher Drown; Mr. Karl Busch and his sister, Mrs. Ruth Busch McIntosh; Mr. Norman P. Hawley; Mr. Forrest L. Hawley; and Mr. Rupert L. Amstead.

Written sources of information used were the following: Early issues of "El Cajon Valley News", and "The San Diego Union"; Elliott's 1883 "History of San Diego and San Bernardino Counties"; "The City and County of San Diego Illustrated and Containing Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Pioneers of San Diego, California 1888"; "The History of San Diego County Ranchos" by Union Title Insurance Co."; and "Good Old Days" magazine for August 1967.

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At the time of this writing - May 1968 - a new phase of El Cajon history has just begun. Earthmovers and bull dozers have moved in to prepare the area of the old "Centennial Ranch" and "Castle Rock Ranch" for the coming of the new Sears Roebuck store and the development of a new large El Cajon Plaza shopping center. The area for development is bounded by Fletcher Parkway on the north, Magnolia Avenue on the east, Interstate Highway 8 on the south, and Johnson Avenue on the west.

This area is just a tiny section of the huge 48,000 acre Spanish Rancho El Cajon which was deeded to Dona Maria Antonia Estudillo Pedrorena, wife of Don Miguel Pedrorena Sr. in 1845. The major portion of this huge Rancho El Cajon was purchased by Isaac Lankershim with the aid of Major Levi Chase (a San Diego lawyer) in 1868 and was opened for settlement in 1869.

The writer will here endeavor to give a glimpse of the early history of this area. The stories and incidents related here cannot exactly coincide with the boundaries of the new shopping center but will tell the story of that area and its close proximities.

Greater details will be given to the forty acre Castle Rock Ranch because of the more abundant information related to us by the late Josephine Asher Vacher; her sister, Dorcas Asher Drown; Karl P. Busch; and his sister, Ruth Busch McIntosh, all of whom had lived at Castle Rock, and by Eugene Vacher, son of Josephine Asher Vacher; and by Norman P. Hawley and Forest L. Hawley who had lived as close neighbors. Josephine Asher Vacher remembered vividly her trip with her father from San Diego to El Cajon to buy from Mr. R. G. Clark in 1879 the almost forty acres which Mr. Asher soon began developing as Castle Rock Ranch; and which became "home base" for the Asher family for many years to come. For Josephine Asher Vacher (although she lived in another part of El Cajon Valley after her marriage in 1908) El Cajon remained her permanent residence address until her death in July 1967 at age 97½ years.

Mr. R. G. Clark, from whom the Ashers purchased their forty acres, came to El Cajon Valley with Mr. J. S. Harbison in the year 1869 with 110 hives of bees. They placed the bee hives in various little canyons in the hill sections surrounding greater El Cajon Valley. Mr. Harbison and Mr. Clark were the first persons in the county to engage in bee culture and to produce honey for market, a venture which was very successful.

In 1876 Mr. Clark began the culture of deciduous fruit trees and Eucalyptus trees, the growing of grapes and the making of raisins, and the raising of grain on his 230 acres which he purchased from Mr. Isaac Lankershim. Eighty acres of this land is the same land which now 92 years later will become El Cajon's new shopping center.

Mr. Clark planted some 80 or 85 acres in deciduous fruit trees and grape vines and he called it his "Centennial Orchard". (The year 1876 was the centennial year marking the 100th anniversary of the American Colonies' Declaration of Independence). He planted most of the balance of his acreage in grain. His house and orchard were just south of the newly planned

shopping center. "He is said to have been the first man in San Diego to demonstrate the productiveness of the soil of El Cajon for raisin culture. He introduced a system of sub-irrigation in his vineyard, running a continuous concrete cement pipe, with outlets at convenient distances under ten acres. His was the only vineyard in the valley that was irrigated and although it was not necessary, the experiment was one that proved not unprofitable". Near his orchard he planted the first Australian Blue Gum forest in the county.

By December 1886 Mr. Clark had completely sold out his interests in El Cajon Valley and with his family, moved to San Diego. The Clark home and Centennial Orchard and Vineyard were sold to Mr. Holt who continued as a strong promoter of the raisin industry in El Cajon.

Mr. & Mrs. Clark were the parents of two children - a son and daughter, but only the son, Edward, grew to maturity. Mrs. Clark was one of the eight charter members of El Cajon's first church - the El Cajon Presbyterian Church organized in 1883.

The sale of the R. G. Clark property in El Cajon had been a gradual "piece-meal" procedure.

In 1878 he had sold to Mr. J. M. Asher the westerly forty acres to the north of his Centennial orchard. Mr. Asher named and developed this as Castle Rock Ranch, and it is upon this same forty acres that the new Sears store will now stand. It is the westerly half of the new eighty acre planned shopping center. The interesting development of this 40 acre Castle Rock Ranch will be given in detail following the more general accounting of the greater area.

In that same year that Mr. Asher purchased his ranch land (1879), Mr. T. F. Miller came to El Cajon Valley and purchased acreage just to the south of the Centennial orchard. There he had a fine vineyard of muscat grapes and a fruit orchard of apples, pears, apricots, peaches, etc. The home which he built still stands (with some alterations) "under the shade of the old Pepper tree" at 489 Gardner Street. Here the T. F. Millers raised their family of ten children. Some years later their son, Joe Miller, became the owner of an 85 acre ranch - 40 of those acres being the same 40 acres which are the easterly half of this newly planned El Cajon shopping center.

In more recent years the Joe Miller place was purchased by the Henry Bradley family, and the property along Magnolia Avenue near Fletcher Parkway became a gathering place for El Cajon's horse lovers. It was the home of the Bradley Riding Stables. Gradually the Bradley properties were increased to include quite an extensive area, part of which is now to become this new shopping center. Sears Roebuck made their initial purchase of 20 acres of this property in 1965, and purchased the remaining 60 acres in December of 1967.

And now for a more detailed description of Castle Rock Ranch, interesting bits of information about the Asher family, and stories about them and later resident owners - all of whom Castle Rock has meant something very special.

When Mr. & Mrs. Josephus Marion Asher began developing this acreage they gave it the name of "Castle Rocks" because of the picturesque grouping of large granite boulders which stood very near the spot upon which they built their home. These rocks and other rock groupings on the ranch seem

always to have been an important and popular feature of Castle Rock Ranch. Their uses were varied as we shall learn.

To supply the "water needs" for ranch and family, Mr. Asher put down two wells and built two granite reservoirs from stone quarried on the place. At one well, he used a windmill and at the other, a gasoline pump. For the smaller reservoir which was just behind the house, part of the grouping of Castle Rocks became portions of the reservoir wall. The larger reservoir was octagonal in shape. It was in the southern section of the orchard. Besides being used for irrigating, it was also the one most often used for swimming parties and of which our pioneer citizens have such fond memories.

Just to the east of the house was the huge rock named "The Elephant's Back". This very special rock was perhaps Early El Cajon Valley's most popular piece of playground equipment for it was here that the children loved to climb and slide. For this activity (lest their clothes become soiled or torn) Mrs. Asher provided the children with special burlap suits made of gunny sacks with turkey red piping at the neck and armhole openings.

Most of the rocks were given names. In the rock grouping just behind the house there was an exceptionally tall rock with a huge rock cap on top. This became "The Castle Rock". Almost leaning against Castle Rock were a couple of rocks (a bit lower in height) which they named the "Sofa" or "Arm Chair". Climbers mounted the sofa first in order to get to the top of Castle Rock. To make it easier for climbers to reach the top of Castle Rock, the Asher children improvised a ladder. This ladder was actually the wooden frame or mould which had been used for the moulding of the adobe bricks for the buildings at Castle Rock Ranch. In photos shown in this exhibit one can see this mould for adobe bricks mounted as a ladder at Castle Rock. Underneath Sofa Rock a small open space between rocks was called the Tunnel and was used as such by the children.

Three other special rocks standing close by were Faith, Hope, and Charity. And on the rock ledge which seemed to pillar these rocks there were indentations or mortar holes made by the Indians as they ground their seeds and acorns many, many years before.

Then west of the house near the present corner of Johnson and Fletcher Parkway there was a grouping of large but lower rocks where the Indians had also prepared their food. In these rocks there was some round mortar holes which were almost four inches across and about that deep. Close by (and covered with soil and ash dust) was a pile of small flat rocks - some circular and some oval in shape - which the Indians had used to grasp in their hands and use as little grinders or as hammer stones. There were still other stones which when heated in the fire had no doubt served somewhat as fireless cookers.

Later - in the years when the Valley became filled with vineyards - the Indians would return from their then more remote homes in the hills to help with the grape harvest. At these times, it was a common sight to find the Indians stopping at these favorite grinding holes of former days.

The Asher house was a two story structure with basement underneath. The lower story was built of adobe bricks. The second story was built of wood and the entire structure was lined with wood. There were seven bedrooms and lots of storage space. In reminiscing, Mrs. Dorcas Asher Drown said, "Daddy made use of every available bit of space for storage and closets along the halls and under sloping roof lines. The cellar was always stocked with canned fruit and unfermented grape juice". Besides the stove for cooking, there were four fireplaces. Along with wood, some of which was furnished by the row of Cypress trees, the dried peach and apricot pits

From the Standard Pacific

from the orchard fruits were used as fuel for the stove and fireplaces.

The house was surrounded with ornamental plantings. A path or roadway lined with cypress trees ran along the west side of the house back to the rear orchard. Rose bushes were in abundance. A single climbing rose bush covered an entire arbor under which suppers, Christian Endeavor Society parties, etc. were often held. Succulents and cacti were numerous in the rocky areas and were of exceptional beauty in their blooming season.

The English Ivy which they planted near the swimming pool had a bit of interesting history attached to its planting, and also it was to play an additional part in the local history of El Cajon as more years passed by.

The story is told that the slips of ivy planted at Castle Rock had been brought from Washington Irving's home or grave which was at Sunnyside near Tarrytown, New York. That same Valley was the setting for Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow". At Castle Rock the ivy grew beautifully and abundantly, and with the story often repeated about where the cuttings had been obtained.

When Grossmont High School's first building was completed in January 1923, it was much in need of ornamental plantings. It was then that Dinon and Karl Busch (sons of Mr. & Mrs. C. J. Busch who had purchased Castle Rock Ranch in 1914) and who were also students of the new Grossmont High School, carried cuttings of ivy from Castle Rock to Grossmont. There the ivy was planted along the outer walls of the newly completed school building. Again the ivy flourished and now for 45 years it has lent its serenity and charm to that dear old building. The last roots of ivy at Castle Rock has disappeared but with roots reset at Grossmont it continues to live on.

An exceptional amount of planning went into the plantings and development of Castle Rock Ranch. Josephus M. Asher had established San Diego's first florist shop in 1869 when he with his wife, Sarah Clark Asher and their year old son, Robert, arrived in San Diego from San Francisco to join Alonzo Horton as pioneers of New Town San Diego. Mr. Asher purchased property on Fifth Street from Mr. Horton and started his florist shop. Then he purchased property in what is now Paradise Valley and there he established his "growing" nursery - "The Fruitvale Nursery". Near that spot now stands Paradise Valley Hospital. There he also built a family home. His nursery depot and florist shop were at Fifth and B Streets in San Diego.

To Mr. Asher much credit was given for promoting and encouraging the raising of fruits and vines in the San Diego County area. To the first settlers the soil and climate had seemed only suitable for grain. Mr. Asher was instrumental in establishing San Diego's Horticultural Society and San Diego's first county agricultural fair which was held in National City in 1880. Mr. Asher's health was somewhat impaired by asthma attacks and it was because of this that he decided to sell his Fruitvale Nursery and move a bit further inland to El Cajon Valley. Although he began developing Castle Rock in 1879, it was not until 1883 after he had the ranch well developed that he moved with his family to the new ranch home.

Castle Rock Ranch was both vineyard and orchard. It produced very fine grapes. They had their own raisin packing house right on the ranch. The orchard produced the very finest of every kind of deciduous fruit that El Cajon Valley climate can grow - peaches, pears, apricots, plums, apples, pomegranites, persimmons, quinces, figs, olives, etc. The garden section produced vegetables, melons, and the finest of berries. Chickens and a cow supplied the family with the necessary poultry and dairy products. Two or

three horses supplied cultivating power and transportation. "Champ" was the family horse for transportation. There were seven Asher children - Robert, Josephine, Alpheus, Mary, Anna, Josephus Jr. (Jay), and Dorcus. Each was assigned a portion of the vineyard as his own to care for and to enjoy the profits received. In case of a rain during the raisin drying season, it meant that everyone hurried to the vineyard to quickly stack the trays of drying fruit so that the fruit could be kept dry.

The Asher family led an active church life and were members of that early Baptist Church which received the church bell for the first church to be built in new town San Diego. Too, the Asher children were very active in the early Sunday School and young peoples activities here in El Cajon Valley. Mr. Asher held several government positions during his life and served as San Diego County's Assessor for two different terms. Mr. Asher passed away in 1912 and Mrs. Asher and daughter, Mary, passed away in 1913. Castle Rock Ranch was sold in 1914 to the C. J. Busch family.

When the C. J. Busch family purchased Castle Rock, they remodeled the house. The upper story was removed and some additions and changes were made to the lower level. Thus the house became a one story home. However, life at the ranch went on pretty much the same in both work and play. And El Cajon residents continued to enjoy those much loved "fun times" at Castle Rock. The Asher's horse, "Champ", and the buggy had remained with Castle Rock when the Busch family bought the ranch. Shown in this exhibit is a photo of Champ, the horse, with Mr. Busch and the three Busch children, Dinon, Karl, and Ruth.

Ruth was a wee child when the Busch's came to Castle Rock and as with most little girls, her dolls were to be a cherished possession for the next few years. A broken doll was almost sure to bring tears, but as always, dolls have a way of getting broken. So when this happened - with the assistance of big brothers, Dinon and Karl - a doll cemetery was created near the big Castle Rock. When dolls were broken they were placed in wooden cigar boxes and buried.

About 1922 the Busch family moved from their Castle Rock home to Grossmont when Mr. Busch was appointed postmaster of the Grossmont Post-office and he took over the little store in which the Postoffice was located.

Soon Castle Rock was purchased by Mr. McKenna, the originator of the Pomona Pump and who was owner of the company by the same name. During that period of ownership pheasants were added to Castle Rock Ranch.

The pheasant story is a most interesting one. It was told to us by Mr. Forrest Hawley, a native resident of El Cajon Valley, and the son of Allen T. Hawley and Annie Miller Hawley. (The Allen T. Hawley ranch was just north of Castle Rock Ranch and the house stood on the north side of the present Fletcher Parkway right at the intersection of Johnson Avenue. The Hawley house is presently being dismantled to make way for the construction of a restaurant.)

In the mid 1920's the Federal Government endeavored to start the propagation of wild pheasants in San Diego County. They brought many pheasants here and released them in various sections of the back country. One day in April 1926 young Forrest Hawley was cutting hay on his father's ranch near the present Gillespie Field. Suddenly there was a flurry of wings and bird excitement. Forrest dismounted and found a nest of pheasant eggs. He watched closely for the rest of the day but the pheasant hen did not return.

The next day he told his neighbor, Mr. McKenna, of the incident. Mr. McKenna told him that he had a setting hen and suggested that Forrest bring the pheasant eggs to the setting hen. This he did. The pheasant eggs hatched and there were twelve or more baby pheasants. With time the McKenna pheasant flock greatly increased. The McKenna's took a great interest in the pheasants and built most attractive cages for them among the Castle Rocks near the swimming pool just behind the house. Later Mr. McKenna brought to Forrest (in appreciation for the gift of pheasant eggs) a fine Airdale puppy - a pet which became a very important member of the Hawley household for a number of years.

About 1927 - Mr. J. B. Simpson - (owner of the Alaska Fur Company) who had come to San Diego to head the Balboa Brewing Company purchased Castle Rock Ranch. It was the Simpsons who had the old Castle Rock house torn down and a new house built in the same spot, using the same basement or cellar. The original home had been built of adobe. The new house was constructed of rock from the Santee quarry.

The stone house was planned very specially to suit life for Mr. and Mrs. Simpson as they desired it, with maid's quarters, and a special master bedroom suite with a sunken Roman bath. The sunken Roman bath was a tiled 3' x 6' bath with steps leading down into its 3' or 4' depth. It was equipped with four shower heads which were placed at different heights to accomodate the individual user. The entire house was beautifully built. Plans for the house were drawn by a San Diego architect and Mr. R. B. Jones of El Cajon, a very fine stone mason was engaged to build the entire structure. It took him somewhere between a year and a half and two years to complete the work. The time was probably between 1932 and 1934.

Soon after the new stone house was completed tragedy struck when Mrs. Simpson became suddenly ill and died enroute to the hospital. Her body was cremated and Mr. Simpson buried her ashes near the large rocks in the western section of the ranch beneath the shade of a large pepper tree. He enclosed the area with a low stone wall. Mr. Simpson moved to Los Angeles. His brother, Jerry Simpson, acted as caretaker at Castle Rock for a number of years.

Mr. and Mrs. Rupert L. Amstead were the last private owners of the ranch. They had it from 1945 to 1958. At that time it was sold to Bradley Properties.

During the entire time that Castle Rock Ranch was under private ownership and maintained as a family home it was a "showplace" in El Cajon Valley, but soon after it was vacated, it became the victim of vandalism. During these past few years much of its beauty was carried away - bit by bit and piece by piece.

Late comers in El Cajon Valley may recall Castle Rock as nothing but a site of devastation and seeming decay; but for those of longer residence in the Valley, memories of Castle Rock shall be those of beauty and order, of orchard and vineyard - a place for work, play, fun, swimming, parties, group meetings - a spot which at one time or another somehow touched the lives of so very many "who came this way". Yes, even for the Indians who so very many years before that had enjoyed it as a campground.