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THE STORY OF MAJOR LEVI CHASE
and
THE CHASE RANCH "CAJON VILLA" IN EL CAJON

Compiled by Hazel Sperry

The information for this story has been gleaned from the following written sources: Early issues of "El Cajon Valley News" and "The San Diego Union"; Elliott's History of San Diego and San Bernardino Counties - 1883; Douglas Gunn's Picturesque San Diego-1887; The History of San Diego County Ranches by Union Title Insurance Co.; Articles on "Historic Ranches" written by Philip S. Rush in earlier issues of The Southern California Rancher; A Partial History of El Cajon by W.S. Head.

Additional information and mementos were contributed by Mrs. Virginia McAuliffe, great granddaughter of Major Levi Chase; Mr. Everett Parsons, whose father Willis N. Parsons was employed on the Chase ranch for a number of years; Mrs. Etta Durbin Mercer and the Misses Gail and Mary Durbin whose parents, Mr. & Mrs. Delbert Durbin came to El Cajon in 1898 and established a ranch just south of the Chase ranch; Mrs. Iola Hall Roether, who played as a child with the Mckinney children when the Mckinney's were Caretakers at the "Cajon Villa" property.

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The activities of Major Levi Chase in El Cajon Valley began in 1868 when he was engaged by Mr. Isaac Lankershim of San Francisco to negotiate with the heirs of the Pedrorena family for the purchase of large acreages of land in the 48,799 acre Spanish Rancho El Cajon which had been granted to Dona Maria Antonia Estudillo Pedrorena, wife of Don Miguel de Pedrorena Sr. in 1845.

The purchase was not a simple transaction. It appears that Mr. Lankershim was taking over and completing a transaction which had begun a year or so earlier between Miguel Pedrorena Jr. and two men by the name of Mr. Jacob Knapp and Mr. J.W. Dodge. As the purchase was sort of a double transaction, the exact total amount paid for the total acreage involved in the sale is not too clear. The price quoted in one part of the agreement was at \$1.00 an acre and another report put the figure at about \$37,000 for 27,000 acres.

Isaac Lankershim was a San Francisco capitalist who developed large wheat acreages in various parts of California. He had a grist mill at 12th and "K" Streets in San Diego. Another of his developments was in the San Fernando Valley near Los Angeles.

When Mr. Lankershim bought this large acreage in Rancho El Cajon in 1868, 7,624 acres of the southwest section of the ranch were deeded to his lawyer, Major Levi Chase - presumably as payment for his services - services which were to require not only legal knowledge but also much dedication, optimism, and perseverance. For along with the purchase of the land, they had acquired some very

difficult and harassing legal problems whose solutions were to usurp much of the time and energy of Lawyer Major Levi Chase for the next seven years.

The original Spanish Rancho El Cajon grant had not been properly recorded with the United States government. Too, and largely because of it, homesteaders and squatters had begun settling on scattered areas of the ranch believing that it was legitimate homesteading land. And so the titles of the property owned by these early settlers were somewhat clouded during the seven years spent by Levi Chase in making the successful litigation. He finally had to carry it to the U. S. Supreme Court.

In 1874, through the efforts of Major Chase, a partition of the 48,799 acres was made by the district court as a result of a friendly litigation between the American settlers of the ranch. Then in 1876, a patent, signed by President U.S. Grant, was issued to the heirs of the Pedorena family confirming their earlier ownership of the entire 48,799 acres. This meant that the land sales and transactions undertaken by the Pedorena family through the years were legal and that those who had occupied the land as a result of those transactions now had clear title to their property.

It is interesting to note that in this friendly partition of lands (1874) that Major Levi Chase was awarded 3,786 acres as his entitlement although he had originally been deeded 7,624 acres in 1868.

Major Chase made his family residence in San Diego where he was a successful lawyer. He built a beautiful home at Twelfth and Broadway which was considered a show place in those early days of San Diego. His El Cajon ranch was conducted by a ranch foreman and crew of "ranch hands" - and all the necessary buildings for the care of the ranch and its workers were erected on the ranch.

Major Chase did build a weekend cottage at his "Cajon Villa" for the personal use of himself and family, but the large Chase home at 12th and Broadway" in San Diego was always their permanent home.

On his El Cajon property - for the first five or six years - Major Chase limited his farming activities to wheat and grain raising, and with selling portions of his vast acreage to prospective settlers who desired to acquire ranch property in the Valley.

Then in about 1875-76, in addition to continuing with grain raising on the more level areas, he began to develop about 100 or more acres as orchard, vineyard and garden "in a pretty little pocket on the south side of the Valley" and which he named "Cajon Villa". This was headquarters for all of his ranching activities. It was located along the present Chase Ave., the entrance being right at the present intersection of S. Anza and E. Chase Ave. (East side of Chase Ave.) The large boulders at the entrance are still standing there.

One early writer described the ranch as follows: "The Chase place is nestled into the south eastern corner of the Valley and shut in on three sides by hills. The house is located on a slightly elevated arm. The entrance to this "Villa Cajon" is picturesque in the extreme. The great granite boulders on either side of the drive are just as nature left them and seem to have been thrown there by some monstrous giant. The entire drive is lined by great Eucalyptus and flower trees". (There was a beautiful driveway running completely through the ranch from the west entrance to the east.)

In the Golden Era Magazine - July 1888, in referring to the Chase ranch in El Cajon Valley it said - "It was the first orchard and vineyard worked on the modern plan".

"Cajon Villa" or "Villa El Cajon" as it was called by some, was often referred to as an experimental ranch. Major Chase planted many different kinds of fruit trees and grape vines to test their suitability to this soil and climate. With most all of them he experienced great success. He also conducted experiments to determine the value of thorough and deep plowing and cultivating.

On the ranch he had a large orchard of oranges, lemons, and limes. Also an orchard of peaches, one of apricots, and sections, too, of English walnuts, olives, pears, apples, plums, prunes, nectarines, quince, loquats, and even some cherry trees. His almond trees did not prove successful. In his large vineyard he had both raisin grapes and table grapes. His raisins were considered of highest quality. The raisins were dried and packed right at the ranch.

The oranges and other citrus fruits were also packed in the ranch packing house. Photos given to the El Cajon Library by Mr. Everett Parsons show the men picking and packing the citrus fruit on the Chase Ranch in about 1890. The ends of the wooden packing boxes are stamped as follows:

Put up at Cajon Villa
by
Major Levi Chase
San Diego.

In the garden section they grew all of the things that make for good eating - including an abundance of watermelons. It was those luscious, mouth watering melons that hold a place of very special significance in the boyhood memories of Mr. Everett Parsons of 1510 E. Chase Ave., whose father, Mr. Willis N. Parsons worked on the Chase Ranch for a number of years, beginning his service there in about 1890.

As was stated previously, the ranch was operated by a ranch foreman and helpers. The ranch foreman there for many years was "Doc" Fisler. For transportation in those early days he drove a two wheeled cart or buggy drawn by a very beautiful horse.

A number of buildings were necessary to take care of all the ranch operations. The Chase ranch had its own packing house right on the ranch. Also there was a house for the ranch foreman and a boarding house for the "ranch hands". And of course there were barns, stables, and sheds for the animals, hay storage, farm equipment etc. The ranch cook was Chinese. He wore his hair in a "cue" or long braid.

It was in 1876 that Major Chase built a country cottage or weekend home at Cajon Villafor his personal family use. In the San Diego Union, Dec. 17, 1876 it said, "we learn that Major L. Chase is having erected on his place in the Cajon Valley a very handsome cottage residence to cost about \$1500. Mr. Journey is the builder and will finish it in about 60 day".

At first, irrigation when needed, was provided by a deep well, a steam pump and pipes. After the completion of the San Diego flume which passed through El Cajon Valley along the east and south hills, Major Chase made use of the flume water also for his ranch. However he never irrigated his vineyard at any time, and his grapes and raisins were of choicest quality.

Each year he planted large acreages to wheat after the soil had been well cultivated and prepared. The following is an excerpt from Douglas Gunn's book "Picturesque San Diego - 1887" - "It is the opinion of Major Chase, backed by very substantial evidence, that the occassional failures of the wheat crop in this Valley in dry years might have been entirely avoided by thorough deep plowing and cultivation of the soil, instead of the more surface "scratching"

that has been the vogue. On his own tract planted in grain, which he has regularly plowed since 1870, he has never had a failure of crop".

Also this interesting item appeared in the El Cajon Valley News of Nov. 26, 1892 - "Major Levi Chase is sowing 250 acres or more of wheat for hay. It is put in with a riding cultivator drawn by six horses. The man doing the work claimed that it could be done more easily now than after the rain set in as the cultivator would not clog. But oh! how the outfit did make the dust fly".

From news items in the El Cajon Valley News we learn that Major Chase and his wife made a trip around the world in about 1891-92. An item in the Aug. 20, 1892 issue reads - "The familiar face of Major Chase is seen in the Valley quite often lately. An absence of more than a year in foreign travel has not weakened his attachment to beautiful Cajon in the least".

Yes. "Cajon Villa" was a show place and no doubt it was the stimulus which prompted a number of other people to become residents and to establish fine ranches in El Cajon Valley.

In the mid 1880's El Cajon experienced quite a real estate boom. At this time Major Chase was able to sell more of his undeveloped land.

Cajon Villa continued its extensive ranching operations until sometime after the death of Major Chase in 1906. It was about 1910 that the remaining property was broken up into parcels and sold off. Mr. Charles Chase, son of Major Levi Chase, engaged Mr. Al Miller, a long time real estate salesman in El Cajon Valley, to subdivide the ranch.

At that time the Chase family cottage at Cajon Villa was closed. Ranch operations ceased and the McKinney family were engaged as caretakers of the property.

In reminiscing about "early days", Mrs. Iola Hall Roether recalls of having gone into the Chase cottage with the McKinneys after the cottage had been closed. Her keenest recollection is of the beautiful chandeliers and a very lovely music box.

In the mid 1920's one of Charles Chase's daughters, Mrs. Gertrude McAuliffe, and her son and daughter, Gilbert and Virginia moved into the Chase cottage where Mrs. McAuliffe continued to live until her death in 1959.

Each year since then has seen additional homes being erected on residential plots of ground which have been cut out of the Cajon Villa Ranch, but the plots of ground are large enough to still maintain a country atmosphere.

At the time of this writing (February 1968) Mr. & Mrs. Harold G. Lutz and family are the proud new owners of the site at 1010 E. Chase Ave. which was the original entrance to Cajon Villa ranch and upon which was built the original Chase cottage.

In every respect possible they are endeavoring to preserve the few remaining original structures, and to incorporate them into their building plans. The "round house" which was the original kitchen of the Chase cottage is being incorporated into the new house plans. Also a shed and a stable which was built by Mrs. McAuliffe (granddaughter of Major Chase) are also being preserved.

In a recent conversation with Mr. Lutz, the writer related to him the following comment which had been made by Mrs. Etta Durbin Mercer - "Of all the ranches I have known, I believe that none were as beautiful as the Chase Ranch. The drive through "Cajon Villa" as one passed along the driveway which ran completely through the ranch from west to east was so very beautiful with the beautiful

plantings on all sides - and not a weed anyplace". And to this Mr. Lutz replied, "We are endeavoring to preserve everything about it that we can, but I fear that it may be some time before I can reach Mr. Chase's accomplishment of "no weeds".

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MAJOR LEVI CHASE AND FAMILY

Major Levi Chase, born in Calias, Maine, October 26, 1823, spent his early life in New York State where he was a railroad construction contractor. He married Elizabeth Wheeler and they had two children, Charles A. Chase and Charlotte Chase. The wife and daughter died of Typhoid fever in 1848 leaving just Mr. Levi Chase and young son, Charles. In 1850, he went to Wapello, Iowa, where he studied law.

At the outbreak of the Civil War he volunteered his services and won for himself and his Company many honors for conspicuous gallantry. He was appointed Captain and then Major. At the end of the war he resigned his commission and returned to his law practice.

He remarried in 1853 to a Cornelia King. He came West after the close of the Civil War. He practiced as a lawyer in San Diego and was one of the oldest members of the San Diego Bar Association. His house on Broadway between 11th and 12th Streets was at one time one of the show places of the city. He was regarded in San Diego as one of the richest men in the county.

He developed large acreages in El Cajon Valley. His El Cajon ranch was called "Cajon Villa".

He retired from his law practice about 1895.

He died May 31, 1906 and was buried in Morristown, New Jersey.

His son, Charles, was of adult age when Major and Mrs. Chase moved to San Diego. Charles Chase had a drug store in San Diego - established in 1872. Charles A. Chase married Cora Agnes Pefley and they had five children - Estelle, Gertrude, Lewis, Harlan, and Sidney. At first they lived above the drugstore. Later they built a home at 2nd and "C" Streets in San Diego.