

A Brief History of Escondido

Adapted from an article by Bill Fark

Most California Indians lived in crude huts that were grouped in small villages. In northern San Diego County, the Luisenos were found above the San Luis Rey River near Mission San Luis Rey and the Dieguenos were close to the San Diego Mission. The Indians were content to live on what nature gave them. Game was plentiful and they skinned rabbits to make blanket-like coverings for the women to wear. Their diet consisted of woodrats, ground squirrels, rabbits, deer and vegetables that grew wild. Acorns from the oak trees were a staple food and were plentiful in the mountainous areas.

The Escondido valley was not under the jurisdiction of the San Diego or San Luis Rey missions. Since it was the belief of early missionaries that land not held by the church belonged to the devil, some people believe that is why the valley was given the name Rincon del Diablo or “corner of the devil.”

Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. In 1834, the vast lands were carved into ranchos that were given to leading California Mexicans. Juan Bautista Alvarado, a native of San Diego, received the land grant described as El Rincon del Diablo Rancho. Alvarado built a large adobe house overlooking Escondido. Alvarado raised cattle on his land. The hides were taken to San Diego and sold to owners of trading vessels.

Both Juan Bautista Alvarado and his wife died in the early 1850s. Their children did not want to settle in the area and each sold their shares of the rancho to a San Diego judge named Oliver S. Witherby. It took about a decade for him to acquire all of the land. He farmed extensively and increased the size of his cattle and sheep herds. In the early 1860s Witherby began mining gold on his property. The judge also built a mill to grind ore for what he named the Rincon del Diablo and Escondido Mining Company. This was the first recorded use of the word Escondido.

By 1868, Witherby was already short of money and sold his rancho to Edward McGeary and the three Wolfskill brothers, John, Matthew and Josiah. They changed the predominately cattle ranch into a sheep ranch with John Wolfskill as the resident manager. For many years a part of the Escondido Valley was known as Wolfskill Plains. During their 15-year ownership the size of the rancho was increased to 12,813.87 acres by the purchase of a “squatter’s” 160.1 acres. There was no attempt to attract settlers but reports of the valley’s beauty and balmy climate began to spread.

In 1883, a group of men formed a company called The Stockton Company and purchased Rincon del Diablo for \$128,138.70. A year later these landowners transferred their interest in the valley to the Escondido Company. They planted a large vineyard of Muscat grapes that required little irrigation and Escondido became known for its juicy Muscats.

The Escondido Company’s ownership of the valley did not last long. On March 1, 1886 they deeded the area to the Escondido Land & Town Company for \$104,042. Organizers of this company were Jacob Gruendyke (the first president of the company), five Thomas brothers who came here from Kansas (A. Richard, William W., John R., George V., and Charles E.) and seven other business associates. The Escondido Land & Town Company set to work subdividing the land and planting more vineyards and citrus groves.

In 1886 they constructed the 100-room Escondido Hotel on the site of today’s downtown Palomar Medical Center and gave free land to any religious organization that would build a

church here. Soon there were seven churches in the young community. The University of Southern California, supported by the Methodist church, built a beautiful three story building on the hill at Third and Hickory. It was a seminary for college students during its first years. Later it became Escondido's first high school (1894) and remained so until a new school was built on Fourth and Hickory in 1927. The old seminary was lost in a fire in 1929.

Construction of a rail line from Oceanside to Escondido was started in March 1887. The Escondido Land & Town Company invested in the railroad because they knew it was necessary to haul the freight from town and bring prospective settlers to the area. The Santa Fe Depot as built at the west end of Grand Avenue. The first freight to leave Escondido in January 1888 was a load of wheat. The Depot served passengers until after World War II in 1945. The depot was moved to its current site in Grape Day Park in 1984 when it was no longer needed for freight storage. A freight train continues to make the trip to Escondido from Oceanside several times a week. The Sprinter reestablished passenger service in 2007.

In 1886, the Land & Town Company drilled several wells to provide irrigation water for the groves that they planted. The next year the Escondido Irrigation District was formed to build a reservoir. The City of Escondido was incorporated October 8, 1888 with a population of 249. Now it was possible to pass a bond issue for \$450,000 in 1890. With the money a ditch line and dam were built bringing water from the San Luis Rey River into the Bear Valley water shed above present day Lake Wohlford. The gate was opened in July 1895 allowing water to run through. The water bonds were repaid in 1905. A celebration and bond burning at the Lime Street Elementary School (located in present day Grape Day Park) was held on the date (September 9) of California's statehood, referred to as Admissions Day.

In Spanish the word "escondido" means "hidden." Today, as in the past, Escondido is often referred to as the "hidden valley." In the 1890s, the mayor of Escondido attempted to popularize the sunshiny climate by referring to the Sun Kissed Vale rather than the Hidden Valley. The spelling changed to Sunkist when Escondido citrus flourished, and the fruit was marketed under the Sunkist brand. The Hidden Valley designation remained and today it is part of our everyday usage.

In 1886, the surveyed townsite streets ran north and south and were named for trees and plants in alphabetical order from Ash to Tulip. Some names have been changed; Lime Street became Broadway in 1930. Avenues named for states ran east and west. This became very confusing; in 1930, ordinal numbering (second, third...) was substituted when the post office began home delivery of the mail. Traces of the old names still remain. Look for the original names imprinted in the old cement sidewalks along the curbs, e.g., Juniper and 5th.

The main shopping street was named Grand Avenue. The city founders wanted it to be wide. Grand Avenue was graded 100 feet wide with board sidewalks. Dust was kept down by sprinkling. By 1913 the street was paved and the sidewalk cemented. The palm trees were planted in 1914 as part of a city beautification project.

To celebrate the grape harvest every September, an event called Grape Day began on September 9, 1908. Many visitors attended for the day, arriving on the train and spending the night at the Escondido Hotel. A parade on Grand Avenue ended at the site of the elementary school grounds, later named Grape Day Park. The event was much like a county fair with prizes being given for the best-grown citrus, vegetables and poultry. A Grape Day Queen reigned over the event. Grape Day continued to be a very popular celebration (second in the state to the Rose Parade) until 1950, when lack of grapes in the valley caused its demise. Grape Day was revived in 1996. Grapes were a great crop early on because they could be grown with

little or no water. When water became available, citrus and avocados replaced the vineyards, bringing more money per acre at harvest. Many of the vineyards on the east end of town became home sites during the building boom of the 1950s.

In 1950 Highway 395 linked Escondido to San Diego, cutting commuting time. The county had many defense contracts in the 1950s, due to both the Cold War and Korea. More people moved into the area but housing was needed. Subdivisions were the answer. Many of the vineyards on the east end of town, as well as citrus groves, became home sites during the building boom of the 1950s. Citrus production declined to the point that in 1960 the lemon packing house, said to be largest in the world under one roof, closed for good. Some citrus groves were converted to avocados, but industry and retail gained importance.

Since mid-century, Escondido has become in some respects a bedroom community. But the city also boasts a large hospital, Palomar Medical Center, and quite a bit of retail including the Escondido Auto Park, Westfield Shopping Town North County, and a charming downtown. When the California Center for the Arts, Escondido open in 1994 it brought a new level of sophistication and entertainment to the city.

Old Escondido, the city's oldest neighborhood is a designated historic district where Victorians sit side by side with bungalows. Adjacent to downtown and full of period charm, the neighborhood has become in very desirable place to live, with prices to match. Downtown is experiencing a revival as a result of specialty shops, art galleries, antiques and restaurants combined with events such as a weekly farmer's market, bi-annual street faires and the popular Cruisin' Grand, a vintage car show on the street every Friday night April through September that brings out hundreds of Fords and Chevys for a family oriented night of fun.