

IRVINE RANCH HISTORY

1769 - 1942

1769 - 1800

Spanish Crown began colonization of California with Gaspar de Portola's 1769 expedition from Mexico to San Francisco. Jose Antonio Yorba was a sergeant in that expedition and later was the recipient of one of the large Spanish land grants in what is now Orange County. The purpose of the expedition was to chart the area for potential ports and possible sites for religious/military establishments to initiate settlement for the Spanish crown of the land discovered in 1542 by Juan Cabrillo.

During the 30 years that followed Portola's expedition Spain strengthened its hold on the New World by building Presidios and Missions along California's coast.

It is estimated that in the latter part of the 18th century over 200,000 Indians roamed the area's fertile plains and valleys. But by the end of the century most of the Indians had come under the jurisdiction of the Catholic missions.

1800 -1810

By 1801, Jose Antonio Yorba and his father-in-law, Juan Pablo Grijalva, began to pasture their cattle on land that would later be granted to Yorba but which he had first seen while part of Portola's expedition. On July 1,1810 the Spanish provincial governor granted Yorba and his nephew, Juan Peralta, ownership of the 62,516 acre Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. It was one of the few Spanish grants made to private citizens. It extended from the Santa Ana Mountains to the Pacific ocean. It bordered on the northern edge of the future Irvine Ranch (including a portion of the N/E corner of it) and now includes a portion or all of the cities of Santa Ana, Tustin and Costa Mesa.

1822 - 1846

In 1822 Mexico gained independence from Spain and claimed California. Over the next ten years Mexico repossessed most of the lands Spain had allocated to the California missions under the "secularization Act". Among the lands repossessed were a number of ranchos controlled by the Mission San Juan Capistrano including the Cienega de las Ranas (Swamp of the frogs) and Rancho San Joaquin.

The lands, which were to have been returned to native Indians, were in fact then opened to petitioners. One of the petitioners was Don Jose Andres Sepulveda who had moved from Los Angeles to land formerly occupied by Mission San Juan Capistrano. He and his family then occupied a house originally built by Spanish missionaries.

In 1837 the Mexican governor Alvarado granted Sepulveda the Rancho Cienega de las Ranas and in 1842 the Rancho Bolsas de San Joaquin. The two grants were administered as a unit and the 48,803 acres soon became known as Rancho San Joaquin and made up the lower half of what within 30 years was to become the Irvine Ranch. Prior to severe droughts which virtually destroyed his cattle empire, Sepulveda had the largest of all the California cattle ranches, grazing 14,000 head of cattle and 3,000 head of horses.

The upper part of the Irvine Ranch also came from an original Mexican land grant known as El Rancho Lomas de Santiago (Ranch of the Hills of St. James.) Rancho Santiago was officially granted on May 26, 1846 to Teodosio Yorba, son of Jose Yorba. Teodosio had actually grazed his cattle on the property for ten years before receiving the grant but when it became clear that the United States intended to annex California he petitioned the Mexican governor for the grant based on prior occupation and improvements. Final certification of the grant, however, didn't occur until July 7, 1846,

the same day the United States seized the town of Monterey, raised the American flag, fired a salute, and formally proclaimed California was now part of the United States.

Americanization

1846 - 1868

Although the United States claimed California was part of that country in 1846 it wasn't until two years later, 1848, that the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed with the Mexican government, ending the Mexican War and officially giving California to the US. The treaty provided that the US. would protect native Californians by recognizing "legitimate titles to every description of property." However, it wasn't until Congress passed the Act of 1851 that the US. established a procedure for "settling private land claims."

Although both Yorbas and Sepulveda were to successfully confirm their ownership rights in their respective ranchos over the next 15 years deaths, debts and droughts caused them and/or their descendants to sell or lose the once famous ranchos.

In 1860, just nine years after the Act of 1851, Don Teodosio Yorba and his wife sold their 47,227 acre **Rancho Lomas de Santiago** to William Wolfskill for \$7,000 (15 cents per ac.) Wolfskill was a contemporary of Don Jose Sepulveda and owned land through-out California. He was one of the outstanding pioneers of California's wine industry. He also was a cultivator of tropical and domestic fruits, the founder of the commercial orange industry in California, and is credited with having introduced large-scale lima bean culture to the Los Angeles area.

In addition to the upper portion of the Irvine Ranch and the University of California, Irvine, lands once owned by Wolfskill have also become the site of the University of California, Santa Barbara, the community of Westwood located at the front gate of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the present day new town known as Newhall, Calif..

However, unfortunately for Wolfskill, the severe drought of 1863-64 followed shortly after his purchase of Lomas de Santiago. Cattle that had sold for \$8 a head in January 1863 were but within just a few months could only be sold for the value of their hides and horns - \$2 to \$3 per head. So in March of 1866 William Wolfskill sold Rancho Lomas de Santiago and interest (probably notes) he held in Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana to Llewellyn Bixby, Dr. Thomas and Benjamin Flint, and James Irvine for \$7,000 - the same price he paid the Yorba family six years earlier.

As time passed ownership interests in **Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana** were also sold and/or willed to many heirs and "aliens" (Americans). By the mid-sixties many "Americans" held fractional interest in the Rancho. Although only a small portion of the Irvine Ranch comes from this Rancho that portion became part of the Ranch via a lawsuit filed by one of the Americans (Sterns) for distribution and division of the Rancho to cover outstanding debts. Due to the fact that the Irvine, Flint, Bixby interest had become holders of some of the Rancho debt as part of their purchase of Rancho Santiago from Wolfskill they joined in the suit and in a judgment recorded on Feb. 24, 1868 they were awarded 3800 acres (8 miles long and 3/4 mile wide.)

Although Sepulveda's productive **Rancho San Joaquin** provided him with an unparalleled living style, his penchant for gambling and unrivaled hospitality could not be supported by a ranch even as grand as the one he had been granted. Then the "great drought of 1860-64 came and Sepulveda reached the end of his financial rope. So on

Dec. 7, 1864 he sold the Rancho to Irvine, Bixby and the Flints (as tenants in Common) for \$18,000 (36 cents per acre.)

JAMES IRVINE SR. ERA

1864 - 1886

Together with several smaller acquisitions by the end of the 1860's the Irvine/Flint/Bixby interest now owned (in one contiguous piece) some 108,000 acres for which they paid a total of \$41,000 (38 cents per acre.) Adjoining tracts were later added increasing their land holdings to approximately 125,000 acres.