

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY: TWO HUNDRED YEARS IN TRANSITION

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As San Fernando Valley approaches its 200th year of modern history, there are indications it is finally approaching urban maturity. Prior to this time the area has witnessed successive stages of settlement and land use, which, like the flush of wild flowers on a spring hillside, have come and gone, leaving behind only weathered vestiges to signal their former presence. This report briefly reviews the periods of human settlement in the valley since it was first visited by Europeans and focuses attention on the present as an integral part of Metropolitan Southern California.

In the year 1769, Gaspar de Portolá led a party of Spanish explorers north up tortuous Sepulveda Canyon and over the Santa Monica Mountains, dropping into a broad, grassy valley rising gently to the north, dotted with massive oak trees. As seen by these early explorers, the Valley of Encinos, as it was first named, was a gently undulating, triangle-shaped, structural valley, 235 square miles in size, surrounded by rugged hills and mountains. Crossing from northwest to southeast was an intermittent stream which exited from the valley at a narrow gap between hills, a gap later to become the major transportation route for the region.

Modern settlement in the valley began in 1784 with the establishment of Rancho San Rafael by Corporal José María Verdugo, in the present Burbank-Glendale area.¹ In 1791, Mission San Fernando, founded in the gap between Mission San Gabriel and Mission San Buenaventura, was awarded nearly all the remaining unalienated valley lands.² Before long the Franciscan missionaries had attracted hundred of neophytes, managed large herds of sheep and cattle, and were successfully growing crops. Wool textiles, soap, leather goods, tallow, tile, and wine were the principal items produced. For a time Mission San Fernando, along with the other twenty missions in California, was a principal supplier for military posts in this distant Spanish province.

The Mission's decline began in the Mexican period when its lands were secularized in 1834 and only the church was placed in the priests' hands. Later the lands were sold to raise revenue for an abortive struggle against the advancing Americans. By 1875 the former mission lands had substantially passed to American owners, with the north and south halves going to separate land associations.³ In the early years, sheep and wheat shared most of the valley, but the founding of the town of San Fernando in 1874 was soon followed by plotting of Pacoima, Burbank, Chatsworth, and Lankershim (later named North Hollywood).

It was in the 1880's that the Valley, now named after the mission, came to be known far beyond the limits of California through the efforts of real estate speculators who sought to entice settlers with notices of cheap

¹ Bancroft, H. H., *History of California*, Vol. 1, 1542-1800, San Francisco, A. L. Bancroft & Co., 1884, p. 661.

² Engelhardt, Zephyrin, *San Fernando Rey: The Mission of the Valley*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1927, p. 47.

³ Keffer, Frank, *History of the San Fernando Valley*, Glendale: Stillman Printing Co., 1934, p. 49.

land and a superlative climate. Railway fares from the east were set at a ridiculously low rate and visitors were welcome at elaborately-planned field days. Although many came, the frenzied land boom of 1888 ended in sudden collapse and a temporary depression, but not before the foundation had been laid for the third era of valley occupation—the town and fruit farm period.

By 1900 orchard farming had spread along the margins of towns and began filling the open spaces. To the southwest of San Fernando grew oranges and to the northeast olives. Peaches and apricots were in the North Hollywood area and walnuts in the west valley. Vegetable farms were scattered here and there in response to urban demand. The Great Owens Valley aqueduct soon brought water into the valley to supplement underground supplies.

The end of World War I found the valley mostly under crops or in residential communities, with the major thoroughfares seen today already surveyed. Suburban lines of the Pacific Electric Railway were extended from Los Angeles to San Fernando and Van Nuys. By this time the settlements of Sherman Oaks, Encino, and Woodland Hills had grown up along the southeast margin, and Canoga Park, Reseda, Northridge, and Granada Hills filled in most of the remaining west Valley. These, and other settlements, excepting San Fernando and Burbank, had been incorporated into Los Angeles City between 1913 and 1915. At this time the Valley, with a population of about 50,000, could be characterized as rural. Each of the dozen or so residential communities was surrounded by farmlands, with principal outside ties gained through major and suburban railway lines, particularly with Los Angeles, but also with northern settlements.

Hints of a change in occupation began in the east Valley when in 1928 Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, now a strategic manufacturer of military and commercial airplanes, located its plant in Burbank. As the company grew through the 1930's, allied industries clustered about it, adding their demand for labor to that of Lockheed's, until ultimately the east valley came to be associated almost exclusively with aircraft manufacturing. Orchard and vegetable farms adjacent to Burbank and North Hollywood gave way to residential land use as an urban picture began to emerge.

Meanwhile, the west Valley, encompassing all the area beyond Van Nuys, and San Fernando, remained mainly rural in character. The suburban railway line from Los Angeles penetrated only to the community of San Fernando, and, although the through railroad passed beyond that town, it soon turned into mountains and did not furnish a connection with the west Valley. Another line eventually crossed the entire valley, exiting at Chatsworth, but this offered no easy access to the outside. Roads were commonly interrupted by streams and gullies, and only two or three were passable throughout the valley.

What industry there was during the time between the two great wars sprang from agriculture. In Sylmar, north of San Fernando, olives were processed; immediately southwest of San Fernando oranges were picked for shipping, and farther southwest around Northridge-Reseda walnuts were the export commodity. Dairy and poultry farms were situated in the southwest limits.

But with the advent of Hollywood and the cult of cinema personalities, a new era began, that of suburban San Fernando Valley, indentified particularly with the western half of the basin. The earliest migration occurred down the north slope valleys of the Santa Monica Mountains; but before long the earthy pastoral life lured many celebrities across the valley and soon formerly pure farm communities included some members of the Hollywood industry. Universal, Warner Bros., and particularly Republic movie studios situated themselves along the northeastern flanks of the Santa Monicas, within easy reach of a still undefiled landscape in the peripheral mountains where western sagas could be filmed.

The years from 1930 to 1940 in the west valley, indeed, saw the height of the suburban period. In 1930 Valley population amounted to 78,000, with perhaps one-quarter in the western portion.⁴ By 1940 with population at 155,000 the proportion approached one-third. A bucolic scene, mingled with large livestock-breeding estates, imparted an aura of rural serenity that was to characterize the valley through the years of World War II, idealized in song and story.

This then was the picture in San Fernando Valley at the close of World War II in 1945: population stood at about 230,000; in the east Valley, largely around Burbank and North Hollywood, aircraft manufacturing and associated industries dominated the landscape as a sort of industrial extension of the Los Angeles basin, and in the west Valley a rural scene prevailed between the residential and market towns and literally no manufacturing was to be found.

The Valley's current era of explosive population growth and land use change began immediately following the war. In the five-year interval 1945-1950 population nearly doubled, going from 230,000 to 403,000, an rate of increase equal to 2,880 persons per month, a rate somewhat above the natural increment. Between 1950 and 1960 immigration jumped to 3,650 per month. Since this represents about 720 families per month, it is not surprising that the most apparent Valley change is in the residential picture. For example, since 1949 not less than 125 new subdivisions were surveyed each year. The highest number was 401, this in 1956. New dwellings averaged nearly 12,000 annually, the peak being 17,000 in 1953-1954. A few minutes drive, particularly in the west Valley, are enough to grasp the meaning of these data. Tract followed tract where orchard land spread before. There are the drab, the faceless houses; there are also the expansive properties trimmed by neatly appointed gardens; and the number yet to come is awesome.

But while residential land use grew several-fold in the years 1950-1960, industry, too, spread across the Valley, changing in character and portent as it entered. To Van Nuys, came Lockheed's Missile and Space Division and the Marquardt Corporation; to Northridge, RCA's West Coast Missile and Surface Radar Division; and to Canoga Park, North American Aviation's Rocketdyne Division and the Thompson-Ramo-Wooldrige Laboratories. And into the Simi Mountains nestled Rocketdyne's Propulsion Field Laboratory to rend the still west Valley air with the

⁴ Security First National Bank, Research Department, *The Growth and Economic Stature of the San Fernando Valley*, 1960, Los Angeles; published by author, September, 1960, p. 8. Statistical data for the remainder of this brief historical review are taken from this study.

thunderous blast of ignited rocket power under test. In other Valley areas Atomics International of North American Aviation, Bendix Corporation, Radioplane of Northrup Corporation, Chevrolet and Fisher Body of General Motors Corporation, joined the older industries, By 1960, there were in the Valley, 92 enterprises employing 100 or more persons and 12 with 1,000 or more. Of these, 40% were in electronics, and defense research and development. The San Fernando Valley had by this time expanded beyond aircraft manufacturing to the field of advanced space engineering. The leading manufacturing communities were Burbank, Van Nuys, Canoga Park, and North Hollywood. Employment in 1960 in manufacturing was approximately 80,000 and total employment was about 240,000. In addition to the 5,000 acres then in industry, another 3,000 were zoned but unused, an appreciable reserve for future growth.

Meanwhile, intra- and inter-regional ties had been strengthened. Although numerous interruptions persisted, most roads through the Valley were paved by 1960.

But the most striking feature in the transportation scene by now are the inter-regional freeways that will eventually lace through the Valley. Now about one-third completed, freeways to total some 80 miles in length will cross east-west and north-south and provide rapid transportation to most places within the Valley and connect it with Los Angeles and the Coast.

There are many qualities of San Fernando Valley which distinguish it as a region of conspicuous consumption. It is an area of high income. For example, in 1959 total income was \$2.6 billion, higher than the income in each of 18 states. Estimated per capita income was \$3,175, compared to \$2,926 for Los Angeles County, and well above the national per capita income. Median family income was \$7,091, higher than the county's \$5,818, and topped only by Beverly Hills at approximately \$11,500. The number of automobiles on the Valley streets similarly attests to affluence. Forty-five percent of the families own two or more cars. In the county 30% of the families have more than one car. The ultimate symbol of wealth, however, is the swimming pool. In the two-year period 1959-1960, permits for nearly 6,000 residential pools were issued, and by all indications pool construction in 1961 continues at an accelerated pace.

What of the future? Population in 1960 stood at 840,000. Estimates for 1970 are for 1,250,000 people and for 1980, 1,600,000, about double the present number. This would presume complete urban residential build up, with probably an increase in multiple-dwelling units. In the period 1951-1956 multiple dwellings represented 20% of all houses built. In the period 1956-1960, this figure increase to 35%. There is, in any case, no slackening in the population growth and building pace in the San Fernando Valley. Although the region has changed markedly in the past 10 years, the next 20 appear to promise still greater change.