HISTORIC LORE SURROUNDS VIEJAS

Editor's note: This is the 74th of a series of articles dealing with San Diego county place names.

By John Davidson

Like many older California names coming down from Spanish and early Mexican times that of Viejas (Vee-eh-hahs) is applied to a mountain, many roads that traverse it and other nearby mountains, the valley of which constitutes the principal wall, the stream that flows at its base, the rancheria maintained on it by Indians, the ranch which surrounds and climbs it, a school in the neighborhood, and even such modern improvements as bridges and the like.

The name is most commonly heard as Vee-yahs; and those responsible for this distortion are not newcomers, tourists unfamiliar with Spanish, but many who have lived longest in the county; descendants of American pioneers who have been constantly exposed to the correct pronunciation because of long association with Spanish-speaking people, Mexican ranchers and cattlemen as well as Indians whose ancestors roamed mountain and valley and called them their own.

There is an interesting story in the name, which means "Old Women." A legend of ancient tribal warfare says that the old women and little children were sent to this protected valley while the men and younger women fought. Charles F. Emery, who knows the region well, says that he used to hear that the Indians sent their old women into this valley to fend for themselves, that they lived on clover and grass, roots and so on—anything they could find.

Road Misnamed

Viejas mountain (El Monte de las Viejas, Monte Viejas are other forms of the name) is 4224 feet high; described in the soil survey as rough stony land. It is an outstanding feature of the Alpine scene. The "Victoria" or "Queen of the Mountain" rock, a noted landmark, is at the foot of the mountain about two miles from Alpine. Emery says: "There was a mine on the north side of the mountain which we all called the Spiritualist mine, because the man who opened it was supposed to be a Spiritualist. I never heard that he found any gold there. There is a live spring on the mountain.

"The road that is now called the Viejas grade is not on Viejas mountain but Descanso mountain. There are several old grades on Viejas. The old toll road was built in the early '70s by A. P. Frary, who owned the Stonewall mine. The county bought the toll road rights and opened it as a county road. It was terribly stony and almost impassable. It came down the canyon. That new road opened up a big section of the county, for we used to have to go all the way round by Tijuana and Campo to get into Pine valley. I was keeping store at Alpine in the '90s and I told the Indians if they would make a road out of the old horseback trail, so that they could haul wood out, I would buy the wood. I sold them the powder and tools for this work and they built it. It went out of the valley and north towards Julian. It was off to the left, turning right out of Viejas valley on the south branch of the San Diego river, where the Conejos Indians had their rancheria."

Grant in 1846

The Viejas ranch was granted in 1846 to Ramon and Leandro Osuna, and consisted of 13,314 acres. In 1851, it was claimed by William Williams and wife, Ramona, of Agua Caliente township. Their declaration of homestead, dated Aug. 24, 1860, gave the boundaries as "a line running up the mountain from the valley above the house toward the coast, to a spring called the spring of the hut containing all the valley known and designated as Rancho del Valle de las Viejas."

In the book "City and County of San Diego," page 50, there is this note: "South of the San Diego river we find no mountain valley larger than Viejas which, with its branches, contains some 2500 acres of fine tillable land at an elevation of 2200 feet and 30 miles from the coast."

There was a post office "Viejas," established in 1887. The population then was given as 300. A description of this period says that the valley "is considered one of the best grain-growing sections in the county. Bee-keeping is a prominent interest."

In early days, John Treat had a dairy there; James Swim harvested in 1872 "a large lot of wheat," and Emery says "Harbison had an apiary there in the '70s. John Rick worked for him. They had about 200 hives. The owner of the south side of Viejas valley was a man named Clendening. I remember he had some kind of shooting scrape over the property."

Emery also remembers that Clark Brawly bought property on the south side of the valley and that members of the Brawly family still are living in San Diego. Last year the government bought the valley and put Indians in there. They were partly El Capitan Indians and partly Los Conejos.

The records of the county school headquarters show that Viejas school was established May 11, 1889, and that the first teacher was Miss Ida Wright, whose term was 1890-1891. The 1892-3 teacher was Bessie E. Harritt. On June 23, 1891, Viejas school became part of the Alpine union, being called until last year (1933-34) Monte Viejas union. The name now is Alpine union.

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The San Diego Julian Toll Road was actually built by George Washington Webb and his son and laborers. It was largely intended to serve the Stonewall Jackson Mine and Julian mines. See San Diego Union, March 16, 1872. It was deeded by Webb to San Diego County in 1874. See Deeds Book 23 page 212.
Rancho Valle de las Viejas y Mesa del Arroz consisted of over 17,000 acres, of which over 4,000 acres were deeded to Williams and Robinson in 1848. Williams was not yet married to Ramona and he was at the time a rancher in the Volcan/Santa Ysabel area in Agua Caliente Township (Warner Springs).
The Imperial Valley city of Brawley was named for this family. A milk house in Viejas survives, built with 18-inch stone walls with an inscription "1894 Braly," located east of Brown's Road by Willows Road. The original 1850's two-story adobe house of "Cockney Bill" Williams was situated by a spring southeast of this intersection, according to a county survey map of the nineteenth century.