An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

Vintage Cameras – Vintage Photos

July 2015

Our mystery for July involved four vintage photos of buildings in early Alpine. The photos were all taken with vintage cameras such as those on display in the Fred Bray Collection at the Alpine Historical Society's John DeWitt Museum. We know that all four buildings were erected in the 1890's and two of them are still in use today. So what is the mystery that these four buildings have in common? Well, these important structures and many more civic projects were financed by Benjamin Arnold.

Mr. Arnold was born in Rhode Island in 1822 and lived most of his life in the New England states. He married Harriet Leonard in 1843 and ran a very successful business trading American-made goods for spices, coffee, tea, fancy fabrics, furs, ivory, and all manner of goods from countries all over the world.

The Arnolds moved to Alpine sometime during 1887-1888, to see if the clean, dry air would soothe Mr. Arnold's asthma – and it did. So they stayed on, purchasing property in the center of town. They hired local labor and built a fine home on what we now call Alpine Boulevard, just east of the original Alpine Store and Alpine Post Office. Only the stone pillars and iron gates remain today, but in its day the Arnold house was something to see.
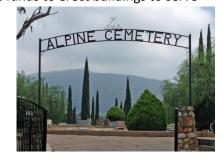
Stone Wall and Gates at Arnold's home in Alpine

There were fewer than 100 folks living in Alpine when the Arnolds arrived and most were homesteaders just trying to scratch out a living while they learned how to cope with the hot dry summers in east San Diego County. So it was no surprise that the community did not have the funds to erect buildings to serve anything other than their basic needs. The Arnolds brought with them ample funds and generous hearts, and they soon set about making civic improvements that would change Alpine from a settlement of homesteaders to a bona fide town. Among the projects that were paid for by the Arnolds were improving the road from Alpine to Lakeside and El Cajon; establishing the Alpine Center Stage which offered regular service from Lakeside to Alpine and Descanso; donating land for the Alpine Cemetery; building the Alpine Center School, the Parsonage, the Oak Grove Hotel in Descanso, the Alpine Hotel (later called the Alpine Tavern); and providing half the funds needed to build the Town Hall.

A little more than 10 years after moving to Alpine, Mr. Arnold died of heart failure, but he will forever be remembered for his kindness and generosity which in a very big way helped to create our picture-perfect little town.

Alpine Center Stage at Oak Grove Hotel