

Alpine History Mystery for June 2013

Do you know who built the first hotel in Alpine? This same person also gets credit for building Alpine's last one-room schoolhouse, for our town's first Parsonage, and the Oak Grove Hotel in Descanso. He also improved the road to Lakeside and El Cajon, and held half interest in the Alpine Town Hall.

If you think he might be Alpine's first construction contractor, then I have misled you. You see, he also established a stagecoach company serving Lakeside, Alpine, Descanso, and Cuyamaca, and he donated the land for the Alpine Cemetery. He is often called Alpine's "greatest benefactor" - but he was also called "the spice king" by some because his primary business was international trade. The company that carried his name traded Yankee goods for coffee, tea, ivory, fine fabrics, and furs. He was thought by many to be the wealthiest man in Southern California in the 1890's.

Our mystery man was not a California native. No, he actually spent most of his life in the northeastern United States. He was born in Rhode Island in 1822, the fourth of six children. In 1843, he married Harriet Leonard and they made their home in Deep River, Connecticut. But he struggled with a health issue that he just couldn't conquer in that climate so in 1888 he and his wife moved to San Diego. In 1889, still seeking improvement for his condition, they bought a large portion of land in the center of the Alpine settlement and built a fine and fancy home that they named "Los Robles". The only remnant of this home, which burned to the ground in 1920, are the stone pillars and massive gates on Alpine Boulevard that mark the former entrance to their residence.



Alpine's benefactor was just one month short of 77 years old when he died in 1899. Although he lived here only 10 years, he was highly regarded by the 35 or so families in the settlement. He was described as being strong of character yet "gentle in manner and approachable – he was a man who had many friends and few enemies". Joe Foss said about him that "he was a rich man and he was not stingy". The San Diego Union said he was "a man of public spirit, with many qualities that won him respect from his fellow citizens".

Alpine History Mystery for June 2013

So, who was this mystery man? And what was the health condition that brought him all the way across the country to Alpine? You can find the answer to these and many more questions about him at the Alpine History Museum, located at 2116 Tavern Road in Alpine. Here you will find photos of both our mystery benefactor and his wife, Harriet, as well information about his life and his good works in and for the community of Alpine. Come visit the museum Open House on June 29 – 30 to learn more. Admission is free to the Alpine History Museum.