

CITY OF EL MONTE

The “island” of El Monte, a four-by seven-mile tract of rich, low-lying land east of Los Angeles between the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo Rivers, has always offered respite and replenishment to native dwellers and travelers. In centuries past, the Gabrielino, or Tongva Indians used this area as they traversed the land harvesting foods and hunting game.

Blessed with deep, rich, alluvial topsoil, the area was crossed by small streams, and in those early days was covered by stands of slender willows, alders and cattails, interspersed with expansive meadows, wild grapevines, and succulent watercress.

Between the 1770s and 1830s, missionaries and Spanish soldiers stopped here, and named the area, “El Monte,” which referred not to the mountain as most assume, but to that era’s definition—“meadow or marsh” or “the wooded place.”

During the land-grant/rancho era of the 1830s-40s, the area continued to serve as a natural resting place for weary travelers, including a small party of Americans led by Jedediah Smith, a famed mountain man and explorer. Among his party in 1826 was Harrison Rogers, whose diary entry about their stay referred to the rest and rehabilitation offered by “Camp Monte” or “Monte Camp.”

El Monte’s first permanent residents arrived in 1849-50, a time when thousands of prospectors and immigrant pioneers came to California seeking gold. Few found wealth in the gold, but some found the riches of a fertile land and built homes. Originally setting off in search of gold, the Thompson family crossed the San Gabriel River to reach El Monte in 1851 after a fourteen-month journey from Iowa that had left them physically and emotionally depleted and living with a daily concern for the



barest necessities of life. With the hardships they had endured crossing mountains and deserts and fending off the attacks by hostile Apaches, their aims changed, and they wanted only to settle at the first place offering adequate fresh water and good soil for farming.

Other pioneers led by Captain Johnson of Lexington, Kentucky, arrived in the following year. A brief survey of the gold fields to the north convinced Captain Johnson that El Monte’s agricultural promise offered a more realistic key to the future of his group. A natural leader, he became an important part of the community in the 1850s with permanent residents consisting of no more than a dozen families. He proposed naming their village “Lexington” in honor of his birthplace and as a tribute to the importance of that name in U.S. Revolutionary War history. Even though residents agreed, the original name of El Monte, Monte Camp or The Monte persisted. When the State Legislature organized California into smaller defined governmental units called townships, they named this area El Monte Township, with the Village of Lexington as its government seat. Two years later the town’s name reverted to the original: El Monte.

Farmers here enjoyed increasing success, despite occasional floods from its rivers and other periods of severe drought. The community grew steadily with card parlors and dance halls, robberies and murders. Vigilantes, particularly the infamous “Monte Boys,” hastened the hanging of wrongdoers.

Politically divided by the Civil War the community had Confederate sympathies, even though California was a Union state. During these early years, El Monte’s successful agrarian economy was based on such products as wool, honey, grain, fruit, castor oil, hops, cotton, and El Monte Bacon. Early business enterprises included



Above: El Monte City Hall.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Below: El Monte Community Center.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.



the Willow Grove Inn on the Butterfield Stage route between Riverside and Los Angeles. This early “motel” was established, owned and operated by members of the Thompson family.

Improved transportation became available in 1873, when Southern Pacific built the first railroad through town. Other important milestones included publication of the weekly newspaper strictly for El Monte, in 1876, and the opening of the drug store in 1892.

Agriculture remained at the core of El Monte’s economy in the early twentieth century, though fruit orchards, walnut groves, truck farms, hay and vegetable fields, and a growing dairy industry replaced most of the earlier field crops. Arden Farms was one of the largest dairies in the area. Bodger Seed Ltd. leased large tracts of land on the southern part of the “island” to grow plots of flowering plants for seed production. Laid out in precise geometric patterns, these fields brought visitors from throughout San Gabriel Valley during the blooming season, and led to the area being called Las Flores.

El Monte Union High School District was organized in 1901, to include students from portions of the present communities of Bassett, Whittier, Montebello, Rosemead, Temple City, Arcadia, Monrovia and El Monte. During its first year of operation, 12 to 15 students attended classes in a single room upstairs in the old Lexington Avenue Grammar School. By 1908 enrollment had grown to sixty-five students, who were housed in a separate high school campus.

Main Street was first graded and paved in 1906. In 1907 Pacific Electric intercity railroad service was extended to El Monte. The line’s old “Red Cars” remained an important part of transportation for the next forty-five years.

Until incorporation of El Monte in 1912, volunteer fire and police departments served the area.

The 1910 revolution in Mexico saw a large increase of Mexican immigration into the southwestern United States. Most of these immigrants found jobs as farm workers, many into the lush farmlands of El Monte. Despite experiencing hardships and discrimination in housing, education, jobs and public service, these young men enlisted in the armed forces of WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam. The American Indians and Japanese Americans also served and worked in support of their country.

The “Roaring ’20s” had a slightly different connotation in El Monte than elsewhere in the country, with the arrival of Gay’s Lion Farm. Two European-born former circus stars, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Gay, operated this tourist attraction, which has been called “the Disneyland of the 1920s and 1930s.” The Gays raised wild animals for use in the burgeoning motion picture industry, with the operation housing over 200 African lions. The compound had individual cages for adult lions, a larger “nursery” cage for cubs, and a very large, centrally located arena cage in which Gay trained the lions to perform acts for spectators.

Many of the lions starred in films during the 1920s and 1930s, including the “Tarzan” films starring Elmo Lincoln and Johnny Weismuller. The MGM lion logo was made with “Jackie,” one of the Gays’ most famous stars. Athletic teams from El Monte High School chose “The Lions” as their team name, and Gay periodically designated one of the young, active male lions as the school’s official mascot to make an appearance at certain home football games and with a roar encouraged cheering of the hometown crowds.

World War II rationing of meat and gasoline led to closing the lion farm, with the lions



Above: Cherrylee Street, a typical residential street.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Below: One of the many El Monte city parks.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.



“loaned” to public zoos. Once the war ended, however, Charles Gay’s failing health made it impossible for him to resume the business, and today the only remnant of the farm is a magnificent statue of Jackie the Lion, which was relocated to the present El Monte High School campus. This statue has been designated as an official historical monument, with the farm’s history inscribed on a bronze plaque at its base. A new lion statue resides at the intersections of Peck Road and Valley Boulevard, the original site and commemorating the history of Gay’s Lion Farm.

In the 1930’s El Monte was a small community with a Mexican population of about 20 percent, a Japanese population of 5 percent, and an Anglo population of 75 percent. However, the Depression of the ’30s brought drastic changes to El Monte, as it did to many other communities. Farm profits plummeted, leading some landowners to sublet small farm tracts to Japanese tenants, who raised such cash crops as berries, melons and vegetables. Other areas of El Monte, particularly large groves and orchards, were subdivided into homesites of one acre or less, transforming El Monte to a bedroom community from which residents commuted elsewhere.

During these times, most Mexican immigrants worked as farm hands and lived in one of three immigrant camps (Hicks, Las Flores, or Medina Court), and the Japanese tenant farmer lived on the farm itself. There was minimal racial tension between these two immigrant groups, as they had common goals and both suffered discriminatory practices from the majority population. For example, elementary education was segregated, with Mexican and Japanese students attending different grade schools (K-5) than their Anglo counterpart. However, there were some tense situations such as what occurred in the famous “El Monte Berry Strike” of 1933, which by the end had mixed results for all sides.

The Long Beach earthquake in March 1933 severely damaged the high school, leaving forty percent of the classrooms unsafe for use. Makeshift wood and canvas bungalows served as temporary classrooms, until a new school was built. The new school, which provided improved facilities for the growing



enrollment, opened in 1939, and still stands today on Tyler Avenue below Mildred Street as El Monte High School.

The graceful new El Monte Community and Civic Center, designed in the mission architectural style, opened in June 1936 next to the high school on land donated by Bodger Seed, Ltd., with several days of celebration that initiated the Pioneer Days observance held annually for the next ten years (with a brief hiatus during World War II). Citizens enjoyed old-fashioned games and events, dressing in western frontier style, and taking part in a pioneer pageant held in the auditorium to depict the “Thompson Party” and “Captain Johnson.” Because these annual “bashes” tended to encourage over-imbibing and attracted a rowdy



Top: The El Monte Lion at the original Gay’s Lion Farm location, Valley Boulevard and Peck Road.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Middle: El Monte’s downtown shopping center, El Monte Valley Mall.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Bottom: The Lexington Grammar School Fifth Grade class, 1939.



element from surrounding communities, they were discontinued.

El Monte had been a small, prosperous farm town, but the advent of World War II brought dramatic changes as small aircraft parts factories sprang up on the west side of town, young men joined the military, and the number of farms and dairies dwindled. Population exploded in the 1940s and early 1950s—illustrated by high school enrollment, which soared from 1,500 students in 1943 to 3,700 in 1948. Five different beginning/ending times had to be instituted to accommodate all the students and class schedules. During its first forty-eight years, El Monte Union High School housed its entire student population in one school, but from 1949 to the present, four additional schools were built.

From a population of about 10,000 in 1940, the population now numbers approximately

116,000. In place of the sleepy little town of orchards, flower fields, and farms and dairies, is an urban community of homes, schools and parks supported by an expanding industrial and commercial base.

Located approximately twelve miles east of downtown Los Angeles, El Monte is the hub of the San Gabriel Valley, where two major freeways—Interstate 605 and Interstate 10—intersect. Other transportation alternatives are offered by a MetroLink train station; MTA bus terminal; and El Monte Airport, a county-operated general aviation facility. The tenth largest city (out of 88) in Los Angeles County, the land use within its ten square mile area is 58 percent residential, 11 percent retail, 10 percent industrial, 7 percent office/commercial, and 14 percent other. El Monte is ethnically a very diverse community, with the year 2000 demographics reflecting an increase in the Asian population up to an all-time high of 18 percent, the Hispanic population remaining steady at 75 percent, and Caucasians decreasing to 7 percent.

El Monte is home to Longo Toyota, the largest single auto dealership in the world, with other successful auto dealerships situated nearby. Other major retail businesses include Home Depot, Kmart and Sam's Club. Major industries include Vons Distribution Warehouse, Wells Fargo Operations Center, and St. Gobain Glass Containers. El Monte is on the move, with a new Aquatics Center with four indoor pools scheduled to open in summer 2003.

In recent times, new immigrants from Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Indochina, the Philippines, Central and South America have moved into El Monte, providing an international flavor and strong workforce. These citizens have a positive work ethic and get along well with each other. City commissions include formal ties with Taiwan, China, Mexico and France. Members of all ethnic groups serve within these commissions, bringing together people from countries across the world. Despite all these changes, El Monte continues to offer a home for those seeking to put down roots, seek new opportunities, and bring fresh ideas and energy to the area—the wooded place of shelter and security, the meadow land of opportunity and promise.



Top: Longo Toyota and Lexus, the largest car dealership in the world.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Middle: El Monte general aviation airport and new terminal facility with elegant dining amenities.

COURTESY OF JOHN COLLARI.

Bottom: New building in Flair Business Park, located just south of the Interstate 10 freeway.

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