



The Oaks
of Santa Paula

*A History of Santa Paula Canyon
and the Oaks Neighborhood*

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Introduction

A Place, a Puzzle, and a State of Mind

If you have ever lived in the Oaks of Santa Paula, or for any other reason traveled the streets of the neighborhood, you may well have found yourself asking how this unique corner of the town came to be. Why are some of the neighborhood's homes over a hundred years old, while many are no more than forty? Why are some lots remarkably spacious, but others far more modest in size? Why do some streets run as straight as an arrow, while others take a more meandering path through the landscape?

You may have noticed that some of the Oaks' streets have curbs, while others do not, and you might have wondered how it happened that some streets are no wider than an alley, yet others seem to go nowhere at all. You may have asked yourself how all of these mismatched bits and pieces were scrambled together with towering oak, sycamore and eucalyptus trees, and miles of stone walls, to become the neighborhood we know as the Oaks.

The short answer is, people made it this way, both by design and happenstance. While this might be reason enough for some, others prefer more complete and detailed explanations. They have an appetite for discovering the stories of the people who make places, to find out why and how they did it.

This book started with the motive of answering a few of these questions, with a bit of casual research undertaken for little other reason than to indulge a historian's curiosity. What emerged was a story of a neighborhood rich and diverse in history, deserving of a more complete investigation. The neighborhood known today as the Oaks may consist of little more than two hundred homes, but as this book will reveal, the area's history is far more complex than it seems. The story of this one neighborhood, it turns out, cuts straight across the broader history of Santa Paula. So it happens, telling the Oaks story is another way of telling Santa Paula's story.

It also became apparent that this story deserved to be told, if only because it had never been recorded before. Adding urgency is the knowledge that we are constantly losing our connections to the people and events that are joined to us only by living memory. The best time to make a record of history is always now.

Although the Oaks is commonly seen by current residents of Santa Paula as one place, as a singular creation, the historical reality is far more complex. In fact, the

neighborhood is the product of layers of settlement, one folded over the other, the result of numerous hands acting over a period of centuries—from the native Chumash at *Mupú* to the padres from Mission San Buenaventura, through *Californio* landholders, pioneering American settlers, agricultural capitalists, land developers, and individual home builders. The expression of these widely varied ways of life and approaches to the use of the land, over time, has produced a neighborhood that manages to be unified, in the way we view it today, yet diverse in its origins. The product is a unique combination of resolve, intention and pure chance.

This history is drawn from a wide variety of sources, including documentary evidence and oral histories. The main source of primary research was the *Santa Paula Chronicle*, which we are fortunate to have in a nearly complete run beginning in 1888, and its competitor for some years during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, the *Santa Paula Review*. Many of the most important events in the development of Santa Paula were described at length in the newspapers, but that is not all a reader finds in these old pages.

In an era long past, local newspapers also documented even the most incidental details of a community's activities. Garden parties, meetings of clubs, bridge parties, vacations, wedding showers, lost dogs, men returning home from war, and even residents' brief excursions to neighboring cities, were carefully reported. Someone examining these old newspapers looking for the big stories will come across a great many of these small ones too. Taken individually, most of these accounts seem trivial but viewed as a whole, they paint in the texture and details of life in another time.

A great deal of additional information and color came from interviews conducted with long-time residents of the neighborhood. Nothing in written documents can quite substitute for the recollections of those who were there, remember the events, and knew the people. Hearing so many of these stories for the first time was one of the greatest rewards of writing this book.

History writing, it should also be said in advance, is a craft built on a lack of absolute certainty. It nearly always depends to some degree on an incomplete record and

ambiguities based on recollections, opinions, and points of view. Consequently, it is always tempting to preface every statement in a history with conditional language, such as "probably" or "apparently," because we can almost never be completely certain about any historical event, especially those completely out of living memory. Even written records, where they can be found, often provide conflicting accounts, in both minor and major details. They were, after all, written by fallible people like ourselves.

Most of these awkward qualifications were deliberately avoided in this book, because history should be understood as an unending process of collecting, adding and revising. The writing of history is at its best when it takes the form of a dialogue, and with the knowledge that today's events will be tomorrow's history. It is hoped that this book, by its very publication, will invite continuing efforts to explore and record the history of the Oaks neighborhood, and the people, places and events that have made it a distinct and special place within the larger community of Santa Paula.

A Question of Boundaries

Defining the boundaries of this neighborhood, or practically any neighborhood, is an open question. For the Oaks, the historical development of the area suggests one set of boundaries. Its physical geography suggests one.



The “heart of the Oaks” and lower Santa Paula Canyon from Richmond Road north to roughly where Mariposa Drive ends today, as seen in the United States Geological Survey map of 1951.

Culture suggests another. Economics, yet another. Still, none of these defining characteristics alone is sufficient to settle the question of the boundaries of the neighborhood, and combined they raise even more questions, and provide no ready answers.

Beyond the most fundamental physical, historical, cultural and economic issues, geographers report that every single one of us carries, in our minds, a map of the world as we know it. All of these private “mental maps” are based upon our personal experiences and perceptions. As a result, each one of them is as completely individual as we are ourselves. In this sense, a neighborhood is literally a state of mind – and hardly anyone would argue that the Oaks is not very much one of those.

This book will certainly not settle any ongoing debates over the boundaries of the Oaks, nor has any attempt been made to do so. The area chosen for this narrative is the one that naturally evolved over the course of the research. The “heart” of the neighborhood, and consequently the heart of the book, are the neighborhood’s three subdivisions of 1926-27, the people who accom-

plished this feat, the challenges they encountered, and those who built and lived in the homes constructed within them. But the historical linkages that emerged with the research takes the discussion well beyond these immediate physical boundaries and historical periods, to people, places and times some readers might feel are “not the Oaks.”

This may even be true. Still, in the course of the research for this book, it became apparent that Santa Paula Canyon as a natural feature, from the very beginning, had a profound and singular impact on the realizing of the aspirations of Santa Paula’s founders. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the canyon provided the city with its very life source in the waters of Santa Paula Creek. The creek powered the first commercial enterprises in Santa Paula, and also made the town itself and its thriving institutions possible. As these themes became progressively and more abundantly evident from the research, the book’s scope widened to accommodate this larger scheme of historical events, in which the canyon and its inhabitants played such an important role.

While we think today of Santa Paula as a city of the Santa Clara River Valley, its location was dictated not so much by the river that gives the valley its name and form, but by the creek flowing steadily down Santa Paula Canyon. In placing the city where it sits, the founders of the town were following the settlement guideposts staked out by the padres of Mission San Buenaventura nearly one hundred years before. In turn, they were walking in the footsteps of the native Chumash people preceding them by thousands of years. Each successive generation of settlers has responded to the land in ways that were both similar and unique to their cultures.

The creek that flows freely and perennially down Santa Paula Canyon provided not only for the town’s abundance in a “land of little rain,” but also formed its primary limitations. One day life-giving, the next day potentially deadly, the creek’s treacherous habits exemplify the hazards of living in a place, and in a time, where the forces of nature ruled, and man could do little but obey.

It is also remarkable to consider, from our contemporary perspective, the risks people were once prepared to take

with little more than a vague prospect of a better life in a distant place, about which they could have had little reliable knowledge—and this in a time before the railroads could deposit a person in a far-off part of the country with relative comfort, speed and economy. Yet, they took these gambles, by the many thousands. No history of the Oaks neighborhood and Santa Paula Canyon that excludes the stories of these intrepid individuals, and their contributions to the founding of the community, could be considered even remotely complete.

Readers will also notice that when taken as a whole, our cast of characters is a restless one, many of them not staying in any place for long. Yet, these restive individuals are the ones who tend to interest us most, since they are the people who get things done. They are the people who make history.

More immediately to the point, as this book will show, it is difficult to turn in any direction in the Oaks and Santa Paula Canyon without bumping into an individual who is not linked into the broader history of Santa Paula, and

whose personal or family story is not intriguing and interesting on those merits alone.

So it happens that history is rarely as neat and tidy an affair as we might hope, confining itself to convenient boundaries or periods of time. Fortunately for the history writer, one of the purposes of history is the discovery of connections between people, places and times, with the much hoped-for result being some clearer understanding of how the accomplishments of individuals long passed from the scene had a hand in forming the places we know and care about today. It was the goal of this book to illustrate and describe these linkages, and to explain—if only in some necessarily incomplete way—why many who have experienced the privilege of living among the oaks of Santa Paula Canyon have developed such a deep fondness for this place.

So no matter how you define the Oaks, and no matter where you find the Oaks in your mind, it is hoped you will also find that place, somewhere, in this book.