

Agua Mansa largest of settlements which later became Riverside site

(Editor's Note: This is another in a series of articles on Riverside's early years, written in conjunction with the upcoming centennial observance.)

By TOM PATTERSON

Of the twin settlements of La Placita and Agua Mansa in the late Mexican and early U.S. eras of Riverside's history, Agua Mansa became the largest and best known. Its name was sometimes used for both.

Despite the two names the communities, just north of



present-day Riverside, were essentially one — with the same religious and social-political leaders.

Maj. Horace Bell, Los Angeles lawyer and member of a volunteer militia organization of the 1850s, visited Agua Mansa in 1853 and recalled it long afterward as "the most beautiful little settlement I ever saw."

HE SAID the people were "primitive in their style of living, kind and hospitable to strangers, rich in all that went to make people happy and content, never having been, up to that time, vexed by the unceremonious calls of the tax collector, owing allegiance to none save the simple, kind-hearted old priest who looked after their spiritual welfare."

Lorenzo Trujillo and a group of his associates from New Mexico first accepted the invitation of the Lugo brothers of Rancho San Bernardino to occupy land along the river near present Colton, at a place called La Politana. The year was probably 1842.

Just why they left the Lugos is not entirely clear, but two reasons were suggested by later court testimony — that the Lugos cut off their water supply and that the Lugos did not give a satisfactory title to the land so it could be divided into individually owned plots.

In any case, the Trujillo group, after two years at La Politana accepted an offer from Juan Bandini of approximately 2,000 acres of land — the northeastern corner of his Rancho Jurupa. Benito Wilson, for whom Trujillo once had worked (probably 1844), was then buying what in 1847 would become the Robidoux ranch.

It was Wilson's initiative that led to the Bandini offer, but both men wanted protection from Indian and Anglo bandit raids from as far away as Utah.

WILSON, on authorization from Bandini, divided the Donation land among the original settlers.

In that first year they founded La Placita (little plaza). Since there were four grown Trujillo sons this soon became known also as La Placita de los Trujillos.

It was a community of small farm plots, each fronting on the river and extending to the base of the La Loma Hills (west of present Highgrove). Somewhere within it was a semi-circular plaza. Trujillo's home was said to be about a thousand yards north of the Donation boundary. If this was on the plaza, both would have been in the recess of the hills later occupied by the Pellissier Dairy buildings — now owned by the City of Riverside.

The one remaining building of La Placita, the Trujillo



The Trujillo Adobe, off north building of La Placita, called Spanishtown. (Press-Enterprise Historical Collection)

Adobe which was owned and occupied by later generations of Trujillos, is a few feet below, or south of, the Donation boundary.

But for many years the boundary was not legally established.

BANDINI in 1854 tried by a lawsuit to repossess the land. His son-in-law, Abel Stearns, who acquired the Jurupa in 1857, filed another suit in 1871. The first was dropped. The second was lost.

Then Riverside's founding organization, the Southern California Colony Association, filed a suit in 1873, not to contest the title but to determine the legal location of the boundary.

At this point Wilson came forward in the defense of his old friends from New Mexico. He described the original arrangement, explaining that it was not a gift in substance, but a value-for-value agreement.

There was evidence leaving no question that the Trujillos and their friends did fulfill their part of the bargain. Wilson confirmed it, telling of frequent encounters, in which three sons of Lorenzo were wounded. An out-of-court account tells of one fight in Pigeon Pass, interrupting Indians who were driving stolen stock toward San Geronimo Pass. In the fight, Esquipulo Trujillo, one of the sons, was badly disfigured by an arrow wound in the face.

IN 1884, a suit was filed in the colonists' behalf by Father Peter J. Stockman, pastor of the Catholic parish in San Bernardino, against Riverside Land & Irrigating Co. Father Stockman then had responsibility for the San Salvador parish and was concerned also over the land title problems of his parishioners.

The suit ended in a stipulated judgment, formally setting the boundary between the Wilson-Robidoux purchase at the Bandini Donation. In the La Placita area this soon became the Riverside-San Bernardino county line. Although the line was essentially as claimed by the colonists over the years, it also corresponded to the section lines of the government survey, made long afterward.

Actually, La Placita, or Spanishtown, had spread south of the Donation line over the years, into the Riverside colony of 1870.

The original La Placita was the community of farm plots between the river and the hills.

A year after the start of La Placita, more settlers came

from New Mexico and La Politana. They started Agua Mansa, meaning "gentle water," from a nearby spring-fed stream.

THE SMALL PLOTS, each including some 500 feet of river frontage and extending to the bluff, eventually filled the river bottom from Slover Mountain to the vicinity of present Crestmore.

Until 1862 stream irrigation was unnecessary on the Agua Mansa side. The river had grown thick with trees and brush. Water was plentiful and evidently the choked river bottom caused it to irrigate the fields from below.

The first building of the Church of San Salvador was in La Placita, but was evidently built too near the stream, with quicksand not far below. It was barely finished in 1852 when it suddenly collapsed.

In the next year the historic little church was built in Agua Mansa, below the cemetery which is today the only visible remains of that community.

Substantially, the first public school established by that district was a successor to the parish school, whose adobe building was near the church it occupied.

MUCH OF the pastoral appearance of the two communities ended suddenly in 1862, the year of one of Southern California's great floods, probably comparable only to those of 1916 and 1938.

It destroyed, witnesses said, every adobe building in the two colonies except the church and the adjacent home of Cornelius Jensen.

The flood seriously affected the communities, especially Agua Mansa. It tore out the bottomland trees and exchanged the soil for a mass of quick-drying sand. No longer was it sub-irrigated, and the colonists had to dig an irrigation ditch. Some must have left after the flood, but contrary to some accounts the communities rebuilt and continued.

The people of the communities, or some of them, had large droves of horses, cattle and sheep, which they grazed on the site of Riverside and the unsurveyed government land on its upper plain.

The remains of a number of kilns, dug into the bluff on the Agua Mansa side, testify to the use of the limestone deposit which subsequently became raw material for American Cement Co. The kilns evidently converted the limestone into material for whitewashing and temporarily weatherproofing adobe buildings.

THE COMMUNITIES had a kind of independent society with individual land ownership and initiative, differing in that respect from the rustic feudalism of the rancho system of Mexican California and the early years of U.S. rule.

Agua Mansa and La Placita were closely knit as a Catholic community, whereas early Riverside was overwhelmingly Protestant.

While the reports of near-demise after the 1862 flood were exaggerated, the communities were apparently declining by 1884 when the boundary of the Bandini Donation was formally established.

Today, the Agua Mansa cemetery remains on the bluff above the church site, a long neglected place which now is being given care under the supervision of the San Bernardino County Museum.

In 1905 Antoine Pellissier bought some of the La Placita property and started vineyards and a winery. He expanded his holdings and started a dairy. By 1920 he owned all or most of the original La Placita. The City of Riverside acquired it from later owners, for the water rights.

THE TRUJILLO School operated until 1926, when it was absorbed into the Riverside district.

The story was similar on the Agua Mansa side. The land is now farmed in large holdings, mostly clear of trees or homes.

Many of the descendants of the colonies live in or near Riverside. Their surnames from the La Placita side included Trujillo, Baca, Pena, Atencio, Espinosa, Archuleta, Garcia. From the Agua Mansa side came such names as Bustamente, Martinez, Aciena, Alvarado, Jensen, Jaegar, Woods, Aguayos, Lujan, Salazar.



These dairy buildings at the foot of La Loma Hills north of Riverside probably occupy the site of the Lorenzo Trujillo home and the plaza of the Mexican era commu-

nity of La Placita. The broad ditch in the foreground is the original Riverside canal. This section was abandoned in 1914. (Press-Enterprise Historical Collection)