



Courtesy of Mission Inn Foundation  
and Museum Collections

In 1866 San Salvador parish members gave their jewelry and scrap metal, along with a \$12 payment, to a Mexican laborer who cast this church bell.

## Along the Santa Ana River, towns take shape

**T**hey walked 1,200 miles to pursue a possibility, and found a new life that laid a foundation for Inland Southern California's future.

They were *Genízaros*, Indian slaves to other Indians in New Mexico, then servants in Spanish-speaking households that had erased their past. They became outcasts who stayed together over the years when no one else would have them.

They had become tough and resilient, and when they heard about fertile lands near the faraway Santa Ana River, in 1842 and 1843 they were quick to walk away from their poverty in Abiquiu, N.M. Other outcasts, including those of mixed cultures dating from the Spanish conquest in the previous century, followed their lead.

Near the Santa Ana River, the Lugos of Rancho San Bernardino wanted to trade land for protection from bandits, from outlaws and from the Indian raiders of Arizona and Utah. The newcomers took up the offer and moved to what is now Colton.

But they wanted more than the one-family ranchos that were the Lugos' — and region's — way of life. They wanted land where their families could live and work together.

A nearby land deal in 1843 and the new landowner's need for protection led the families to their dream 2,200 acres on the Jurupa Rancho straddling the Santa Ana River.

On the river's south side the families built neighboring adobe homes and the first Inland community with European roots: La Placita de los Trujillos (the Little Plaza of the Trujillos, after the lead family), just northwest of land that later became Riverside.

On the river's north side they began Agua Mansa (Gentle Water) near the future city of Colton. A Roman Catholic parish church, San Salvador, served both sides of the river.

Soon vegetable gardens and fruit trees spread across shared lands. River breezes often carried the music of fiestas and smells of food such as *puchero estofado*, beef stew simmering in outdoor adobe ovens.

Sunday horse races left gamblers in riches or dust while a cantina kept them fueled. Others found sport in capturing grizzly bears and pitting them against bulls in fights to the death.

Traders from New Mexico arrived each autumn to swap woolen goods and other treasures for California's valued horses and mules. San Salvador's parish became a trading center for the West until 1849, when thousands of gold-seekers began pouring into California.

Then came hard times: A drought, a depression, heavy rains that drowned livestock and, in 1862, the Santa Ana River's biggest known flood.

The ringing church bell summoned all residents to higher ground and saved them all as the flood destroyed everything except the church and one home.

Although they rebuilt the parish, it was never the same. Sandy swaths and quicksand had replaced the graceful riverbanks and rich soils. American farmers already were clashing with free-ranging cattle that ate their crops — a conflict the Americans would win. Trains and more towns were coming.

Amid another devastating drought, San Salvador's men went elsewhere for work. Some eventually would labor in the Riverside orange groves that would shape Southern California's future.

Press Enterprise  
Sunday, Oct 10, 1999