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Reminders that Agua Mansa

The pre-Riverside settlements of Agua Mansa and La Placita are gone, but they leave a memorial — the cemetery-museum on Agua Mansa Road, north of Rubidoux.

Within the cemetery is a replica of the long gone church of the community's parish, the Parish of San Salvador. The replica displays artifacts reminiscent of the times.



THE COUNTY'S PAST

Tom Patterson

It was a Spanish-speaking community, but it was unlike any other community of California's Mexican times.

For the past 30 years, the church and the cemetery, as a remembrance of the community, has attracted the attention of many local historians and preservationists.

Harry Lawton wrote newspaper articles and scholarly papers. Joyce Vickery wrote a book called "Defending Eden." Patricia Beatty made the community the scene of one of her youth novels, "The Bad Bell of San Salvador."

Marie Espinosa Wood of Riverside, descendant of two of the families of the community and an enthusiast for local history, initiated the movement leading to the restoration of the cemetery (which had been in deplorable condition) and the building of a replica of the church. Both are now known as the Agua Mansa Memorial Park (of the San Bernardino County Museum Association).

I also wrote of the community. I was intrigued by its governance, which was simple and informal. Its economy was based on individually owned small farms. That contrasted with the rest of Mexican California where economy was based on land grants of 10,000 acres and more, to politically favored people who primarily raised cattle for the Boston hide market.

The plan for the community was brought here from New Mexico by the original settlers of the 1840s. Tragically, it didn't survive the buffeting of Manifest Destiny as represented by the later U.S. communities of Riverside and San Bernardino.

In more recent years, the bits and pieces of history have been pulled together and supplemented by a new and scholarly participant — Dr. Bruce Harley, archivist of the San Bernardino Catholic Diocese.

Still another major contribution has been made by a series of archaeological digs around the foundation of the original church, by UCR students under the supervision of Dr. Philip Wilke. The church location was alongside Agua Mansa Road under the bluff below the cemetery and church replica.

The digs confirmed that the replica, which was



Mary Haggland

The bell of Agua Mansa.

based on a 1904 drawing, long after the church had gone to ruin, basically was accurate. (The original had windows while the replica doesn't.)

Dr. Harley has even gone into antiquarian particulars, and where the record is exasperatingly vague he has made informed guesses. For instance, there's the question of when the old church was abandoned.

It was replaced in 1893 by a new San Salvador church in south Colton, but Harley has found drawings showing it earlier in ruins. Meanwhile, in 1876, the Trujillo public school was opened near the intersection of Highgrove's Center Street and north Orange Street, on the La Placita or easterly side of the river. There, Harley suspects, was the logical place for church services in the interim.

Then there's the story of the big, heavy, homemade

and La Placita were there"

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bell, that was cast in the Agua Mansa churchyard in 1866. First it hung from a crossbar between two trees alongside the church. By 1881, it had fallen from the crossbar and in the following year was hoisted onto a single tree. There it stayed until it was moved to the new church in Colton.

(Incidentally, the bell was too heavy to hang in the new church, but as part of fund raising for still another building the pastor sold the bell to the Mission Inn, where it resides today. Some parishioners were greatly displeased.)

What else can be seen of old Agua Mansa and La Placita?

On the westerly, or Agua Mansa side, you might drive along Holly Street, on the bluff, overlooking the sites of onetime small farms and adobe homes. There are no such farms there now. There's a big layout for breeding, training and boarding race horses and there are other types of corporate agriculture.

Holly Street, going north, will lead you into Agua Mansa Road. Continue north. The cemetery and church replica entrance is on the left, about 100 yards north of Riverside Avenue, which is a continuation of Riverside's north Main Street. (The entrance sign has been vandalized and San Bernardino County is slow at replacing it, but you can spot the entrance.)

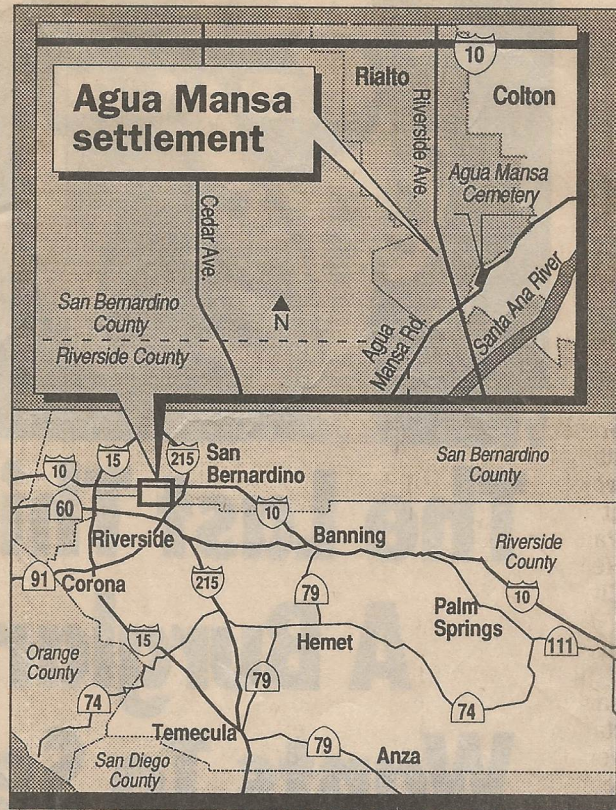
Agua Mansa Road was the main street of Agua Mansa. It curves with the river past Slover Mountain — the hill that's disappearing into the cement factory at its foot. Somewhere in that vicinity you'll cross the unrecognizable dry course of a stream that flowed from a spring into the river. It was named Agua Mansa, or gentle water. In that vicinity it's likely that the first Agua Mansa farms were started in 1846.

By now you're in Colton.

Agua Mansa Road intersects Rancho Avenue. On the southwest corner of that intersection is the one-time house of Peter C. Peters, whose name is part of the Peters-Refugio name on one of the cemetery gravestones. There were a few other Anglo-Hispanic marriages in the community. The Peters house, which was pictured in an 1883 history of the region, may be the only surviving home of the old community.

Most of the La Placita side of the community is along a non-public extension of Riverside's north Orange Street, behind Highgrove's Center Street. There's a tiny Riverside County park at the intersection, where walls of the Trujillo adobe are protected by a free-standing canopy. (Lorenzo Trujillo was the patriarch of the original community, but this home was built by a member of a later generation.)

Beyond that point the extension of north Orange Street, in San Bernardino County, is unpaved, has many horrible bumps and is not open to the public. The land, although in San Bernardino County, is now owned by the city of Riverside for water reasons and leased for corporate farming.



Lorena Iniguez/The Press-Enterprise

I've stolen a look along that road, past recognizable one-time home sites including the skeletal remains of a wooden house at old La Placita. But traffic isn't welcome. Besides, the road is rough, very rough.

So visit the museum — the restored cemetery and the church replica. The hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.

And make the acquaintance of Gerald and Ursula Beardslee, who have been resident caretakers since the replica was opened 13 years ago. It's their home and they love it.

Inquire about the new sprinkler system, which Gerald has installed, despite his advanced age. There was no county budget for sprinklers, so he bought the pipe himself. He got help in digging the trenches from a Riverside Boy Scout troop. There are 20 rows of it, but only three have sprinkler heads. He moves them from row to row. You could help by buying more sprinkler heads, but if you give money to the county it'll go into a general fund. Consult with Beardslee to be sure that what you buy fits the system.

Tom Patterson, a former Press-Enterprise reporter and editor, has published three books and numerous articles on Riverside County history.