Rancho Bernardo Historical Society

Rancho Bernardo History Museum
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The Original Residents

The people we now know as the Kumeyaay Nation were the original inhabitants of the lands we today call Rancho Bernardo. These indigenous people have been present in this region for some 10,000 years.

Spanish/Mexican Era

In 1769 a band of Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries arrived in San Diego where they established a military headquarters, or presidio, along with a church, Mission San Diego de Alcalá, beginning the colonization process that would be repeated over the entire state. Under Spanish rule, from 1769 to 1821, the land here in this part of San Diego County was under the authority of the missions. The mission fathers bestowed the names that appeared on the first written maps in the early 1800s. One such name that began to appear on maps at that time was a parcel of land about 25 miles north of the town of San Diego called, originally, “El Paraje O Cañada de San Bernardo.” In English, that means “The place or canyon of Saint Bernard.”

After Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, the mission lands came under the control of the new Mexican government, which offered massive tracts of land to anyone agreeing to settle on and work the lands.

The Rancho Under A New Flag

The war ended in victory for the United States on February 2, 1848, bringing California under the U.S. flag. Don Jose Snook died later that same month. The Snooks had no children of their own; Don Jose left ranch real estate and buildings to his siblings, one of whom, John, had come over from England. He left his widow Maria a life estate in San Bernardo.

John Snook died in 1852. Maria Snook died in 1862. Ownership of Rancho San Bernardo passed to six Snook nieces and nephews in England. In 1867 they sold the rancho to Thomas Fox, representing the interests of James McCoy.

The Ranch Is Subdivided:

The Short Life of the Town of Bernardo

The sale to McCoy began the subdivision of the rancho. McCoy sold off parts of his acreage to Sylvester Lyman, Omar Oaks, and Charles Wetmore. Lyman and Wetmore, in turn, subdivided their property into smaller ranches.

By 1872, with all the subdividing going on, there were enough settlers in the area to require tri-weekly mail delivery and the establishment of a fourth-class post office which was given the name “Bernardo.”

The last postmaster of Bernardo was Zenas Sikes. The Bernardo Post Office opened for business on December 3, 1872 inside his farmhouse.

Within a few years Sikes sold two acres of ranch land just southeast of his home to Patrick Graham. Graham erected a building on the property and opened a general store in partnership with Joseph Nugent.

Town of Bernardo Post Office and General Store

The post office was soon relocated from the Sikes house to the general store. A blacksmith shop soon went up near the store. Other businesses followed, forming a village to serve the growing population of farmers and ranchers in the vicinity.

The town of Bernardo flourished for a time, then declined and disappeared by the early 1920s. Its demise was hastened by the growth of the city of Escondido a few miles north and the completion of the Lake Hodges Dam and Reservoir in 1919.

The Last Ranchers of Rancho San Bernardo

The biggest remaining unsubdivided portion of the old Rancho San Bernardo, about 5,800 acres, was owned by Ed Fletcher and then William Henshaw in the early 1920s. Then it passed to the San Diego County Water Company. In the late 1930s, the water company began leasing the property to George Daley. The Daleys were a pioneer ranching family in San Diego County who had large ranches in Escondido and Jamul by the time George began raising livestock and grain under lease on the Rancho San Bernardo property. George Daley bought Rancho San Bernardo outright in 1943.

When George Daley died in 1957 the ranch passed to his nephews, Donald and Lawrence. As late as the 1960s, the property was still rugged country, with more horse trails than auto roads.

Modern Rancho Bernardo

In November 1961, developer Harry Summers and business partner W.R. “Fritz” Hawn announced a joint venture with Lawrence and Donald Daley to develop the ranch into a planned community to be called Rancho Bernardo.

The joint venture, initially named Rancho Bernardo, Inc., devised a master plan for a self-contained community offering housing, employment, schools, community and recreation centers. The community plan was submitted to the city of San Diego in late 1961 as part of Rancho Bernardo, Inc.’s proposal for annexation, the ranch at that time being unincorporated county land.

In February, 1962 the San Diego city council voted to approve annexation of Rancho Bernardo. The first sales office for the new community opened in July 1962 at the intersection of Rancho Bernardo and Pomerado Roads. The first model homes erected represented the neighborhood developments of Bernardo Greens, Bernardo Hills and Seven Oaks.

The first residents moved into Rancho Bernardo in 1963. That year also saw the opening of the Rancho Bernardo Inn and the community’s first shopping center. By February 1964 the new community had grown to 1,300 residents. By June of the same year, 2,000 people called Rancho Bernardo their home.

In 1968 NCR became the first corporate tenant in the Rancho Bernardo Industrial Park. That same year AVC acquired a 51 percent interest in Rancho Bernardo, Inc., which became AVCOC Community Developers, Inc.


Estimated population in 2015 is over 50,000.

A Short History of Rancho Bernardo” was compiled for the Rancho Bernardo Historical Society by Vincent Rossi of StorySeekers.
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