

History of Northeast Los Angeles

Few are the residents of this area who realize the priceless legacy of romance and adventure that is the history of Northeast Los Angeles.

The story of "The Land of the Five Valleys", as this area was once known, parallels and is part of the colorful history of the exploring and founding of California. It dates back to the year 1769 when a small company of priests and soldiers under the guidance of Junipero Serra and Gaspar de Portola left Mission Pueblo to colonize Alta California. Their search was for the lost Bay of Monterey and the march of Portola and his intrepid Conquistadores ranks among the outstanding deeds of pioneer history in America.

His search for the lost Bay was in vain and, while they had discovered what was to be the great Harbor of San Francisco, this little band of explorers, not knowing of the magnitude of their discovery, were disappointed and discouraged and started back. Somewhere in the Tehachapi they lost their way and bearing off to the East and South came upon a land of beautiful valleys. At the head of one such valley stood an enormous rock. Small brooks of clear fresh water wound their way down through the valleys, originating from the several natural springs. One of the soldiers, observing the low rolling hills, named them for the Guardian of Heaven, St. Rafael, and to this day the hills are known as the San Rafael Hills. The huge boulder which is now the Eagle Rock was then to be named Roco Gordo. The friendly Indians of the valley provided this band of explorers with food and directed them on toward their destination.

So it was in 1769 that the land of the Five Valleys was discovered and reported to the King of Spain. One of the young soldiers in this original group, Jose Verdugo, who had given many faithful years of service to the King of Spain, became Captain of the Royal Guards and was rewarded by a land grant from the King—a tract of 43,000 acres lying South and East of Roco Gordo which was to be called Rancho Rafael.

In 1784 Jose Verdugo proudly took possession of his estate and brought his family to live on this vast domain. Many years were spent in developing and cultivating the land and finally, upon passing, Jose Verdugo bequeathed it to his son, Julio, and his daughter, Catalina.

Julio Verdugo became a great Don and well known for his hospitality and generosity. This great Rancho Rafael had its full share of romance, feasts, festivals, and was the center of Spanish gaiety. It knew also of lawlessness in that bandits hid in the arroyos and used the caves of the Roco Gordo as hiding places for their booty.

Evil days befell Julio Verdugo when, in borrowing money and offering security for others, he lost his portion of his holdings. The great ranch lay idle for many years but, at the coming of the railroad to Los Angeles, the scene changed and Americans coming from the East with their families founded their homes in and around these Valleys. These early American settlers were mostly people of some means who selected large parcels of land and bought fine homes.

The soil of the Valleys was fertile and soon there were orchards of every kind, gardens of vegetables, and fields of grain. Then came the plentiful 80's and the gay 90's, and with the dawn of the 1800's came the march of progress and the ambitious subdivider, followed by the electric street cars, which brought many eager and admiring buyers. What was once the great Rancho Rafael was cut up into small plots of ground, bungalows were slipped in and around the trees in the orchards, and the small crossroads became business centers. The acres of garden vegetables and grain were needed for schools and playgrounds. So it is that the history of Northeast Los Angeles was recorded—a legend of adventure and romance of which the residents of Eagle Rock, Highland Park, Glassell Park, and their adjacent areas can be proud.

Places of Interest

EAGLE ROCK CITY HALL—This building, located on Colorado Boulevard, is the original City Hall of the separate and incorporated City of Eagle Rock in the days before it became a part of the City of Los Angeles.

THE EAGLE ROCK—Situated at the north end of Figueroa Street, the Eagle Rock, while originally named by the Spanish settlers as Roco Gordo, had previously been a part of an Indian legend which told of the eagle whose life was crushed out on the face of the rock leaving its imprint to endure throughout the years. Jose Verdugo, hearing the legend of the rock, renamed it the Eagle Rock.

OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE—Nestling in the beautiful hills of the Eagle Rock district is Occidental College, one of the leading institutions of higher learning in the State of California. Originally established in 1887 in the Boyle Heights District, the college moved into the Highland Park area in 1899, and was finally established in its present location in 1919. Occidental College has rapidly acquired an enviable reputation throughout the nation for its beautiful campus and its high scholastic achievements.

YOSEMITE PLAYGROUND—One of the finest recreation centers in Southern California, Yosemite Playground, at 1840 Yosemite Drive, covers approximately 11 acres of land and is part of the Los Angeles Recreation System, considered one of the finest in the United States.

SOUTHWEST MUSEUM—The Southwest Museum at 234 Museum Drive, as well as the Southwest Museum's Adobe House on North Figueroa Street provide an interesting and historical collection much of which ties in with the history of Northeast Los Angeles and the early historical background of Southern California.

CHURCH OF THE ANGELS—One of the oldest and most beautiful churches in Northeast Los Angeles, the Church of the Angels, has been the wedding place of many prominent Southern California residents.