

A Brief History of the Ojai Valley

AWHAI

Signs of human activity have been found on the Channel Islands dating from 11,000 to 12,000 years ago. By 1000 A.D., descendants of these early Native Americans, named the Chumash, inhabited a large area of Southern California that included the Channel Islands and a coastal strip and inland valleys extending from Malibu Creek to Morro Bay.

Milling Stone Horizon (formerly called the Oak Grove People) is the name archaeologists now give to the period between 6,500 to 8,500 years ago due to the abundance of milling stones (basin metates and manos) that appeared during this time. This culture flourished from San Diego to San Luis Obispo.

Robert Browne, one of the founders of the Ojai Valley Museum and curator from 1967 until his death in 1993, discovered a Milling Stone Horizon site in the 1970s. He and his wife subsequently bought the property that was located in the Mira Monte-Oak View area. Browne and a crew of archaeologists excavated over 4,000 artifacts from the site.

The Chumash arts of basket weaving and boat construction are well known, and their extensive cosmology has been documented. The Chumash called the Ojai Valley "Awhai" (A-HA-EE), meaning moon. The Awhai village, one of five main villages in this area, was located in the Upper Ojai Valley.



Chumash painting by Oatley Kidder-OVM



1854 Lithograph of the lower valley by A.H. Campbell

RANCHO OJAY

In a period from 1769 to 1823, Spanish Franciscan fathers established 21 missions in Alta California. Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, and in 1833 the Mexican government ratified a law to secularize the California missions. This order ushered in the Rancho Period. The mission and other lands were divided among the political and military leaders of early California. These rancheros ruled over vast estates.

In 1837, Governor Juan Alvarado granted the 17,716.83 acres of the upper and lower Ojai Valley to Fernando Tico, a prominent figure in the social and political affairs of the region. As was typical, Tico raised cattle in the valley for the hide and tallow trade with Europe. Tico sold all of Rancho Ojai (Spanish spelling) in 1853. After a change in ownership several times, an Easterner named Thomas A. Scott bought the Ojai Valley land. Scott, acting Assistant Secretary of War under President Lincoln and President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was interested in oil exploration. By 1868, with little success in striking oil, Scott's agent Thomas Bard began selling off Ojai Valley land to settlers interested in farming and living in a healthy climate.

NORDHOFF

R. G. Surdam of San Buenaventura laid out a town site in the lower valley in 1873 and promoted the new town far and wide. In 1874, Surdam named his new town, Nordhoff, in honor of Charles Nordhoff, the author of a popular book at the time called, *California for Health, Pleasure and Residence*. Although Nordhoff did not mention the Ojai Valley in the first edition of his book, he subsequently visited his namesake town and included some glowing comments about our lovely valley in his 1882 revised edition.

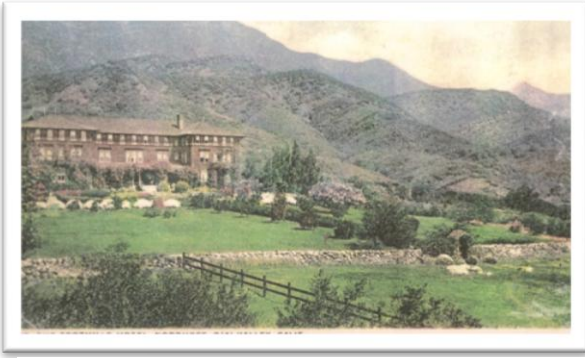
The Ojai Valley quickly gained a reputation as a healing place, especially for people with respiratory illnesses. Families from across the country arrived with sickly members to settle here. The discovery of hot springs in the local mountains added to Ojai's healing mystique.



Early Nordhoff

OJAI

The small town of Nordhoff became a mecca, not only for pioneer families seeking a healthy environment, but also for wealthy Easterners wishing to winter in a warm climate. By 1903, the elite Foothills Hotel had been built on a mountain overlooking the town. At this time, the Foothills was one of the top tourist resorts in Southern California. Here visitors enjoyed dining, music concerts, horseback riding, and hunting and fishing trips into the back country.



The Foothills Hotel – burned in the 1917 fire. Rebuilt in a Spanish style in 1919, then demolished in 1976.

One Eastern couple who began wintering at the Foothills Hotel was Edward Drummond Libbey and his wife Florence. They first arrived in 1908. Mr. Libbey, a successful glass manufacturer from Toledo, Ohio, was charmed by the rural beauty of the area and decided to build a home here. Libbey soon became active in civic affairs and proceeded to give the dusty western town a facelift. In 1916, he hired Richard Requa, of the San Diego architectural firm of Mead & Requa, to design a unifying Spanish style village.



Edward Drummond Libbey



Postcard of Ojai Post Office Tower, Arcade and Pergola

Mr. Libbey, now known as our town benefactor, contributed to giving the valley its signature structures, including the Arcade, Pergola, Post Office Tower, The Oaks Hotel, St. Thomas Aquinas Church (now the Ojai Valley Museum), Libbey Park, the Ojai Valley Country Club (now the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa), and the Ojai Library property.

After the facelift was completed in 1917, the town changed its name from Nordhoff to Ojai. Ojai today is known for its artists, educational institutions, rich musical presentations, delicious tangerines, tennis tournaments, spiritual and health offerings, and scenic beauty.



Pink Moment over the Topa Topa Mountains

Learn more about Ojai's rich history at the Ojai Valley Museum, located at 130 West Ojai Ave.
Call 805-640-1390 or visit www.ojavalleymuseum.com.