

History of the Ojai Valley

AWHAI

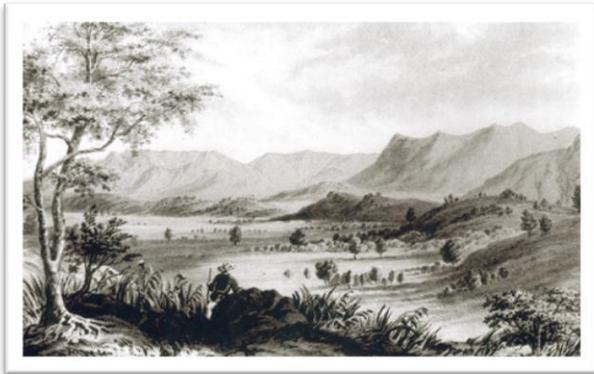
The earliest inhabitants of the Ojai Valley, according to archeological studies, were hunter/gatherers called the Oak Grove People, who lived in this area 10,000 to 7,000 years ago.

They were replaced about 3,000 years ago by the Chumash, a tribe that occupied the Channel Islands and a coastal strip from Malibu Creek to Morro Bay. Theirs was a more highly developed civilization, evident particularly in the arts of basket weaving and boat construction. The extensive cosmology of the Chumash was reflected in their distinctive pictographs (rock art). The Chumash called the Ojai Valley “Awhai” (A-HA-EE), meaning moon.



Chumash painting by Oatley Kidder and artifacts - Ojai Valley Museum

RANCHO OJAY



1854 Lithograph of the Lower Valley by A.H. Campbell

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 all the land of both the upper and lower Ojai Valley—17,716.83 acres—to Fernando Tico, a Santa Barbara businessman and politician.

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 Scott’s agent Thomas Bard, began selling off the surface rights to the Ojai Valley land to pioneers interested in farming.

NORDHOFF

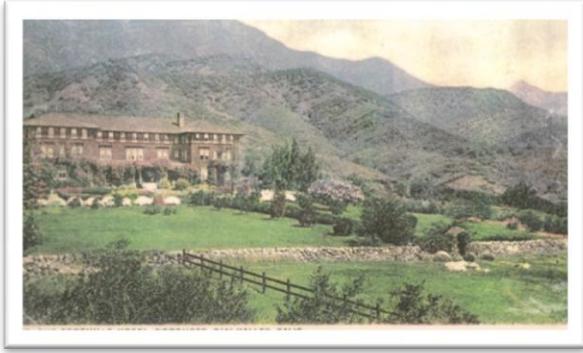
Royce Surdham of San Buenaventura laid out a town site in the lower valley in 1873 and promoted the new town far and wide. In 1874, Surdham named his new town, Nordhoff, in honor of Charles Nordhoff, the author of a popular book at the time called, “California for Health, Pleasure and Residence.” Although 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 Foothills Hotel – burned in the 1917 fire.
Rebuilt in the Spanish style, then later torn down.*

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 was 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 in to the back country.

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 patron, along with architects Frank Mead and Richard Requa, gave 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 and the Ojai Valley Country Club (now the Ojai Valley Inn).

After the facelift was completed in 1917, the town's name was changed from Nordhoff to Ojai. Ojai today is known for its artists, fine educational institutions, rich musical offerings, great oranges and tangerines, tennis tournaments 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.