

Serrano Adobe Fact Sheet

Built about 1863, the Serrano Adobe is the oldest surviving house in the Saddleback Valley, and one of the best preserved Mexican Rancho era adobes in Orange County. It is the second of five adobe homes built by the Serrano family on the Rancho Cañada de los Alisos (Sycamore Canyon Ranch) between 1840 and the 1870's, and is the only one of the five still remaining.

This adobe original consisted of only three rooms, a large rectangular front room and two bedrooms flanking a corridor. There probably was an enclosed patio to the rear of the house which would have had the outdoor cooking facilities, including a brick oven for baking and charcoal braziers for frying and cooking. The original house had hard-packed dirt floors, a different roof than today's roof, and fewer windows than the building has today.

The origins of the Rancho Cañada de los Alisos extend back to the old Spanish mission days of early California. The Spanish crown granted the Franciscan missions established in Alta California in the eighteenth century usufruct (*the right to use something that belongs to another*) rights over lands surrounding each mission. These lands, called rancherías normally corresponded to an area occupied before the Spanish conquest by a specific Indian tribe, clan or village. The Rancho Cañada de los Alisos was first recorded as one of the rancherías belonging to the Mission San Juan Capistrano, in an inventory of mission lands written in 1823.

Following secularization (nationalization) of mission lands by the Mexican government in the 1830's, all of the rancherías of the San Juan Mission were acquired by various individuals who petitioned the Mexican governors for title. **Don José Antonio Fernando Serrano** petitioned the government for rights to the Rancho Cañada de los Alisos in 1841. **Don José** had already built an adobe ranch house on Aliso Creek, near the Camino Real (near the location of today's Aliso Blvd. overpass on the 405 freeway) in 1840. **Governor Juan B. Alvarado** granted the petition in 1842. **Don José** petitioned for an extension to the ranch which was granted by **Governor Pío Pico** in 1846.

José Antonio Serrano was a son of **Francisco Serrano**, one of the earliest Spanish settlers in California. Francisco Serrano came to Alta California as a soldier, probably in 1782, eventually becoming Alcalde, or mayor, of the Pueblo de Los Angeles in 1799. His son, **José Antonio Serrano**, was named Juez del Campo, or Judge of the Plains, for the Los Angeles District in 1835, a position which gave him jurisdiction over disputes about cattle ownership at the annual rodeos. **Don José** married **Petra Avila**, cousin of **Juan Avila, "El Rico"**, in 1829. **Don José** and **Dona Petra** had a large family with the number of children reported ranging from 11 to 13, with the general consensus of there being 11 children (7 boys and 4 girls). The Serrano and Avila families were both considered members of the 'Californio' elite who descended from the early Spanish settlers and became large landowners or rancheros during Mexican rule.

Following the Mexican-American war and California statehood Don José's rights to the Rancho Cañada de los Alisos were confirmed by U.S. Government surveys and court decisions in 1856 and 1863. These surveys showed that the ranch consisted of two and one-half leagues, or 10,688 1/4 acres, stretching from the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains (today's Santiago Canyon Road marks the eastern

boundaries of the ranch) to the Saddleback Valley basin, roughly paralleling today's 405 freeway on the west, and between Aliso Creek on the south and today's Bake Parkway bordering the former Ranchos San Joaquin and Lomas de Santiago, today's Irvine Ranch. The ranch was devoted principally to livestock raising, including cattle, horses and sheep, varying from 250-700 head of livestock, depending on the year. Before 1862, cattle raising predominated, but following the 1862-63 drought, sheep raising became more important. **Don José** also maintained fruit orchards, a vegetable garden and vineyards near the main ranch house on Aliso Creek. **Don José's** grapes came from some of the oldest grapevines in California and were sought after as far away as San Gabriel and Los Angeles because of their renowned quality for wine-making. **Don José** was also a horseman and built a race course on Aliso Creek near the main ranch house where races were often held.

In addition to the main ranch house on Aliso Creek, the Serrano family also maintained a town house in San Juan Capistrano. As the Serrano sons reached adulthood, they built other adobe homes on the ranch. The first apparent record of the adobe located at Heritage Hill Historical Park appears in the 1864 tax assessment rolls, where it is listed as property of **Cornelio Bernábe Serrano**, Don José's second oldest son. Three other adobe homes were built by Serrano sons along Aliso Creek between what is today the 405 freeway and Trabuco Road. All of the other Serrano adobes on the ranch have long since been destroyed, leaving only the Heritage Hill Serrano Adobe as physical evidence of the once great Rancho Cañada de los Alisos.

Don José died in 1870 and the ranch passed to his widow, **Dona Petra**, while her son **Rupherto José** was named administrator of the estate. In 1876, she had the ranch divided into ten lots and distributed among her children. Lot No. 1 which included the main ranch house on Aliso Creek, was sold for the nominal sum of \$100 to **Francisco Palomares**, related to the Serranos by marriage. Lot No. 10 which included the Serrano Adobe at Heritage Hill became the property of son **Rupherto José**. **Cornelio Serrano** died in 1864 shortly after the Heritage Hill Adobe was built. Thus It is quite possible that **Rupherto**, as administrator of the estate, and his mother lived in the Heritage Hill Serrano Adobe after the main ranch house was sold. This may be the reason why old timers sometimes referred to the Adobe on Heritage Hill as the "Widow Serrano's Adobe".

The Serrano heirs lost most of the Alisos Rancho between 1878 and 1884 through the sale or auction for debt, bad business deals, or back taxes. Though portions of the ranch passed through various hands, most of the ranch became property of **Dwight Whiting**, a Bostonian immigrant, who bought eight of the ten original lots of the ranch in 1884 for \$23000 or about \$2.70 per acre. Anticipating the value of the land would increase with railroad access, he granted a concession for the construction of a railroad line through the ranch. The line was completed through the Saddleback Valley in 1888 and eventually linked up with the main line connecting San Diego and Los Angeles. Together with other partners who owned two lots of the Serrano ranch, **Whiting** conceived of the development of a town to be called Aliso City (after the old ranch name) by subdividing the land around the railroad tracks into parcels to be sold for hotels, shops, residential tracts, and 5-acre ranches.

The name of the town was changed in 1888 to El Toro at the request of the Post Office Department because of the confusion with a similar town named Alviso City in Northern California. El Toro ("The

Bull" in Spanish) was a name used for the Aliso Creek area since mission days. After an initial failure to attract many settlers to the new town, **Whiting** made recruiting trips to England where he hoped to interest second and third sons of English "landed gentry" who could not inherit the family estate under the English laws of primogeniture, in his El Toro colony. He also published a book, Fruit Farming for Profit in Southern California, in London in which he extolled the virtues of farming as an occupation for "gentlemen", and wrote about the fertility of the soil and benign climate of Southern California. More settlers were attracted to the area, including some English colonists. And so it was that from a Mexican livestock ranch, the area became an English fruit-farming colony.

The Serrano-Whiting Adobe at Heritage Hill was probably never used as a residence by the **Whitings**. In the twentieth century it was used as a caretaker's home for the northeast section of the Whiting Ranch at various times. The Adobe was given little care until **Stanley Goode Sr.**, Superintendent of the Whiting Ranch, made renovations and additions to the building around 1915. The first roof was replaced by a shingle roof to preserve the adobe walls from disintegration. A frame addition was added outside the west wall (where the Ranger's Office is today). The dining room and kitchen frame additions were probably added also at this time. In 1932, **Dwight's** son, **George Whiting**, made extensive renovations and additions to the Adobe. The roof was replaced with a lower-pitched roof, the walls were plastered, new doors and windows added, the frame additions were remodeled and improved, a fireplace was added in the northwest corner of the living room, and red tile bricks were used to tile the dirt floors. George Whiting later repented of his choice of floor tiles (purchased at 10¢ each) because they were so porous that, "each brick absorbed a bucketful of water," when trying to clean them. The stables structure to the east rear of the house was enclosed into a third bedroom and bathrooms were built for each of the bedrooms. The very comfortable home thus created by this restoration and remodeling then became a vacation home and hunting lodge for **George** and **Dwight Whiting Jr.** and their families. **George** and **Dwight** applied for and received state historical landmark status for the building from the California State Legislature in 1932. The Serrano Adobe as we see it today, State Historical Landmark No. 199, is essentially the house as restored and remodeled in 1932.

In 1958, the **Whiting** heirs sold 5,000 acres of the Whiting Ranch to **Mr. & Mrs. V. P. Baker**. The **Bakers** continued to use the Adobe as a vacation home and spent considerable time and money refurbishing the house with valuable antiques and artifacts. Some of the **Whiting** furnishings which had been given to charity before the property was sold were located by **Mrs. Baker**, who re-purchased them and returned them to the house. Such pieces include the beautiful mahogany armoire-wardrobe located in the hallway, made entirely without screws or nails (wooden pegs hold the piece together), the marble-topped chest of drawers in the rear bedroom, and a small marble-topped night stand in the middle bedroom. The rest of the furnishings the **Baker's** obtained from antique stores, estate sales, or were commissioned and custom-made for the **Bakers** in Mexico and California. The colorful wool rugs in the main room are Spanish Bridal Rugs from Andalusia in Southern Spain. The dining room set was commissioned by **Mrs. Baker** for use as both a dining table and for meetings of the Los Alisos Water Board. The chairs were recovered with an 18th century tapestry reproduction with hunting motif appropriate to the style of the set.

In 1969, the **Bakers** sold their ranch, including the Serrano Adobe, to Occidental Petroleum with the stipulation that the Serrano Adobe be preserved as a historic site. Dean Brothers, Inc. the real estate development corporation subdivision of Occidental Petroleum, proceeded to develop the Lake Forest subdivision. To meet open space and recreation requirements, Occidental Petroleum deeded 55 acres along Serrano Creek (formerly Cañada del Toro) to the County of Orange for a community park in 1974. This deed included the Serrano Adobe site and 2 3/4 acres surrounding it for development as a historic site. The Serrano Adobe thus became the focal point for the development of the County Parks and Recreation Department's first historical park. Community interest and support, and County cooperation resulted in the acquisition and moving of three other historical structures from the old town of El Toro. These buildings include the first church and school in El Toro, St. George's Episcopal Mission (1891) and the El Toro Grammar School (1890), also a 1908 citrus farm ranch house, the Harvey Bennett Ranch House. Together, these four historic buildings provide the physical evidence to tell the colorful history of the Saddleback valley and the pioneers who lived here before the days of freeways, shopping centers and housing tracts.

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Supplement No. 1

The Henry Serrano family recently donated to the County of Orange two iron cookware pots for display in the Serrano Adobe. These pots are typical of 19th century rancho era cookware and were actually used on the Serrano Ranch.

The cookware consists of a cast iron dutch oven, Lodge brand, with lid and wire bail. This is on display on the tile floor to the left of the fireplace in the adobe.

The second item is a black iron pot with a wire bell handle and pouring loop. This is displayed on the fireplace mantle directly above the dutch oven.

Another recent donation from the Serrano family is a hand embroidered wall hanging with red and blue threads outlining a cross, birds and flowers on a light background. This piece is signed and dated in thread "M. Lopez 1897." The wall hanging has been framed by the Saddleback Area Historical Society and placed on display in the bedroom directly opposite the armoire in the adobe corridor.