

# Visitor Center and Bennett Ranch House

## Transcript of Audio Tour Visitor Tape

Welcome to Heritage Hill Historical Park, owned and operated by the County of Orange Harbors, Beaches, and Parks. Heritage Hill was the county's first historical facility, acquired in 1974 and dedicated in May of 1982. Heritage Hill is the result of special efforts by individuals, groups, and organizations that wished to preserve some of Orange County's historical past before it disappeared completely. Heritage Hill is a unique collection of four buildings from one community that illustrate the chronological history and development of the Saddleback Valley of Orange County.

In order to better understand the development of this valley, let's go back in time. In 1763, Charles III, King of Spain, sent an expedition to explore Upper California with the idea of finding sites for establishing Franciscan missions. The expedition, led by Don Gaspar de Portolá, came through Orange County in 1769 and was the first recorded reference to Europeans in our immediate area. They camped in Capistrano Valley two nights on the Trabuco Mesa. While there, one of the Spanish soldiers lost his rifle, or blunderbuss, which in Spanish means trabuco. Hence the names Trabuco Canyon and Trabuco Mesa.

A few years later the Franciscan missionaries established the San Juan Capistrano Mission as a permanent settlement and Father Junipero Serra officially dedicated it in 1776. Father Serra would later be responsible for establishing a chain of 21 missions in Upper California.

After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, the missions and their lands became Mexican territory. The Mexican government redistributed large tracts to individuals who petitioned for grants of land. One such individual, Don José Antonio Fernando Serrano, son and member of one of the most prominent California families, was granted land once belonging to the Mission San Juan Capistrano and it became part of his Rancho Cañada de Los Alisos. The rancho eventually consisted of 10688 acres and now stretches from the junction of the 5 and 405 freeways to Santiago Canyon and from Aliso Creek to a stretch along portions of Bake Parkway and through Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park.

In 1884, the Whitings came on the scene followed shortly thereafter by the Bakers, Bennetts, and other settlers. With this influx of new settlers came the need for churches and schools. What you see at Heritage Hill are a select few of those buildings preserved for your benefit. You may visit the Serrano Adobe, schoolhouse, and church, listen to their audio tours, and learn about their individual histories.

We hope you enjoy your visit and, if you do, please tell your family and friends to come and visit as well. Have a wonderful day here at Heritage Hill Historical Park.

## **Bennett Audio Tour (after Visitor Center Audio Tour)**

At this time, the Bennett House is not available for inside viewing on self-guided tours but, because of the influence and significance the Bennetts played in the history of the Saddleback area, it is important to include some Bennett history.

The home of Harvey and Frances Bennett, originally located at Second Street and Cherry Avenue, is now located on the north side of the visitor center. Harvey Bennett was an experimenter of agriculture and developed 13 new strains of citrus. He was also a member of several different citrus boards and an important leader in the citrus industry of Orange County.

The house was built around 1908 by Harvey's father, Charles F Bennett, of Tustin. Charles purchased the land to grow navel oranges and introduced citrus farming to the Saddleback Valley area. Charles also constructed the house for a live-in caretaker to oversee his El Toro holdings. In 1910, when Charles Bennett contracted pneumonia, Harvey became the ranch foreman, moved into the house, and operated the ranch for the rest of his life.

In March, 1913, Harvey met and married Frances McDonnell of Santa Ana. Frances led a very busy life raising six children, cooking, washing, sewing for the family and ranch hands, and teaching Sunday School at St George's Mission Church.

The one and one-half story stucco house consisted of a living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and three upstairs rooms. Indoor plumbing was added around 1915 with water piped into the bathroom and kitchen. The Bennetts were without electricity until approximately 1928 when it first came to El Toro.

From the outside, be sure to notice the unusual roof on the Bennett House. This sloping roof style is known as the airplane design, considered very modern in 1908. The architectural style of the house is identified as a California Bungalow.

Harvey and Frances Bennett lived in this ranch house until 1971 when Harvey died. Frances remained in the house until 1978 when she sold the house and property to the William Lyon Company. The company donated the house and, along with the Saddleback Area Historical Society and the County of Orange, donated money to cover the cost of moving the ranch house to Heritage Hill. It is the only remaining turn-of-the-century ranch house from this entire area.