THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

America's Suburb

KEVIN RODERICK

Los Angeles Times
BOOKS

For Julie and Rod, who pursued their dreams in the Valley; and for Judy and Sean, who allow me to chase mine.

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BOOKS

Book Development General Manager: Carla Lazzareschi
Editing: Noel Greenwood, Carla Lazzareschi
Design: G&O Design, Inc.
Copy Editing: Patricia Connell, Steven Hawkins
Maps: Roger Kuo

ISBN 1-883792-55-X

Published by the Los Angeles Times
202 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012

First printing May 2001
Printed in Singapore

Los Angeles Times

Publisher: John P. Puerner
Editor: John S. Carroll

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"We were delightfully entertained by native musicians who played dreamy old Spanish airs."

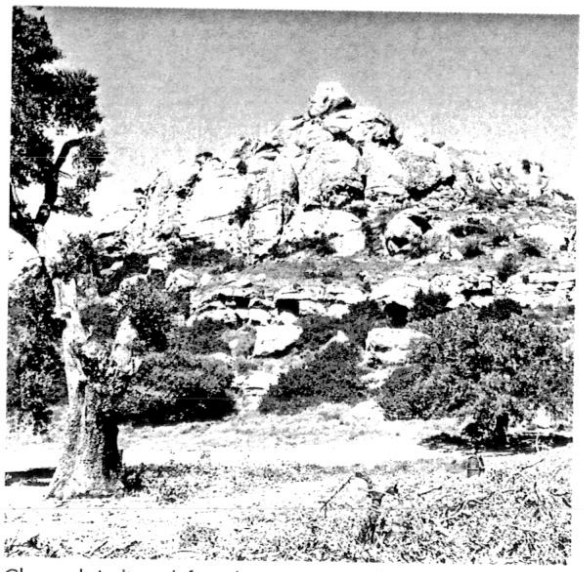
—J. E. Pleasant, visitor to Mission San Fernando Rey in 1856

On a summer morning in 1769—Saturday, August 5—a ragged procession of 64 men with almost a hundred mules in tow began ascending the southern slope of the Santa Monica Mountains. Their ranks included a priest who served as diarist for the expedition, and a company of soldiers dressed in leather and armed with muskets. They bushwhacked their way up a canyon thick with sycamores, wild rosebushes and stubby walnut trees until, at midafternoon, they reached the crest of the mountains (near where Mulholland Drive crosses the San Diego Freeway today). There the unsuspecting explorers looked upon "a very pleasant and spacious valley," in the priest's words.

They stumbled down through the brush and, after resting beside a refreshing pool, found their way into "two large villages of very fine, well-behaved and very friendly heathens who must have amounted to about 200 souls, men, women and children. They offered us their seeds in baskets and other things made of rushes.... Each of them brought some food with which to regale us, and we reciprocated with beads and ribbons."

The visitors had come from Spain, in the Old World, and Mexico, her newly established colony in the New World. They had begun walking north from the recently founded settlement of San Diego three weeks earlier, after receiving blessings from Fray Junípero Serra, a learned priest who was intent on creating a string of missions in this land the Spanish called California. Gaspar de Portolá, a captain in the Spanish army, led the expedition. Their goal was to find an overland route to the Spanish outpost at Monterey.

The bearded strangers looked out of place among the Indians, but their manner was more curious than hostile. The Indians, called by later anthropologists the Tongva, responded in kind. They knew of sailing ships passing by the coast beyond the mountains, but these were the first outsiders they had seen. The natives did not act especially concerned; they could not have known that their world



Chumash Indians left rock paintings and other artifacts around the boulder mound known as Stoney Point. The Chatsworth landmark has appeared in many western films.

had in an instant dramatically changed.

At the time, more than a dozen Tongva settlements flourished on the edges of the Valley—among the rocks, under the oaks, away from the open flats that were so foreboding. Their inhabitants ate seeds, berries and acorns and trapped small animals. They fashioned shelters out of river rushes placed over depressions sunk into the ground. Women wore skirts of grass or rabbit skins; the men went naked unless it was cold. The Tongva wore their hair long, crafted flutes from hollow reeds, and played ball-games in large groups. Evidence of their presence in the form of tools and graves has been found throughout the Valley, but nowhere in as much abundance as around the presumed site of the village with its flowing spring, in the modern community of Encino.

Linguistically part of the Shoshone tradition, the Tongva spoke the "nga" sound to indicate a village or special place, as in the now-familiar place names Topanga and Cahuenga. The Tongva also possessed a rich lore of stories and myths. Their village of *Tujunga,* or "old woman place," was where legend said the wife of the chief 'Ra'wiyawi turned herself to stone out of grief for her children who had died. *Siutcanga* was, by some accounts, the name of the village beside the spring, nestled against the mountains among giant live oaks—*siutca* was the native word for the towering shade trees, some of them a thousand years old.

Portolá's weary explorers and the Tongva first met on the Catholic feast day of St. Catherine of Bononia. In tribute to her and the magnificent trees, the Spaniards christened this land *El Valle de Santa Catalina de Bononia de los Encinos*—the Valley of St. Catherine of the Oaks. The next day, Mass was celebrated by the priest, Fray Juan Crespi, and the Spaniards remained in camp and attempted to communicate with the locals. The two groups exchanged gifts while the Indians sketched maps in the dirt showing the Channel Islands off the coast and the course followed by the white men's ships. On Monday afternoon Portolá led his expedition across the broad Valley on the far side of the river. They camped overnight under the San Gabriels, near present-day Sylmar, "in a very green valley grown with large live oaks and alders," Crespi recorded. On Tuesday they climbed through the canyons that later became Newhall Pass and journeyed north.

After the Spaniards returned to San Diego, maps were drawn showing this new place, the valley of *los encinos.* The river was proclaimed to be the *Río Porciúncula,* and a fledgling pueblo, known as *Los Angeles* for short, was founded 15 miles downstream beside another large Indian settlement. In 1774 and 1776, as American colonists in the east were building toward revolt against the king of Great Britain, Juan Bautista de Anza led new expeditions across *el Valle*

In early California, cattle hides and tallow were the unofficial currency. With no fences on the vast Valley plain, *vaqueros* periodically rounded up stray longhorns and checked for branding marks, as depicted here.

de los Encinos in the name of Spain's king. The Valley's destiny as a place to which settlers would flock was sealed—notwithstanding that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Tongva already considered the grassy plain their world.

Before the century ended, 36,000 acres east of the river narrows were given by Spanish grant to José María Verdugo, an invalid army corporal. His grant was known as *Rancho San Rafael*. His brother, Mariano, received the land straddling the Narrows itself and dubbed it *Rancho Portesuelo,* the gateway. Francisco Reyes, a black-skinned member of the original Portolá expedition also set up a small rancho, across the Valley floor from the spring at *Los Encinos*. By 1795, a quarter-century after the Spaniards' arrival, Reyes had a herd of livestock and an adobe house—and fertile fields of beans, corn and watermelon tended by Tongva Indians wearing shoes and sombreros.

A ission for St. Ferdinand

The native Californians working in Reyes' fields caught the eyes of Franciscan priests scouting a suitable location for a new mission. Reyes' land lay one day's walk between the established missions inland at San Gabriel and on the coast at San Buenaventura. "It has much water, much humid land and also limestone," wrote Father Vicente de Santa María. Reyes agreed to move on, and his adobe became the first building at Mission San Fernando, Rey de España, the seventeenth in the chain of 21 missions in Alta California begun by Fray Serra's order. The name honored Ferdinand III, the Spanish king who had vanquished the Moors in 1248 and been anointed a saint.

Mission buildings were constructed of mud-and-straw adobe bricks and heavy timbers dragged from the nearby mountains. This 1926 view of a cloister room shows the dirt floor.

On September 8, 1797, Fray Fermín Francisco de Lasuen—president of the missions since Serra's death in 1784—intoned the Litany of All Saints and planted a cross marking the newest outpost in the Spanish empire. He baptized five Indian children of each sex as Catholic neophytes, *neofitos*. The first girl to receive the holy sacrament was christened with her

A mission Indian's life: Field work and prayer

- Indians at the mission rose with the sun, answered bells calling them to morning Mass and ate corn mush before reporting to work. A two-hour break at noon was followed by another three hours of toil and a chapel session. A bell at 8 p.m. ordered the Indians to bed. Sundays and feast days were free of work.
- In all, 1,586 Indian "neophytes" were baptized at San Fernando Rey. Of the 2,081 Indians who died at the mission, half never reached the age of 20. But 92 San Fernando Indians reportedly lived to the age of 80 or older.
- Some historians insist that treatment of the Indians by Spanish soldiers was not excessive. But the soldiers could be brutal, if an account credited to a Russian sea otter hunter captured on the California coast is accurate. Vassili Tarakanoff said he was marched two days to a mission, where he saw Indians tied and flogged with straps—and one chief sewn into the warm skin of a slaughtered calf and tied to a stake until he died. His account, translated into English in 1953, did not name the mission, but the book's editor surmised it was San Fernando. Historical sources confirm the Russian's 1815 arrest but suggest that he was taken not to San Fernando Rey but to Mission Santa Barbara before his release in 1817.

Grizzly bears roamed the Valley grasslands when the Spanish arrived in 1769. "Roping the Bear" by artist James Walker, an occasional guest at the San Fernando Mission, depicts a bear being trapped.

new Spanish name, Fernanda María. Other missions donated cattle, sheep, oxen, mules and horses—a thousand head in all. The valley of San Fernando appeared on maps.

The calling of mission priests was to civilize the Indians, baptize them as Christians and put them to work producing goods. Some 147 baptisms and 13 marriages took place the first year. The Indians planted crops and built a small chapel. In concept each mission was a temporary establishment, designed to prepare Indians to run their own self-sustaining Christian pueblo within 10 years. Huge expanses of land were commandeered for the missions. San Fernando Rey laid claim to its valley and to several others north and west, covering some 130 native settlements.

When the 18th century ended, 541 Indians lived at San Fernando Rey and did the heavy work: making adobe bricks of mud and straw, planting figs, grapes and an olive grove, tending crops and livestock. About half of the *neofitos* came from Tongva-speaking settlements in the San Fernando Valley: from *Ceegenga,* near today's Northridge; from *Momonga,* near Chatsworth; from *Cabuenga* at the mouth of Cahuenga Pass; from *Topanga* and *Tujunga.* The rest came from Chumash lands west of the Valley, or from tribes further inland. Choosing to accept the mission's lure of food and civilization apparently was voluntary. But once baptized, a neophyte could not leave without permission. Those who fled were hunted down by soldiers, returned to the mission and typically whipped or locked in chains. Floggings of 50 to 100 lashes were no uncommon, though some historians emphasize that the severity of punishment was usual for the times.

Selected Indians became overseers with the authority to mete out punishment, while others were trained as *vaqueros,* the cowboys who tended the free-ranging herds. By 1826 there were 56,000 longhorn cattle and 1,500 horses and ponies foraging on the Valley floor. San Fernando Rey became known for the artistry of its silversmiths, its olives and its vineyard and wine. St. Ferdinand's day, May 30, was the biggest feast of the year. "All attended, from the majordomo to the lowliest Indian," longtime Valley resident T. R. Wilson recounted in the 1920s, recalling his grandmother's stories. "Following the mass was a great feast or banquet. The table was spread between two long rows of pomegranate trees in the orchard at the rear of the old church.... The main event was a bullfight held in the plaza in front of the old church. In the evening, songs and dancing ended the gay fiesta."

The buildings of San Fernando Rey dominated the Valley plain, beckoning travelers on *El Camino Real,* the "king's highway" linking all of the missions, which passed beside the original spring at Los

A landmark rises from the ruins

Restoration of the mission did not progress until the 20th century. In this photo taken about 1888, sunlight filters through the damaged roof as visitors inspect the interior, vandalized by treasure seekers and squatters.

The buildings and gardens of Mission San Fernando Rey were the most visible landmarks on the broad, empty floor of the Valley, an oasis of hospitality and civilization that beckoned travelers across the parched grassland. Stone channels and dams diverted streams from the San Gabriels and kept the mission stocked with cool flowing water.

After the new Mexican landlords of California stripped the missions from church control, the rancho at San Fernando Rey became a semiprivate enterprise under the control of a *mayordomo,* or overseer. The most important of these was Don Pedro López, a rancher whose family remained active in Valley affairs for many decades. His brother, Don Francisco López, became famous as the first discoverer of gold in California in 1842. He found a nugget after pulling up a wild onion while resting under a tree in Placerita Canyon, on the far side of Newhall Pass.

The physical condition of the mission worsened while Andres Pico resided there. On May 31, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the Mission San Fernando Rey church, clergy residence, cemetery, orchard and vineyard would revert to the control of the Roman Catholic bishop of Monterey. Nonetheless, time and neglect continued to take a toll. Vandals and treasure seekers invaded after Pico's death in 1876, and the elements began to erode the mud-and-straw bricks. Within a few years, the mission was considered to be in ruins.

Around the turn of the century, efforts began to preserve the mission as a historic treasure. Not until 1941 was the mission restored sufficiently that Catholic Mass could be celebrated again in the church.

Encinos. The main church, built between 1804 and 1806, was erected with walls five feet thick at the base tapering to three feet at the top, so that the picturesque structure appeared to lean. The nearby *convento,* at 243 feet in length, was the largest adobe structure ever built in Spanish California. Erected from 1810-22, its 21 Roman arches and long portico became a familiar landmark for travelers (and remain so today). Visitors entered through heavy doors into a *sala,* or grand reception room, the grandest in the province. The *convento* provided quarters for the priests and soldiers, and included the chapel, refectory, winery, kitchen and guest rooms.

Mexico's independence from Spain in 1822 altered the course of the California colony, and set in motion events that would strip the missions of their status. Many citizens of the Los Angeles region wanted the missions' valuable cattle-grazing lands put into private hands; many in the north, including the Mexican governor of the province of Alta California, sided with priests who wished the church institutions to continue operating. The split erupted into an armed rebellion against the governor, Gen. Manuel Victoria.

On December 4, 1831, Victoria led a company of 30 soldiers into the valley of San Fernando Rey, intending to smash the revolt. The troops bivouacked at the mission. The following day, a column of rebels from Los Angeles rode through Cahuenga Pass with lances raised and banners flying. The two forces faced off in the vicinity of today's Studio City and waited for the other side to charge. Finally, Victoria accused his own men of cowardice. In answer to the challenge, Capt. Romualdo Pacheco spurred his horse across the grassland toward the rebels. Responding for the Angelenos was José María Avila, a large man regarded as the region's best horseman. As they met, Pacheco swung his saber, but Avila deflected the blow with his lance and with his other hand fired a pistol shot that found its target. Pacheco crumpled to the ground dead, the first military casualty—and possibly the first gunshot victim of any kind—in the San Fernando Valley.

As the battle raged with swords and muskets, Avila turned to hunt down Victoria. After managing to knock the governor from his horse, Avila himself fell fatally wounded. The undisciplined rebels turned and retreated to Los Angeles, but they had lost the battle and won the war. Victoria had been severely cut over the eye and left soon for Mexico, resigning as governor.

In victory the southerners became more influential and sure of their cause, spelling the end of the missions as all-powerful landholders. San Fernando Rey was still thriving, with 32,000 grapevines, 1,600 fruit trees, 26,000 animals and 792 Indians in residence. "Oranges, lemons, figs and olives hung upon the trees, and the blood-red tuna, or prickly pear, looked very tempting," visitor Edwin Bryant wrote of the mission gardens. But in the new order, the priests became strictly religious functionaries, and the Indians were freed. Some tried to return to their ancestral settlements, but they had become outsiders—if the villages even existed any longer. Some Indians drifted to Los Angeles, but most who did met an unhappy welcome. Many simply vanished into the hills around the Valley or remained near the mission, struggling to eke out a living on the land.

More than a decade later, hostilities flared anew when another unpopular Mexican governor, Jose Manuel Micheltorena, decreed that the missions and their former landholdings should be returned to church control. Ranchers in the south who wanted land for grazing their cattle found this intolerable, and the provincial Assembly voted to unseat Micheltorena as governor and replace him with Pío Pico, a native *Californio.* Another military skirmish followed on the floor of the Valley, pitting dissidents from Los Angeles against forces loyal to the ousted governor.

For this battle, the weaponry had advanced from wooden lances to cannons. Micheltorena marched his ragged army into the Valley in mid-February of 1845 and camped near the spring at *Los Encinos* (the site of his headquarters was pegged in a 1934 history as about where the Balboa Park soccer fields are today, but no supporting evidence was given). Micheltorena's force of 500 men included Americans enticed by his promise to usurp Mexican law and allow them to own land. John Sutter, who played a prominent role in the Gold Rush of 1849, led the American fighters.

In Los Angeles, horses were once again saddled

Castle Peak: a beacon for the ages

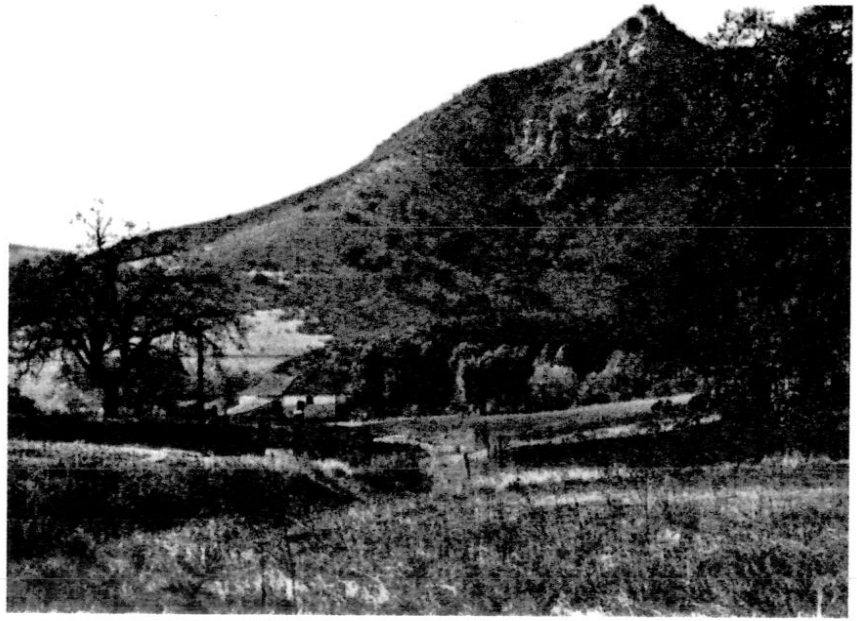
Twelve miles due west of Van Nuys by car, the suburbs bump up against an imposing barrier. Directly behind the backyards on Castle Peak Drive, a scrub-covered slope climbs steeply to a rocky pinnacle with a commanding view over the tract neighborhoods of West Hills.

The promontory looming above Castle Peak Drive looks like just another hill. But through several centuries it served as a sentinel for travelers, guiding visitors to an unusual Indian settlement that flourished beside a creek still flowing out of what is now called Bell Canyon, a crease in the Simi Hills.

Experts think that *Huwam,* the phonetic spelling of the site's name in the Chumash tongue, was a ceremonial meeting place on the border between two Native American lands. The two Indian cultures spoke different languages but evidently interacted peacefully. Chumash celebrants would travel from the western hills and the Malibu coast to mark significant holidays alongside the Shoshone-speaking inland people who lived across the floor of the Valley. These Indians, later designated by anthropologists as the Tongva, apparently knew the ceremonial grounds as *Jucjauynga.*

Some cherished relics of that time remain, known mainly to native descendants and academics. At a nearby clearing called Burro Flats, a little piece of ancient Chumash culture reveals itself each December on the morning of the winter solstice. When the sun is aligned just right, a little after 7:30 a.m., a dagger of light slips beneath a low rock overhang and illuminates a ring of circles painted on the sandstone. Near the primitive calendar are eight other elaborate pictographs—paintings in red, black and white that depict symbols in Chumash myth like the condor, the centipede and a part-bird, part-man figure. Another half-dozen rock paintings have been studied nearby in Chatsworth, near the rock-climbing landmark known as Stoney Point.

By some accounts, the Chumash had a myth that beneath Castle Peak lived a supernatural being with the body of an iguana. Either because of this myth or by judging that the ridgeline resembled a scorpion's raised tail, Spanish soldiers labeled the peak and surrounding land *El Escorpión.* The name stuck and appeared on maps well into the 20th century.



Chumash and Tongva Indians congregated in a village beside Bell Creek at the base of Castle Peak, also known as *El Escorpión.* Today, a suburban tract known as Castle Peak Estates covers the lower slope.

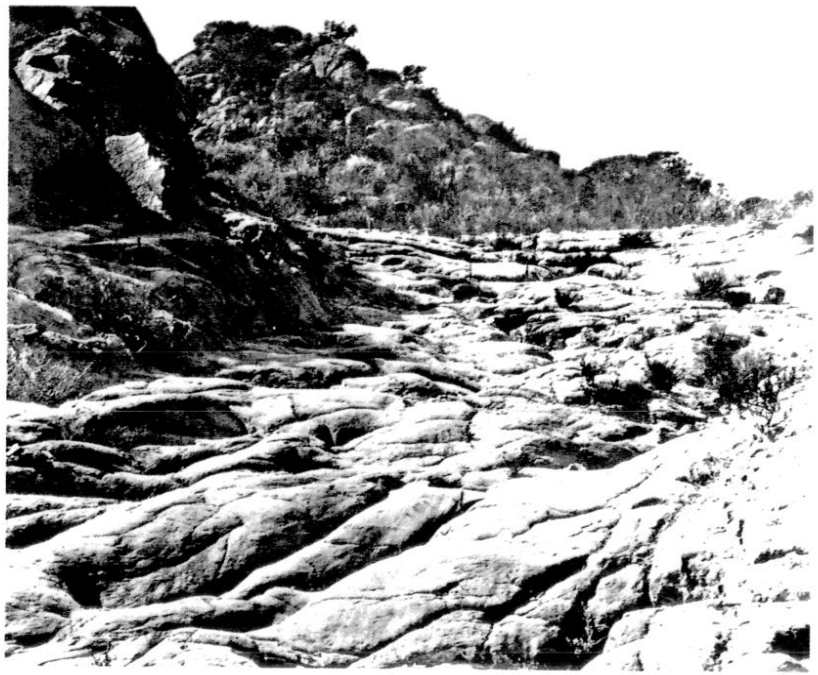
of the open plains."

Pico enjoyed the most notoriety, but others began settling in the Valley. The first American landholders were Alexander Bell and David Alexander, who purchased *Rancho Providencia*—which included part of the original *Rancho Portesuelo*—in 1851. At *Rancho Encino*, the Indian owners had cattle and a stable of 20 horses, but they could not keep up with the taxes and lost the land to Vicente de la Osa, the former holder of *Providencia*. At *Rancho Encino*, de la Osa built an adobe house with nine rooms for himself, his wife and their 14 children. Near their house gurgled the historic Encino spring, said to flow with a thousand gallons a day of water "very palatable, as soft as water possibly can be. Horses and cattle will come for miles to drink from this spring," wrote Ben Truman.

De la Osa's ranch at Encino became a way station for travelers on the dirt *camino* across the Valley. By tradition, voyagers could expect gracious free lodging at ranches they visited. But as more traffic came through the Valley, de la Osa was forced to humble himself and insist on payment. An ad in the *Los Angeles Star* in 1859 delicately announced the new realities. "I have

Perilous new passes

- Phineas Banning opened a new route out of the Valley by coaxing the first Concord stagecoach, pulled by six mustangs, to the top of San Fernando Pass in December 1854. "A rather broad trail already existed there, but such was its grade that many a pioneer...will never forget the real perils of the descent," Los Angeles merchant Harris Newmark wrote.
- Beale's Cut, completed in 1863, made it even easier to exit the Valley. Edward F. Beale dug a narrow passage in the hills—the site remains a hidden but easily reachable piece of history in Newhall Pass. Beale made another contribution to the lore of the area. As an Army lieutenant in 1857, he led camels over Newhall Pass and across the Valley to ferry supplies between Los Angeles and Fort Tejon. The camel experiment was abandoned after the Civil War.
- A precarious passage cut through the rocks of Santa Susana Pass in 1860 became a new coast stage route. "Devil's Slide" challenged horses and men alike, the "nearest thing to an escalator without power that has ever been constructed," according to stage historian Charles F. Outland. An Overland Mail Company stage began using the new pass in September 1861. The summit was crossed about a half mile south of the current Santa Susana Pass Road, almost at the end of Lilac Lane. It cost $1.50 to ride the 18 miles from Los Angeles to *Rancho Encino*, and $4 to go the next 14 miles over the Devil's Slide.



Horse-drawn stages departing Los Angeles for the coast crossed the Valley, then negotiated Devil's Slide, which was carved into Santa Susana Pass in 1860.