

OTAY MESA COMMUNITY PLAN UPDATE

HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT AND HISTORIC RESOURCE SURVEY

City of San Diego
City Planning and Community Investment
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Executive Summary

This historic context statement was prepared in support of the City of San Diego's Otay Mesa Community Plan Update (OMCPU). The information in this document along with the Cultural Resources Report (Recon 2008) will be used to identify locations in Otay Mesa that may contain significant historical resources. In addition, both documents will be used to shape the historic preservation element of the OMCPU.

Significant historic themes in Otay Mesa's history include agriculture and aviation uses. The area was settled in the late 19th Century and was originally a rural farming community of San Diego County. Though the availability of water was limited, residents practiced dry farming for most of the early 20th Century. The landscape of Otay Mesa was dotted with farms and barns as the primary land use was agricultural. The small community was typical of other rural farming communities in the county. The center of the community became the Alta School and St. John's Lutheran Church. After the Great Depression of the 1930s, Otay Mesa experienced a period of decline. While several families continued to farm on Otay Mesa, the Army and Navy began to use a large part of the mesa as training grounds for pilots. Originally known as East Field, this base was renamed Brown Field and ultimately transferred to the Navy. The Navy used Brown Field for training throughout World War II and again during the Korean War. In 1956 Otay Mesa was annexed to the City of San Diego and shortly thereafter, in 1961, Brown Field was acquired by the City. The conversion of Brown Field to a general aviation airport brought various small businesses, flying schools, and aircraft maintenance shops to the facility. In addition, after the Otay Mesa border crossing opened, the City rezoned much of Otay Mesa to commercial-industrial uses. With this rezoning, manufacturers moved to the area causing an increase in the number of warehouses and business parks located on Otay Mesa, reflecting the built environment visible today.

Previously identified historical resources on Otay Mesa include the Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District; this historic district was designated by the City's Historical Resource Board (HRB) as Site #405-408. Other previously identified historical sites on Otay Mesa include Site #409 (Building Facility 2004 at Brown Field), HRB Site #410 (Building Facility 2044), and HRB Site #411 (Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District).

Historical resources staff conducted a reconnaissance survey of Otay Mesa in October 2008. The survey did not reveal the presence of resources that would reflect the agricultural or aviation history of the area.

Therefore, it does not appear that additional survey work will be required for above ground resources. The potential for archaeological resources will be addressed in a separate document.

Interpretation of Otay Mesa's early community may be the most appropriate preservation policy for historic, above ground period resources. This could take the form of interpretative signs, a display in the public library, or the publication of brochures.

Project Overview

The historic context and survey apply to the area bounded by the limits of the Otay Mesa Community Planning Area. The Community Planning Area is bounded by the Otay River Valley and the City of Chula Vista on the north, the International border on the south, Interstate 805 on the west, and the County of San Diego on the east.

Investigations for the historic context statement included archival research and a reconnaissance survey. Archival research was conducted to gain specific information about the development of Otay Mesa within the context of the City of San Diego. The reconnaissance survey was conducted to determine the presence of potential historical resources within the planning area.

Archival research included an examination of various documents regarding the history of Otay Mesa. Items reviewed included primary and secondary sources such as previous historic maps, historic photographs, current aerial photographs, cultural resource studies, building evaluation reports, and master's theses. A thesis completed on Otay Mesa provided an introduction to the history of the area.¹ Research was conducted at the San Diego Public Library, the San Diego Historical Society, and San Diego State University Library.

A records search was conducted in support of the OMCPU. The records search revealed 29 historical sites have been recorded within Otay Mesa (Table 1). In addition, numerous archaeological sites, including isolates have been recorded on Otay Mesa. The Cultural Resources Report prepared by Recon provides a complete table of all sites recorded in the planning area.

Table 1. Previously recorded historical resources within Otay Mesa

Address/Name/P-Number	Year Built	Status
1940 Cactus	1938	Not Eligible
1724 Cactus	Ca. 1940	Not Eligible
1704 Cactus	pre 1930	Not Eligible
APN # 645-090-05	Ca. 1940	Not Eligible
6395 Lonestar Rd (P-37-013724)	1954	Not Eligible
Unnamed farmstead/P-37-015980	pre 1903	Not Eligible
Site of Fred Piper Homestead (Brown	pre 1903	Not Eligible

¹ Susan Painter, "Otay Mesa: A Study of the Impact of Water on Land Use Changes," M.A. Thesis, CSU San Diego, 1985

Field) (P-37-015981)		
Site of Schroeder/Geyser/Stark Homestead (P-37-015982)	pre 1903	Not Eligible
Site of Lampe Homestead (P-37-015983)	pre 1903	Not Eligible - no buildings remain
Site of Dallet Homestead (P-37-015987)	pre 1903	Not Eligible
Site of St. John's Lutheran Church (P-37-015988)		Not Eligible - no buildings remain
Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District/P-37-018246 (Buildings 10, 2002, 2003, 2005)	1941-1945	San Diego Historical Site #405-408
Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District Alta School Site - Archaeological Site		San Diego Historical Site #411
Brown Field Building 2004		San Diego Historical Site #409
Brown Field Building 2/P-37-018247	1942-1945	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2006 and 2048/P-37-018248	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2007 and 2046/P-37-018249	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2010 and 2011/P-37-018250	1942	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2012/P-37-018251	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Buildings 2017-2022/P-37-018252	1942	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2032/p-37-018253	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2033/P-37-018254	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Buildings 2039 and 2946/P-37-018255	1942	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2044/P-37-018256	1942-1944	San Diego Historical Site #410
Brown Field Building 2049/P-37-018257	1942	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2050/P-37-018258	1942-1944	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2052/P-37-018259	1942-1944	Not Eligible

Brown Field Building 2054/P-37-018260	1942	Not Eligible
Brown Field Building 2056/P-37-018261	1942- 1944	Not Eligible

Designated historical resources within the Otay Mesa Community Planning Area include HRB Site #405-408, the Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District, Building facilities 10, 2002, 2003, and 2005. This resource is designated under HRB Criteria E. In addition, HRB site #409 (Building Facility 2004 at Brown Field) is designated under Criteria B and C. HRB Site #410 (Building Facility 2044) is designated under Criteria B. Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District Alta School Site-Archaeological Site (HRB Site #411) is designated under Criteria A.

Historic Context

The Otay Mesa Community Planning Area embodies several historical contexts. Some of these contexts can be applied to other areas of the City, while others are unique to Otay Mesa. The following contexts and periods of significance will be discussed in detail below. These contexts are organized in chronological order, and some periods overlap.

- Prehistory of Otay Mesa
- Early History of Otay Mesa (1821-1870)
- Homesteads and Agriculture (1870 - 1920)
- Aviation and Military on Otay Mesa (1918 - 1956)
- Annexation to the City of San Diego (1956 – 1985)

Prehistory of Otay Mesa

The prehistory of the San Diego region is evidenced through archaeological remains representing up to 10,500 years of Native American occupation. The myths and history that are repeated by the local Native American groups now and at the time of earlier ethnographic research indicate both their presence here since the time of creation and, in some cases, migration from other areas. The earliest archaeological remains in San Diego County are believed by some investigators to represent a hunting and gathering culture that subsisted largely on shellfish and plant foods from the abundant coastal resources of the area from about 6000 BC to AD 650. It is widely accepted that the Late Prehistoric Period (AD 650 to 1769) in the City of San Diego is represented by the people ancestral to the Kumeyaay people of today. The Kumeyaay trace their ancestors to the earliest cultural remains found throughout their traditional territory in San Diego County and are the identified descendents for all Native American human remains found in the City of San Diego.

The Kumeyaay are generally considered to be a hunting and gathering society often with both coastal and inland settlements. Kumeyaay houses varied greatly according to locality, need, choice and availability of raw materials. The founding of Mission San Diego de Alcalá in 1769 brought about profound changes in the lives of the Kumeyaay. Some of the earliest available accounts of Native American life in San Diego are from recordings made in an effort to salvage scientific knowledge of native lifeways. However, these accounts were often based on limited interviews or biased data collection techniques. Later researchers and local Native Americans have uncovered and made public significant contributions in the understanding of native culture and language. These studies have

continued to the present day and involve archaeologists and ethnographers working in conjunction with Native Americans to address the continued cultural significance of sites and landscapes across the County.

In the past several decades, more than 200 archaeological sites spanning thousands of years of Native American use and occupation have been identified across Otay Mesa. The majority of these sites are associated with the prehistoric making of stone tools, possibly related to the availability of large quantities of raw materials near the canyon rims and more distantly at the base of the San Ysidro Mountains. Residential base camps have also been identified in both western and eastern Otay Mesa near the heads of large canyons. Based on limited radiocarbon dates and diagnostic artifacts, it appears that Otay Mesa was used by Native Americans mainly between 7,000 and 2,000 years ago, although later use is evidenced by Late Prehistoric period ceramics.

Early History of Otay Mesa

Areas adjacent to Otay Mesa were settled during the Spanish (1769-1821) or Mexican (1821-1846) periods, but Otay Mesa remained relatively undeveloped in its natural state. During the Spanish period, Otay Mesa was placed under the jurisdiction of the Mission San Diego de Alcalá.² The Spanish land use system was divided into three different jurisdictions including presidios, missions, and pueblos. The presidios were military installations, and the pueblos were civilian governments. The dominant land use under the missions was agricultural and livestock grazing. In the late 1820s and early 1830s a decline in the Mission's economic strength corresponded with a rise of ranchos.³ Ranchos in the vicinity of Otay Mesa included El Rancho del Rey, later known as El Rancho de la Purísima and El Rancho de la Nación (site of National City and Chula Vista). While ranchos were located within close proximity to Otay Mesa, no ranchos were located on the mesa during the Spanish period.⁴

During the Mexican period, Rancho Otay was located in the Otay Mesa area. This rancho encompassed 6,657 acres and was given to Dona Magdalena Estudillo in 1829.⁵ The southern boundary of Rancho Otay extended to include the northern tip of Otay Mesa (present day sections

² Painter, 43.

³ ASM Affiliates, "Prehistoric and Historic Archaeology of Metropolitan San Diego: A Historic Properties Background Study", City of San Diego, August 2008.

⁴ Painter, 43.

⁵ Painter, 46.

20 to 24 of Township 18 South, Range 1 West).⁶ The economy of Rancho Otay as well as other ranchos was tied to the sale of hide and tallow. Sheep, livestock grazing, grain crops and wine grape sales provided supplemental income.

Following the Mexican-American War of 1845, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago, and the statehood of California, the rancho system began to dissolve. The final draft of the Treaty did not provide for any protection of existing land titles. Land titles had to be confirmed under the Land Act of 1851, and often it was difficult to prove ownership due to a lack of records. Some of the land became available for sale, and many ranchos were divided or broken up.

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed for American settlers to establish freehold title to 160 acres of undeveloped land. This act caused thousands to move west and establish homesteads and farms. The first settlers arrived on Otay Mesa in 1870 and by 1879 wheat, barley, corn, tomatoes, and beans were being cultivated. These crops were sustained by water pumped from nearby streams and the Otay River.⁷ Residents of Otay Mesa were also dependent on the storage of precipitation and wells for their water supply. There was an excessive amount of precipitation during the 1861-1862 season; however, this season was followed by a period of prolonged drought from 1862 to 1864.⁸ Though the availability of water would impact the settlement of Otay Mesa, settlers continued to arrive and establish homesteads during the late 19th Century.

Homesteads and Agriculture

Development of Otay Mesa during the late 19th Century was typical of development of other rural portions of San Diego County. Settlement was scattered as by the 1870s there were only ten to twelve families living and farming on Otay Mesa.⁹ Otay Mesa was relatively isolated from the rest of San Diego as it took four hours to haul barley down Chester Grade (Otay Valley Road), the main road to and from San Diego. Otay Mesa was home to about 140 individuals brought together by geographical boundaries, a school, and a church.¹⁰ Though separated from the City of San Diego, similar to other farmers in San Diego County, the residents of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ City of San Diego, Otay Mesa Community Plan and Environmental Impact Report, 1981, 100.

⁸ Painter, 54.

⁹ Painter, 67.

¹⁰ Stephen Van Wormer, "Historical and Architectural Assessment of the Piper Homestead, Otay Mesa, City of San Diego, January 12, 1987, 3.

Otay Mesa contributed to the growth of the region through the production of various crops.

Southern California experience a period of economic growth and “land boom” in the late 1880s unparalleled in the history of the region. The boom of the 1880s was evident in San Diego in 1885 when land speculators began to buy up San Diego County land in anticipation of a railroad connection between San Diego County and the transcontinental Santa Fe line at Barstow. The development of Otay Mesa was impacted by this period of speculation as the demand for agricultural land increased.

The growth in the number of farms through San Diego County can be partially attributed to the settlement of Otay Mesa. Between 1885 and 1887, Otay Mesa was promoted as a rich agricultural resource. Though located well above the Otay and Tijuana rivers, the availability of water was not an overwhelming concern to settlers of Otay Mesa. Promoters announced plans to establish irrigation districts and construct reservoirs and pipelines that would provide water for the mesa. Promoters argued that annual rainfall and dry farming could sustain a variety of crops. Though irrigation would not be available to the area until the 1950s, pioneer farmers did lay claim to vacant federal lands under the Homestead Act of 1862 at little or no cost.¹¹

¹¹ Stephen Mikesell, “Historic Architectural Survey Report for the State Route 905 Projects San Diego County, California, May 1997, 3-4.

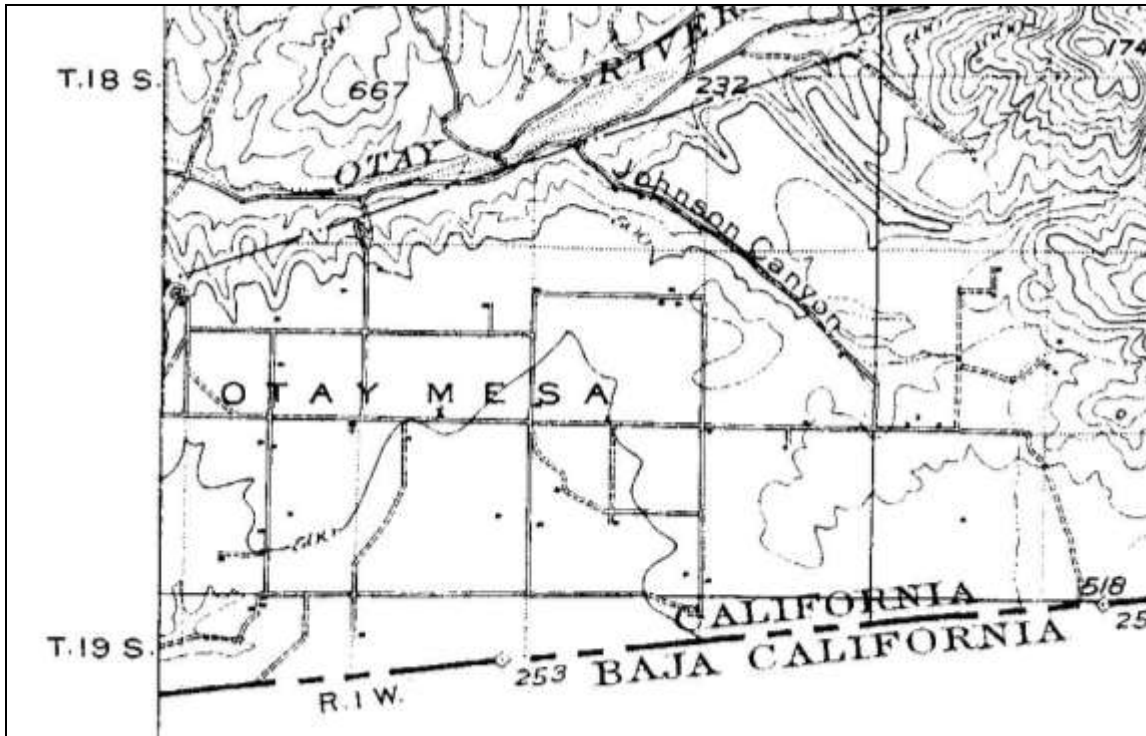


Figure 1
USGS Cuyamaca Topographic Map, 1903, reprinted 1942.
Source: San Diego Historical Society

By 1887, there were 40 households on Otay Mesa and a community of 140 people including 25 school-age children.¹² Farmhouses and barns dotted the landscape as farms ranged in size from 160 to 320 acres (Figure 1). Among the residents of Otay Mesa was a large group of German immigrants. Several of the residents were related and had originally settled in New York County, Nebraska in the 1870s. This included Charles and Herminia Piper, Charles' cousin Fred Piper and his wife, and Fred's Uncle John and Aunt Sophia Geyser.¹³ Other settlers included Henry Beckley, Dederict Lampe, John Schroeder, and the Starks.¹⁴

¹² Van Wormer, 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mary Robbins-Wade and Stephen Van Wormer, "Historic Properties Study for the Brown Field Master Plan Update Otay Mesa, San Diego, California", April 1999, 19.

Between 1885 and 1890, the rural farming community of Otay Mesa became an established community. In 1886, Otay Mesa residents established the Alta School District and constructed a school (Figure 2). The school was located about one mile west of Charles Piper's farm (what is now Brown Field). Otay Mesa also had its own store, post office, and blacksmith shop by 1890. This area was known as Siempre Viva and was located on the farm of J. Harvey McCarthy.¹⁵

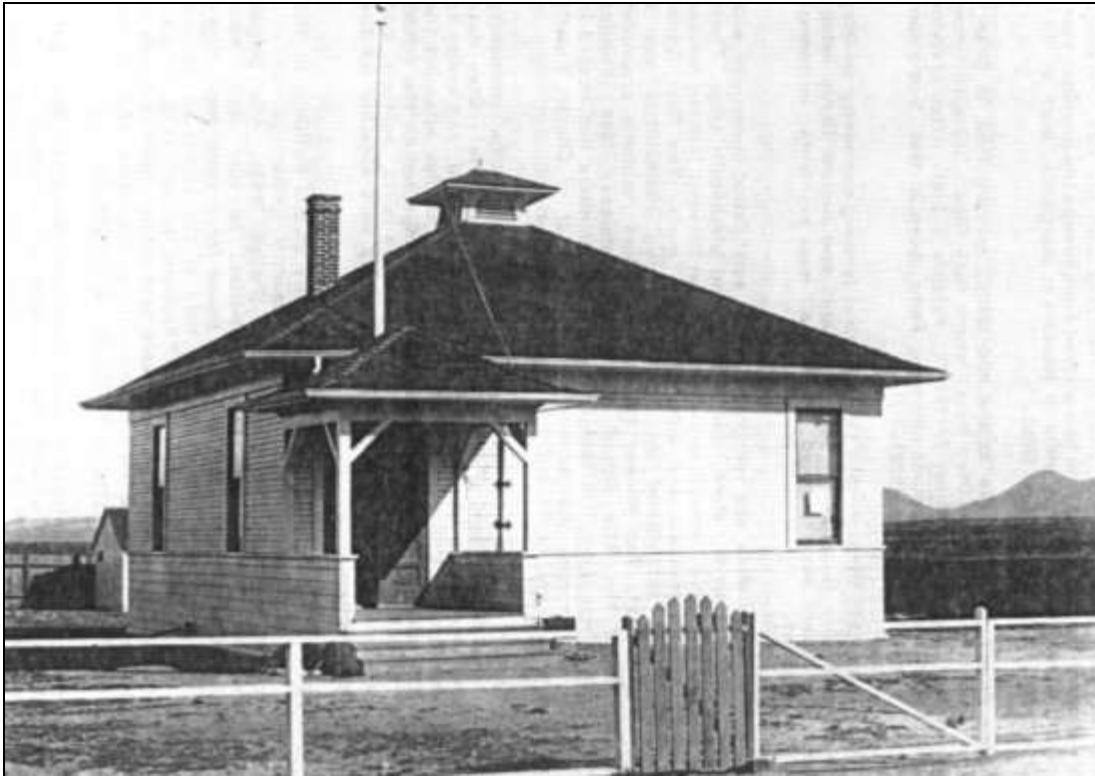


Figure 2.
Alta School, 1935
Source: San Diego Historical Society

In 1889 a church was constructed by German Lutherans on Otay Mesa. St. John's Lutheran Church along with Alta School were the center of the Otay Mesa community. The church was located approximately ½ mile west of the school. Both the church and school served as a center of activity and gathering spaces for the residents of the mesa. The Pipers served as trustees of the church and on the Alta School Board. The children of Charles and Fred Piper, Henry Beckley, John Schroeder, and Dederict Lampe attended Alta School.

The lack of easily accessible water was not a restriction for residents of Otay Mesa. During the late 1880s, San Diego County enjoyed higher than

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

average rainfall, and farmers produced plentiful crops. Wheat and barley were staple crops and hauled by wagon to the railroad station in Otay Valley.¹⁶ The National City and Otay Railroad delivered the crops to San Diego. Farmers experimented with a variety of other crops including corn, raisins, lemons, oranges, quince, apricots, peaches, potatoes, beans, and berry bushes.¹⁷ Though early success was strong, by 1890, local papers were discounting the myth that dry farming could be successful in San Diego County.

The supply of water impacted development on Otay Mesa. Wells were dug on the mesa and pumped with windmills, but this was a difficult task as water was 123 feet below grade level.¹⁸ Water was also collected in cisterns; each house had three or four.¹⁹ Water for domestic use and also farming was collected in catchments, natural depressions that were used to “catch” and store precipitation runoff. These catchments could be natural depressions or man-made. Other water storage systems included the use of waterwagons, a horse drawn wagon that would deliver water to Alta School. Families would fill water containers at the school from the waterwagon.²⁰ The use of wells, cisterns, catchments, and the waterwagon continued until 1961 when a water district was established.

Between 1900 and 1920 a drought brought a decline in the number of residents living on Otay Mesa. In 1899 there were 27 households with children attending Alta School. However, a dry weather cycle between 1897 and 1905, reduced the number of households with children in school. By 1900, there were only eight households with children attending school. The number of households sending children to school would not reach the same level as the late 19th century. There were only nine families with children attending Alta School in 1910.²¹ The Charles Piper family was one of the few households to remain on Otay Mesa during the drought years. By 1906, Henry C. Piper, the son of Charles, had taken over farm operations.

During the 1920s, a nationwide agricultural depression brought difficult times for all San Diego County farmers. The Great Depression of the 1930s continued to cause economic hardship and many of the rural farm schoolhouse communities in San Diego County including Otay Mesa disappeared or were greatly reduced. Some farmers were forced to sell

¹⁶ Van Wormer, 8.

¹⁷ Painter, 72. VanWormer, 8.

¹⁸ Van Wormer, 8.

¹⁹ Painter, 70.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Van Wormer, 8.

their land to those who remained on the mesa. Some portions of the mesa were leased and farmed by non-residents. During the early 1940s, the main crop was garbanzo beans while the land that was unsuitable for bean cultivation was used to raise grain or graze cattle.²²

The Piper family remained on Otay Mesa during the periods of decline. In 1906, Henry C. Piper, the son of Charles Piper, took over farm operations. In 1936 Henry's sons, Herman and Henry, Jr. took over operation of the farm. The Pipers continued to cultivate hay and grain as well as garbanzo beans (Figure 3). In the late 19th and early 20th Century steam-power and horses were used to power machinery and haul produce. By the 1920s, tractors and trucks had replaced horses and steam-powered machinery. The Pipers continued to farm on Otay Mesa throughout the second half of the 20th Century after World War II and into the 1980s.²³ The Piper Home, built in the late 19th Century after the family arrived in 1887, was demolished in the late 1980s.²⁴



Figure 3.
Hauling grain on the Piper Ranch, circa 1900
Source: Chula Vista Historical Society

²² Wade and Van Wormer, 29-30.

²³ Van Wormer, 9.

²⁴ Mikesell, 4.

Aviation and Military on Otay Mesa

Aviation history on Otay Mesa can be traced to the 1880s. In 1883 John Joseph Montgomery made the world's first controlled flight with a fixed curved-wing glider from the top of a hill on Otay Mesa. Montgomery's flight took place 20 years before the Wrights made their world famous flight in North Carolina.

Though it would be another 30 years before other aviation activities were present on Otay Mesa, the history of aviation is closely tied to the area. The Army Air Corps assembled an air field along Otay Mesa Road in 1918 just before the United States entered World War I. The air field was located adjacent to Alta School and was originally known as East Field. The facility was established to provide advanced training for pilots who received their basic training at Rockwell Field on North Island near Coronado.²⁵ The Army established three fields: a junior flying field, a senior flying field, and a deadstick field. The World War I facility was temporary in nature and included tent housing and tent hangars for the aircraft. After World War I, the air field was under caretaker status and students returned to Alta School.²⁶

During the 1920s, the U.S. Navy began to have a presence at East Field as they used the airstrip as a practice landing field.²⁷ In December 1928, the Navy leased 320 acres located just west of Alta School, as an auxiliary airfield to Naval Air Station San Diego on North Island. The location of an airfield on Otay Mesa was ideal during periods of mist and fog when flying was difficult at coastal Navy fields. Though the landing field was not graded, the open field had ruts worn into the ground from numerous practice landings.

In 1935 the Army transferred East Field to the Navy and the facility became known as Navy Auxiliary Air Station, Otay Mesa. Between 1940 and 1942, the Navy improved the base with the installation of three small landing mats and construction of a small storage building. One of the landing mats was 750 by 100 feet and the other two were 600 by 100 feet.²⁸ The future plan for the base called for three standard runways 2,000 feet long by 300 feet wide. In order to construct these runways, the Navy acquired an additional 475 acres located to the west and north of the original air field.²⁹ In June 1943, a Ship's Service Department including

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ Wade and Van Wormer, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

a store, barber shop, laundry, shoe repair shop, and lunch counter opened on the base. By July 1943, the runways had been extended and support facilities including barracks had been constructed. In August 1943 Chief of Naval Operations renamed the base Brown Field in memory of Commander Melville Stuart Brown, killed in a plane crash in November 1936 near Descanso, California.³⁰

Brown Field continued to expand during World War II. Between July and November of 1943, a 6,000 foot Portland cement concrete runway 200 feet wide, was built on top of the original east-west asphalt runway.³¹ Other improvements included bachelor officer's quarter, mess hall, dispensary, assembly and repair shops, nose (end) hangars, storehouses, magazine area, athletic pavilion and facilities, recreation and ship's service, transmitter building, control tower, administration building, outdoor skeet range, and aircraft parking areas. Throughout World War II, the base operated as a training facility for the Navy. In July 1944, there were approximately 1,400 individuals on the base and an expansion plan to increase the capacity to 2,000.³²

The end of World War II reduced the activities at Brown Field and in October 1946 the Navy leased the facility to San Diego County for possible development as a municipal airport. Though some private aircraft occupied the base, the County did not undertake any improvements and other buildings were leased to Sweetwater Union High School District.³³

In November 1951 with the outbreak of the Korean War, the Navy reopened Brown Field as an auxiliary landing field to Naval Air Station San Diego. World War II era buildings were renovated and the runway was expanded to accommodate jet aircraft. The Navy acquired 160 acres to the east, including the site of Alta School, to expand the runway.³⁴ The expansion of the runway resulted in the current configuration of Brown Field and the use of the original "X" configured runway ceased at this time. With the end of the Korean War, activities again were reduced at Brown Field.³⁵

Annexation to the City of San Diego

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ibid.

Otay Mesa was annexed to the City of San Diego in 1956 (Figure 4). By the late 1950s, the City was interested in acquiring Brown Field to relieve congestion at Lindbergh Field and to provide another airport for private pilots. San Diego's Mayor, Charles Dail, was a proponent of the plan, but the San Diego Chamber of Commerce was opposed.³⁶ Although this early plan for a City airport on Otay Mesa failed, in February 1961, the San Diego City Council voted to acquire Brown Field for use as a general aviation facility. The City took possession of Brown Field on September 1, 1962.³⁷



Figure 4.
Aerial of Otay Mesa, 1956
Source: San Diego Historical Society

The conversion of Brown Field to a general aviation airport brought various small businesses, flying schools, and aircraft maintenance shops to the facility. The City received \$40,000 in annual revenue from the businesses at the airport.³⁸ In the late 1960s Pacific Southwest Airlines operated a commercial pilots school at Brown Field. In addition, due to the proximity to the U.S. border with Mexico, Federal agencies became associated with the airport. The Border Patrol moved its light planes to Brown Field in 1962.

³⁶ Ibid., 43-45.

³⁷ Ibid., 45.

³⁸ Ibid.

In addition, the U.S. Customs Service changed the port of entry for San Diego County from Lindbergh Field to Brown Field.³⁹ Though used as a successful small aircraft facility, Brown Field never became an international airport or one that relieved congestion at Lindbergh Field.

Along with the conversion of Brown Field to a general aviation airport, other changes in Otay Mesa during the post World War II period included the establishment of the Otay Mesa Municipal Water District (known as the Otay Water District today). The Otay Mesa Municipal Water District delivered a dependable water supply to Otay Mesa from a pipeline connection to the Colorado River and Feather River.⁴⁰ However, though access to water was improved, this did not cause a resurgence in agricultural uses on Otay Mesa. Limited agricultural use remained on Otay Mesa in the second half of the 20th Century, but reflected a different type of farming. The availability of irrigation allowed for a variety of vegetable farming including tomatoes, celery, bell peppers, cucumbers, and barley.⁴¹ Farming continued into the 1970s with 1,500 acres on Otay Mesa planted with crops, but the acreage declined to 700 in 1980.⁴²

In the 1970s a variety of development was planned for Otay Mesa. Several amusement parks were proposed including “Captain Nemo’s Twenty Thousands League Under the Sea” and “La Frontera.”⁴³ The Captain Nemo Park was supposed to be located southwest of Brown Field with an accompanying residential development. Though neither of the amusement parks was constructed, South Bay Speedway, an auto and motorcycle racetrack, was built on Airway Road, between Harvest Road and La Media Road.⁴⁴

Along with a transition from farming to industrial uses, the federal government decided to open a second border crossing at Otay Mesa. The border crossing was planned in the 1970s, but did not open until 1985.⁴⁵ This was the first U.S.-Mexican border crossing to be located in a largely unsettled area. In response to the new border crossing, the City of San Diego rezoned most of Otay Mesa from agriculture to commercial-industrial. With this rezoning, a variety of industrial uses moved to Otay Mesa including auto-wrecking recycling yards. The new border crossing and industrial zoning spurred an increase in manufacturers moving to the

³⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰ Mikesell, 6.

⁴¹ Painter, 104.

⁴² Mikesell, 6.

⁴³ Painter, 78.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mikesell, 6.

mesa. Some of the first manufacturers located on Otay Mesa included Japanese companies, Sanyo and Panasonic.⁴⁶ The Otay Mesa industrial zone was home to dual-site plants, in which manufacturers could develop plants on both sides of the border. Manufacturers would use Mexican plants for final assembly work and Californian plants to warehouse parts and finished products. The increase in industrial and commercial uses led to an increase in the number of business parks and warehouses and by 1993 there were three and one-half million acre-feet of industrial space on Otay Mesa.⁴⁷

Property Types

The Otay Mesa Community Planning Area contains a variety of property types including residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional. Residential property types range from single family homes to multi-family complexes. However, most of these buildings have been constructed since 1970 and do not relate to significant themes (homesteading/agricultural or aviation) in Otay Mesa's history. Based on Otay Mesa's historic context, expected significant historical resources would likely include wood framed residences that date to the early 20th Century, farm buildings, or other agricultural structures. Significant properties may also include landscape features such as eucalyptus groves, agricultural fields, or remnants of irrigation systems.

Previous reports have documented the significance of homesteads on Otay Mesa.⁴⁸ The Piper Homestead was a Folk style building known as a I-house (two rooms wide and one room deep) (Figure 5). The building was a wood structure, with both a one and two-story wing. At the time it was documented in 1987, the Piper House was one of the last buildings that remained on Otay Mesa that reflected the agrarian history of the area. Though determined to be significant, the Piper House was torn down in the late 1980s.

Commercial buildings are concentrated along Otay Mesa Road and consist primarily of strip malls or large shopping complexes. The store that served the residents of Otay Mesa was located in Siempre Viva in an area just outside the boundaries of the Community Planning Area. Large industrial buildings and business parks are located throughout Otay Mesa, but these buildings were primarily constructed in the last twenty to thirty years and also do not reflect significant themes in Otay Mesa's history.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Van Wormer 1987.

Along with large industrial parks, auto-wrecking yards are located along Heritage Road.

Institutional property types consist of public schools (San Ysidro High School), a fire station, churches, US Customs offices, and the Otay Border Crossing. The majority of these structures have also been constructed since the 1970s. Though a few churches are located on Otay Mesa, St. John's Lutheran Church is no longer present on its site. In addition, Alta School has also been removed.

Properties that may reflect Otay Mesa's aviation and military history are located on Brown Field. An intensive level survey of Brown Field has been conducted and a small historical district was identified (HRB Site #405-408, the Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District).⁴⁹



Figure 5.
Piper Home
Source: Stephen Van Wormer (1987)

⁴⁹ Wade and Van Wormer, 1999.

Survey Results

HRB Staff conducted a site visit to the OMCPU on October 21, 2008 and October 24, 2008. Prior to the site visit, historic maps were reviewed to determine areas on Otay Mesa in which above ground historical resources may be present. As anticipated, few built or above ground resources survive from the pre-1970 era. No potential historical resources (buildings, structures, sites, objects, landscape features, or districts) were observed that would reflect themes significant in Otay Mesa's history. Though a few older buildings constructed in the 1950s or 1960s are scattered throughout the area, these buildings do not reflect a significant theme in Otay Mesa's history. In addition, it appears that all significant buildings related to the mesa's aviation history have been identified in the Auxiliary Naval Air Station Brown Field Historic District. Therefore, no new potential historical resources related to aviation or military resources were identified as a result of the survey.

Recommendations

Based on the historic context, reconnaissance survey, and lack of built environment resources, interpretation of Otay Mesa's early community may be the most appropriate preservation policy for historic, above ground period resources. This could take the form of interpretative signs, markers, a display in the public library, or the publication of brochures with a narrative description of the community's heritage.

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