



Faith and Friendship
Places of Worship in Early Camarillo

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*Special Thanks
to*

*The Stan Daily Family
Alice Frost Sweetland*

And the many authors of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church 1869-1969

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Places of Worship in Early Camarillo
by
Beth Miller

At one time in Camarillo there was only one church. Many years passed before a second house of prayer joined the community. “If you were to worship in the community,” wrote Stan Daily in his memoir, “you were going to be either a Catholic or a Baptist; they were the only two churches in Camarillo in the early days.” Locals viewed it with gentle good humor. Planted within the whimsy were the seeds of faith and friendship.

Long before there was a town called Camarillo, cattle grazed on the chaparral hills around the Pleasant Valley. Not many crops were cultivated. Few people lived in the area and the Camarillo family had not yet taken ownership of the Rancho Calleguas. But in 1868 the area offered John and Rebecca Mahan opportunities. There was good land, and a comfortable climate, but no school. About the same time, the Sisson and Davenport families arrived in the area.

The closest school was in San Buenaventura (Ventura). Children, if they had transportation to Ventura, faced challenges from the weather. During the rainy season, the Santa Clara River was a dangerous crossing. The first bridge over the Santa Clara River opened in 1898. That was thirty years after the Pleasant Valley School District was established.

According to [They Lived and Died in Pleasant Valley](#) by Sherwood Milleman and Val Rains, John and Rebecca Mahan “were strong supporters of their community and the people in it. They were also people who always seemed available to help a neighbor.” Along with neighbors Jeremiah Sisson and Henry Davenport a plan was set to open a local school.

In November 1868 the Pleasant Valley School was established when Mahan, Sisson and Davenport went to Santa Barbara to obtain a permit to start a school in Pleasant Valley. The name Pleasant Valley was derived from a governmental land area north of Camarillo. On November 10, 1868 the school permit was granted for what would become known as the Pleasant Valley School District. Six pupils were in the first class that was held in an old granary on the Hugo Carlson Rancho on

Somis Road. The school building would play an important role in the spiritual life of the community.

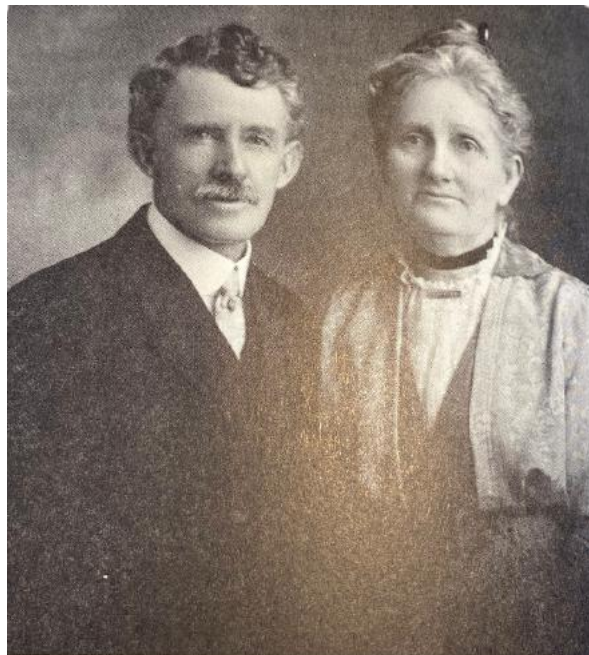
Just seven months later on June 12, 1869 Davenport, Mahan and Sisson, along with 20 other neighbors, established the Pleasant Valley Church. (The word "Baptist" was not used at this time.) Henry Davenport served the area as a colporteur. He had called the organizational meeting to establish the church and also served as the meeting moderator. Davenport would become the first pastor.

According to the commemorative history,
Pleasant Valley Baptist Church 1869-1969:

"A colporteur was almost always a preacher, but they served in areas where there were no organized churches. They were sponsored by organizations like the Bible Society, groups of churches working together, or in some instances, by individual churches. They were sponsored, but they tried to support themselves, as much as possible, through the sale of Christian literature and Bibles: hence the word 'colporteur.' They did give away books and Bibles where they found a need and people could not afford to pay for them. These colporteurs played a very important part in the settling of the West."

Sunday services were held in Pleasant Valley School. When needed they also met in the home of a member such as Deacon Sisson. For many years, the congregation did not expand. Farming was the chief source of income, but for years there was no irrigation. The land was dry farmed. The farmers depended on the winter rains to irrigate the crop. A good winter rain meant a good crop and income. But a dry winter left many farmers unable to raise enough feed for their cattle.

In 1891, Frank and Augusta Davenport donated land for the first church to be erected. It was a simple one-room structure on Ventura Boulevard. Significantly, Church records note "the new church was dedicated free of debt, which had cost \$1800.00." The Davenports also donated land for a cemetery. Today it is Dizdar Park.



Mr. and Mrs. Frank Davenport

Photos from commemorative history:
Pleasant Valley Baptist Church 1869-1969



Church in 1891

Pleasant Valley Baptist Church

According to Mabel Mahan, in the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church 1869-1969 :

“the Church met each Sunday for preaching services with many of the second Sunday services being held in the afternoon instead of Sunday nights. This made it possible for people to get home to look after their livestock and do their chores.” But there was also a time for socializing.

As explained in the Church commemorative history: “The Pleasant Valley Baptist Church evidently could have been called the social center of the Pleasant Valley for quite a number of years. Our Church was organized many years before there were moving pictures, radio or television. Transportation was poor and costly; and a place for social gatherings was quite important.”

In other developments, “It was quite a number of years before there was a telephone in the parsonage. The Church did have electric lights put in. They were used for the first time in 1910. The late Judge Flynn was the one who did a great deal of the wiring for the church building.”

The spirit of community extended well beyond the Pleasant Valley. In 1906, after the earthquake, the Ladies Aid “raised \$130.00 and sent 400 pieces of clothing and money” to San Francisco.

By 1900 the area was growing and the County of Ventura requested permission to move the small church building forty feet to make room for the construction of Arneill Road to connect Ventura Boulevard and Las Posas Road. In 1908 John Mahan had donated a baptistry to the Church. Two large rooms were added to the original structure which were used for social activities and Sunday School.

About this time, the town of Camarillo would have another church built at the opposite end of Ventura Boulevard. Juan E. Camarillo, brother of Adolfo Camarillo, had purchased land from Sarah Jane Saviers Willard (daughter of John Saviers). It was on a prominent hill which would become known as the “Catholic Hill site.”

John Saviers had also sold land which became the sites of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church and Cemetery to Frank and Augusta Davenport. The Davenports deeded both properties to the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church.

Both the Baptist and Catholic churches in Camarillo were established on land that was originally owned by the Saviers family. The Saviers' 54-acre parcel would comprise modern-day sites consisting of the following: St. Mary Magdalen Chapel (known as "Catholic Hill site,") Dizdar Park (which had been the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church Cemetery) and Pleasant Valley Baptist Church (corner of Arneill Road and Ventura Boulevard).

Both houses of worship began with simple one room buildings. A spirit of friendship existed between the congregations and the community.

Newspapers reported in April 1909, the temporary structure for a Catholic chapel was built in one week. In the article it was simply called the Camarillo Chapel. For clarification purposes, it will be called the "Wooden Chapel" in this article.

Juan E. Camarillo had heard about a special service planned for the Portuguese community to take place in the Hall at Somis. He wanted the worshippers of Camarillo and the Portuguese community of Somis to gather together in a church. A newspaper reported that "Mr. Camarillo determined to provide a church in which the mission services might be held and with the able cooperation of his enterprising contractor, Mr. T.H. Carroll, successfully carried out his plan."

In just one week's time, two hundred fifty people gathered in the little Wooden Chapel. Plans were forming for the construction of the permanent Catholic Church on the knoll. Esteemed architect Albert C. Martin, who had completed the Ventura County Courthouse, now the Ventura City Hall, was commissioned to design the church.

There was much speculation reported concerning different architectural styles. It was also noted that the Chapel would reflect the "Spanish renaissance, perpetuating the spirit of the mission days."

The family chapel would welcome the community. Newspapers also reported that Juan was "doing much toward the advancement of the community" which included the construction of "two cozy bungalows" to fill the rental housing demand.



In his diary, Juan E. Camarillo wrote on June 24, 1910:

“Friday-Camarillo-

Rev. Father Laubacher and I decided to name the Chapel Santa Martina in memory of my mother Mrs. Martina Alta Garcia de Camarillo. I was over to the Chapel and at last decided to name the chapel, Santa Maria Magdalene Chapel.”

(For purposes of this article, it will be referred to as St. Mary Magdalen Chapel.)



First Confirmation class with clergy and Juan E. and Adolfo Camarillo



First Choir

From 1909-1914, the choir was kept busy at the little “Wooden Chapel” as they sang at Christmas programs, First Holy Communion and many other services.



Carmen Camarillo (young girl behind flag bearers) in route to laying of cornerstone for St. Mary Magdalen Chapel. She is carrying a small box of family items to be placed in the cornerstone.
July 1, 1913

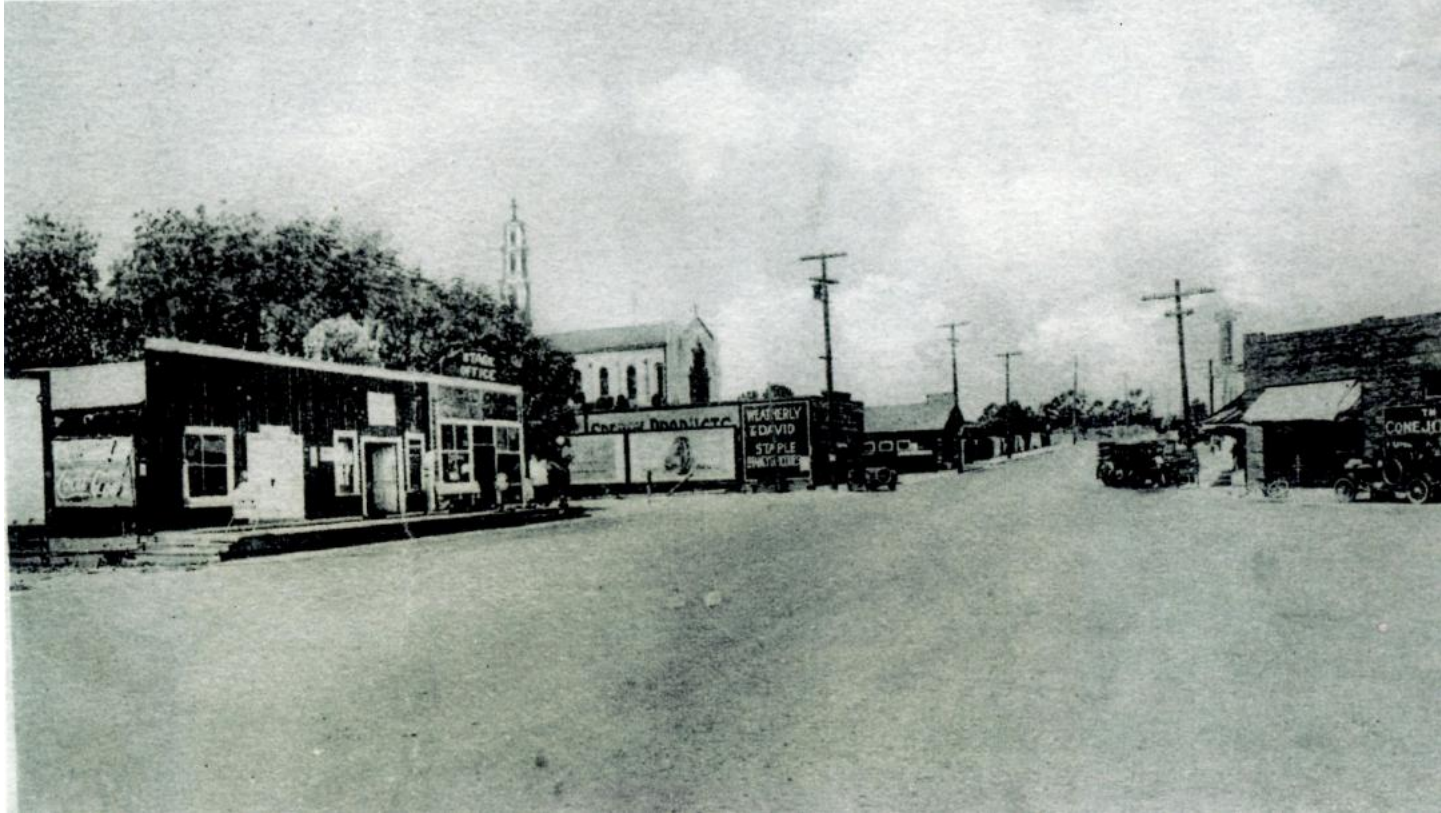


Laying the cornerstone and box of Camarillo family items
July 1, 1913



Daniel Miller and his daughter are standing on the path leading to the St. Mary Magdalen Chapel on the hill above Ventura Boulevard. Next to them on the right is Dizdar's Café, formerly the "Wooden Chapel."

In a ceremony on July 1, 1913, the corner stone was prepared for construction of the chapel that continues to be a prominent part of the Camarillo skyline today. St. Mary Magdalen had been officially established. The little "Wooden Chapel" would be moved to make room for construction. It continued to be used for church services until the St. Mary Magdalen Chapel was completed. Then it became the Dizdar's Café.



Ventura Boulevard circa 1920:

On the left, St. Mary Magdalen Chapel can be seen prominently in the skyline.

Just below St. Mary Magdalen Chapel (next to the Weatherly & David Staples) is the former "Wooden Chapel."



Chapel under construction

On November 1, 1914 the chapel was opened for the first time to the public when the Feast of All Saints was celebrated. The next day, All Souls Day, a requiem Mass was sung in memory of deceased members of the Camarillo family. The first wedding at the chapel was that of Adolfo and Isabel Camarillo's daughter. Rosa Camarillo and Alfred Petit were married on November 11, 1914. With the exception of the stained glass windows, the Chapel was complete. The windows had been made in Europe and delivery delayed due to the First World War. In newspapers, Camarillo would often be referred to as the "Chapel City."

By 1927, it was decided that the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church needed more room for its various activities and departments.

According to the commemorative history:

"The Board of Trustees was authorized to take whatever steps were necessary to sell this unused portion of the cemetery. There were a few graves on it; these would have to be moved, so it took time to accomplish anything....It was voted to have the committee proceed to clear title to the property and then advertise it for sale...on February 9, 1929, it was reported that Mr. A. Camarillo had made an offer of \$10,250.00 for the portion to be sold. The Church voted to accept the offer. The building committee had selected Harold Burket* as architect. The old building

was moved to make room for” the new Church. It was dedicated on August 10, 1930.”

**Harold Burket was the husband of Adolfo Camarillo’s daughter, Isabella (‘Nunie’)*



Pleasant Valley Baptist Church was dedicated August 10, 1930.
Harold Burket, son-in-law of Adolfo Camarillo, was the architect.

In his 2007 memoir, Camarillo and Other Remembrances, Mayor Emeritus Stan Daily wrote:

“They (*Adolfo and Juan Camarillo*) agreed to buy the property outright for the generous sum of 10,000 dollars. My grandfather always felt the Camarillo brothers were overly generous in the amount they paid. There was a “Great Spirit” between the Baptists and Catholics in town, and there was no better example than this.”

On August 21, 1936, Juan E. Camarillo died suddenly. It was reported that heart failure was the cause of death. He was 69 years old. Newspaper accounts noted

that “hundreds of leading citizens of Southern California attended funeral services” at St. Mary Magdalen Chapel. Bishop John J. Cantwell of the Catholic Dioceses of Los Angeles and San Diego delivered the eulogy. The Franciscan choir from Mission Santa Barbara sang the Mass. Juan’s dedication to his family and community was renowned. He was interred in the Camarillo family crypt at St. Mary Magdalen Chapel. A small black swallow figurine was given to mourners. One of the swallow keepsakes is in the Camarillo Ranch collection.

The Pleasant Valley Baptist Church received a letter dated September 14, 1936 in the “spirit of friendliness and mutual help.” The letter was signed by Lena M. Jones, George G. FitzGerald and John A. Lagomarsino, the executors of Juan E. Camarillo’s will.

In the Last Will and Testament of the late Juan E. Camarillo, it was written: “As a mark of gratitude and appreciation for the many acts of kindness shown to me by the pastors and people of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, and the spirit of tolerance and respect always manifested by them toward the Catholic people of Camarillo, I give, devise and bequeathed unto the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church at Camarillo, the sum of Five Thousand Dollars.”

The Los Angeles Times reported:

“Here is a shining evidence of true Christianity and tolerance and love. The Baptists had been kind to Don Juan. And he himself so kind, that more than another type of man, he appreciated kindness. So, out of the bounty and largess with which God had blessed him, he remembered his fellow Christians of another creed just because they had been kind to him. It is the magic key to all peace and happiness—kindness. There is nothing in life to compare with it. And it is so easy to always be kind.”

In 1938 it was decided that the money would be used for a new parsonage. Harold Burkett was again selected as the architect. As the congregation grew, the Church moved to the corner of Ponderosa and Lantana in 1976.

The town of Camarillo was growing and changing in the 1950s. The population was approximately 3,000. It was not yet an official city, but activities, education and community services were expanding. The First Lima Bean Festival was a town wide celebration of Adolfo Camarillo's 90th birthday and the farming community. It would evolve into Fiesta Days. A military housing tract opened. The Las Posas Country Club was established.

To enable local high school students to attend school close to home, the Adolfo Camarillo High School was built on land donated by its namesake. Pleasant Valley School District added a second school, Camarillo Heights, to its system. St. Mary Magdalen open its parochial school. The Camarillo Sanitary District was established. The elimination of the last railroad grade crossing on U.S. 101 Freeway between Los Angeles and San Francisco was completed through Camarillo.

And a new church would also join the growing community.

In 1953, the Camarillo United Methodist Church would join the community. It would be followed by many other churches. Again, Stan Daily explained the background in his book. His grandfather was at heart a Methodist, when he came to the Camarillo area there was no Methodist church, so he joined the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church. Stan had attended Pleasant Valley Baptist Church from boyhood until his early adulthood. He and his wife, Liz, switched membership to the Camarillo United Methodist Church "long before I had known anything about my ancestral family's love affair with the Methodist religion. I now wonder whether it was in my 'genes' to have been a Methodist."

The United Methodist Church in Camarillo began as a discussion between friends.

"Mr. Harold Neish and my father belonged to the Odd Fellows Lodge in Oxnard, and were great friends. Harold was a staunch Methodist and felt that the community needed another denomination of Protestantism, so along with others started a financial drive to assist in the building fund. Mr. Neish also owned several acres of land at the corner of Catalina and Anacapa Drives in Camarillo Heights. He donated the land to build the first United Methodist Church."

Soon afterward the small church was built, it was decided that more land was needed and the property at 291 Anacapa was purchased. Later additional property was purchased. With the help of volunteer labor, the new sanctuary was constructed in 1975. There is a building named in honor of Harold Neish.

CAMARILLO UNITED METHODIST CHURCH HISTORY

by

Barbara Burrows

The church was organized in 1953 in a building located at Anacapa and Catalina. Later that year the current church property at 291 Anacapa Drive was purchased. In 1954, military barracks were moved in to serve as a temporary sanctuary and meeting place. These now serve as the common use facility and the Korean United Methodist Church. In 1956, the first unit that contained the sanctuary and offices was completed. It is now the uncarpeted area of Brooks Hall, the kitchen, the youth center and library. In 1961, additional land was purchased for the construction of Neish Hall. That building is now our education unit. In 1971, the parsonage was built using volunteer workers. In 1975, construction of the new sanctuary building was completed in ten months using mostly volunteer workers. During the following year, the 22-rank Schantz pipe organ was installed to complete the construction and in 2006 it was digitally upgraded with the addition of 31 digitally recorded ranks. In 1979, an addition to the first unit was constructed. That addition is now the balance of Brooks Hall and Howald Parlor. In 1989 adjoining property on Anacapa (to the north) was purchased for use in possible future expansion. In 2000, we transformed our parsonage into "Mission House". Our Mission is to serve our church and community with this 3400 square foot facility. We celebrated our 50th Anniversary in 2003 and in 2004 our parking lot was redesigned and renovated. In 2006, our rental house on Anacapa Drive was torn down and the area made into "Friendship Garden" which consists of an outdoor chapel with open cathedral beams and a meditation labyrinth nested in a lovely 11,000 square foot garden. In 2009, an addition was started to the existing Mission House garage transforming it into a large assembly room to accommodate 150.

The sanctuary building is designed around a forest glen theme with circular pews and natural lighting from high around the perimeter. The stained-glass windows were designed with two primary thoughts in mind. There is a figure representing

the Good Shepherd in the front window. This figure was done entirely with glass - and lead, no paint was used. There is also a cross and a rainbow in this window

The Manzanita Cross was constructed by a member of our church after receiving permission from our conference and the county to obtain the wood and boulders from the Santa Clara riverbed. The cross was left in its rugged state to remind us of the cruelty suffered on the other cross represented on that first Good Friday. Hours of loving work went into sanding and polishing it to enhance the natural beauty of the wood. The altar is a single boulder taken from Santa Clara riverbed. It is symbolic of the altar used in Old Testament times, and of the strength and eternal nature of God. The rock wall into which the pulpit and lectern are placed are made of smaller boulders from the riverbed. These boulders are broken open to show the beauty within.

The Camarillo United Methodist Church Child Development Center uses the church Sunday school classrooms for pre-kindergarten students Monday through Friday during the regular school year. The school is NAEYC Accredited. They also have a summer school program held between July and August.

In the early 1990's, the Medical Supply Project was started offering free medical equipment to the Camarillo area to borrow at no charge.



Camarillo United Methodist Church



The Manzanita Cross was constructed by a member of Camarillo United Methodist Church.



Camarillo United Methodist Church

Looking Back Through the Eyes of a Child

A little more about school life in early Camarillo. When we were in grammar school, every Thursday afternoon we had Release Time. Students were released from class to go for religious instruction at a nearby church. Since there were only two churches, Catholic and Baptist, the choice was simple.

For those students who didn't want to go to the Baptist or Catholic, for whatever reason, they stayed in the classroom with free time to read or whatever. Groups of students led by an adult walked to their church of choice. When I was about 10 or 11 my brother came running up to me and said "Sis, there's a new church in town, we're going with the Episcopalians".

Captain Ray Lewis of the Church Army came to Camarillo to form a new church, St. Columba's. Next the Methodist's came, then more and more denominations. Most had youth programs. In high school the Methodist church on Anacapa had a Canteen every Wednesday night in an old building where Anacapa and Catalina meet. There was dancing and socializing. It was a great time for kids to gather. St. Columba's had a very active youth program too.

This was the culture of a small town. Church played a role in our formation. The Mormons had early religious instruction. I think the kids met at 6:30 am at a house on West Loop, maybe the Taylor's. We always marveled at the early risers who then came to school by 8:00 am.

Thanks for indulging my walk down memory lane.

Alice F. Sweetland

Camarillo Lore?

“I have heard from many “Old Timers” that there was a Father Crow at the Catholic Church and that both the minister of the Baptist Church and priest were great friends, even went to hear the other’s preaching from time to time. There was one time that a load of wine was delivered to the Baptist Church by mistake, and the minister loaded it up in his auto, and took it down to the father at the Catholic Church.

I understand that Reverend Dawson said, with a twinkle in his eye, “I think this was delivered to the wrong address, Father Crowe. I thought I’d better get it over to you before one of my parishioners sees it in the rectory, as I might have some explaining to do!” or words to that effect.

At least that was the lore that came down to me.”

Stan Daily

Mayor Emeritus

From: Camarillo and Other Remembrances

Camarillo is a city with deep spiritual traditions and history. It is home to many, many more houses of worship than were in the City during the early years. “My grandfather, in his book, noted that Camarillo was now known as ‘Chapel City.’ “How pleased he would be,” wrote Stan in his memoir, “to see all the churches in Camarillo. We are truly a ‘Chapel City’.”



Do you have a comment, story or photo you'd like to share?

Please contact Karin Farrin.

Thank you!

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