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Sarah Bliss
CSUSB

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Museum Review: Temecula Valley Museum

By Sarah Bliss



View of “Temecula History,” Photo by author.

While the city of Temecula is young, it contains a rich history that exemplifies many of the trends of Californian and American history. The first written accounts of Temecula were from Father Juan Norberto de Santiago in 1797, who sought a new mission site. While there is little known about Temecula in the early 1800s, this land was part of a rancho for Mission San Luis Rey. After the 1840s, the land went from ranchos owned by the mission system and Mexican government to individuals. In the early days of California’s statehood, stage lines and a post office were established in this area. Then in the late 1800s a railroad was established, which linked Temecula to San Diego and San Bernardino. Until the 1960s and 1970s, Temecula remained a place for cattle ranching and agriculture. While suburbs have replaced much of the rural farmland that Temecula once was, vineyards are now prominent where cattle once grazed. Like in its early days as a

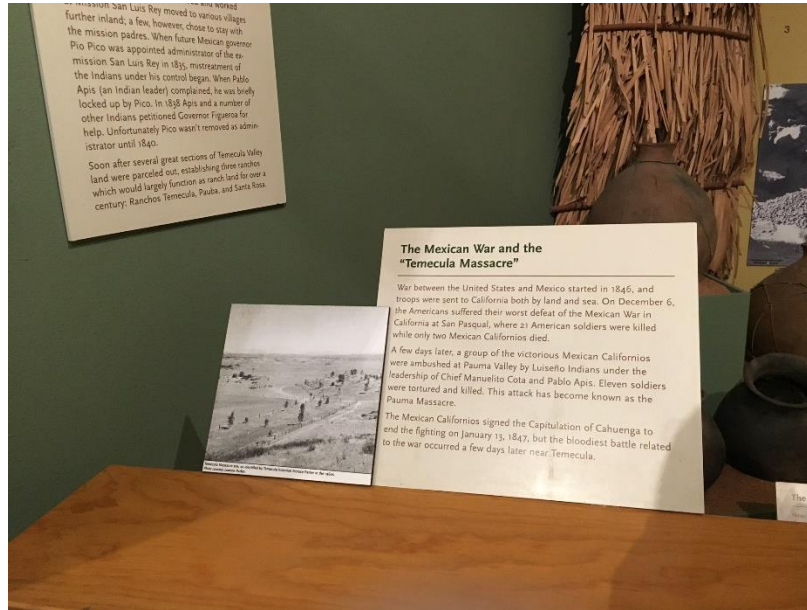
link between stage lines, Temecula is still a hub between San Diego and Los Angeles. Much of this history is stored at the Temecula Valley Museum.

The museum is a two-story building located in Sam Hicks Memorial Park, near the entrance of Old Town Temecula – which is now a popular tourist destination that features historic buildings. The goal of the museum is to accurately portray the stories of Temecula Valley's past and present. It aims to be a destination for Temecula Valley residents and, since it is next to the revitalized Old Town District, many tourists also come to learn about the history of Temecula Valley. The main exhibit “Temecula History” developed over many years. The first artifacts came from the personal collection of Tony Tobin and objects purchased from the former Frontier Historical Center of Temecula. The KACOR Development Company and Overland Bank contributed \$20,000 to the acquisition of objects in the Bianchi collection.¹ Additional donations to the collections still are made by the community. Thus, the museum has had constraints on space. It first opened in its Butterfield Square location in 1985. It moved to larger locations from Front Street, Main Street, to Mercedes Street in Temecula. Currently, the Temecula Valley Museum is developing a database of images, documents, and publications that will eventually be online. With exhibits for children and adults, it is a great place to visit and learn about the history of Temecula.

The main exhibit at the Temecula Valley Museum is called “Temecula History.” It depicts key periods of Temecula Valley including Luiseño Indians, Mission San Luis Rey Period, the establishment of the ranchos, and transportation influences including the stagecoach and railroads. The overall content of the museum does try to be accurate to the periods it displays. Temecula has had a rich, but controversial history; and, surprisingly, the museum did exhibit more volatile events such as The Mexican War and the “Temecula Massacre.” This event, containing one of the bloodiest battles of the Mexican War, took place in a nearby canyon in 1847. During this time of uncertainty and fighting, the Temecula Indians captured Mexican soldiers and executed them. In retaliation, a Mexican contingency was sent, and

¹ “Creating the Temecula Valley Museum,” *Temecula Valley Museum, Inc.*, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.temeculavalleymuseum.org/about/about-the-museum/>.

with the help of Cahuilla Indians, they slaughtered the Temecula Indians.²



Information about the Mexican War and the “Temecula Massacre,” Photo by author.

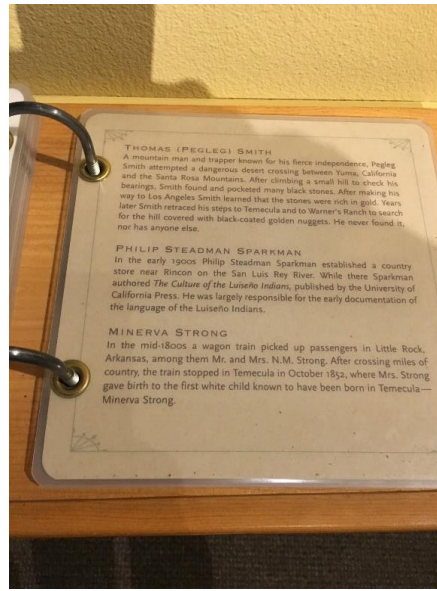
The main themes of the museum were the different time periods and ended with a section called “They Passed This Way...” There is also an accompanying section upstairs that includes a section for children to interact with objects and themes that they learned about. Each section is named and is accompanied by a combination of artifacts, videos, interactive elements, photos, text, and miniatures. Overall it flows well and allows the visitor to see the different periods of time in a logical way.

The museum has an effective presentation and is successful at showing the various time periods in Temecula's history. In many sections, the layout is a bit cramped; there is a significant amount of text in many of the plaques and it is sometimes hard to focus on a single object because many of them overlap. One of the most compelling presentations was the "They Passed This Way..." section. When you are at the museum's entrance, there is a

² Vanessa Ebbelrig, “A Look Back: The Temecula Massacre,” *The Press-Enterprise*, February 6, 2010.

History in the Making

monument that seems out of place in the park. It is a large stone with names engraved on it with a little plaque about it.



“They Passed This Way” monument and information inside museum, Photo by author.

Inside the museum, after learning the history of the area, they have a video playing with the history of the people and the monument. The monument has names of people who passed through Temecula or prominent figures in Temecula history. Inside the museum, you can see the creation of the monument and the stories of those people. Having a minimalist approach on the outside is intriguing and once you go inside you have more of interest to learn more. They are currently working on a book that tells the stories of the individuals memorized on the “They Passed This Way” monument.



Sign showing interactive area, Photo by author.

Other parts of the museum that enhance the presentation include the section designed to be a children's educational area. Objects that children can touch are placed alongside fragile artifacts to help children interact with and understand history. They can interact in a mercantile store, dress shop, campsite, and learn how to use a grinding stone. These items showcase what life was like in the early days of Temecula. Children get to learn how Native Americans ground acorns, what types of items people used to use, and they get to wear period clothing to immerse themselves in what life was like. Overall, the museum has a mixed variety of presentation strategies to engage museum visitors.

In the “Temecula History” exhibit, the book *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson is showcased. While it focuses on the book and the play that goes along with it, the exhibit shows a more optimistic version of what the book means. It mainly highlights the “Ramona Pageant” which is the play based upon the book. This play takes place in Temecula, Hemet, and other nearby communities. The exhibit mainly focuses on the fame and actors that the play brought to the area. The story, which depicts the racism shown to Native Americans in California, does not seem to reach its full potential in this exhibit. More details should be on Helen Hunt Jackson, who tried to show America's mistreatment of Native Americans. In the book, Helen Hunt Jackson tries to show what life was like for Native Americans who were caught in-between Mexican rule and when American's started to settle in California. With her novels that spoke for the fair treatment of Native Americans, Helen Hunt Jackson may have contributed to Congress passing the Dawes Act in 1887. A more in-depth presentation of the themes of this novel could give viewers a greater understanding of the tensions in California during the 1800s.

In a traditional history presentation, you would not get to see, touch, and interact with artifacts. At the Temecula History Museum, many of the artifacts are not encased. This allows the visitor to see and have a larger connection with the artifacts and with history. There is even a section where visitors are encouraged to “Touch History.” There is a monument that sparks interest and makes the viewer ask questions. Just reading and looking at pictures does not have the same level of engagement that this exhibit allows. Overall the exhibit does enhance public knowledge in an engaging way. While there is a fair amount of space dedicated to the Native American’s who lived in Temecula, the tensions that were in this region are not fully presented. Perhaps more narrative from local Tribes could help give the story of the tensions that were in this region. The “Milestones of Temecula History” highlight events such as “First Hotel,” “Most Notorious Inn,” “First Bank/First Bank Robbery,” “First Newspaper,” and only one highlight the Native American’s titled “Year Pechanga Indian Reservation was Established by Presidential Executive Order.” When other professionals look at this exhibit they can learn effective ways in which to draw visitors and ways to engage with visitors.

Overall, the museum introduces the City of Temecula, and gives visitors the tools to learn about local history and ask broader historical questions. The museum does present some of the more volatile and controversial topics in local history, such as the Temecula Massacre. This shows that the museum does want to ask and highlight the events that happened in Temecula. While the museum is small, only occupying a small two-story building in Old Town Temecula, it does its best to engage all audience levels. For people wanting general knowledge of Temecula history, the first-floor exhibits as much information as the floor space allows. The second floor offers areas for younger visitors to engage and get a better understanding of history. This floor also exhibits an area for rotating exhibits, giving an opportunity for repeat visitors and changing exhibits. The museum could work on highlight the Native American side to the history of Temecula. While the museum does have a section on some Native American history; this should be expanded showing their influence in the history of Temecula.

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Author Bio

Sarah Bliss is currently a graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino, in the applied archaeology program. She is finishing her thesis on culture contact in the Domenigoni/Diamond Valleys, using the collection housed at the Western Science Center. She has conducted archaeological fieldwork in Colorado, Ireland, Japan, and California. Sarah works for the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians as a Tribal Cultural Specialist. Her special interests include culture contact, historical archaeology, California archaeology, cultural resource management, and geographic information systems.

