

## Mentone Enjoys Its Rocky Fame

Beach jokes aside, most residents find that life is good in this semi-rural suburb along Highway 38 east of Redlands.

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MENTONE - The founders of this town envisioned a community like its namesake, a ritzy tourist resort on the French Riviera.

And, for a little while, Mentone made a big name for itself as the Southland's health spa capital. A grand hotel welcomed visitors from the East and from Los Angeles.

An item in an 1887 issue of The Citrograph, an early Redlands newspaper, proclaimed Mentone as among the most favored spots in San Bernardino County. It was a community "destined to blossom ... into a veritable Garden of Eden."

Santa Fe Railway made it the farthest point east on its new kite-shaped track in 1892, with eight trains every day bringing tourists from Los Angeles to Mentone and to other, less prestigious Inland Empire communities like Redlands and Riverside. Soon, Southern Pacific built its tracks into Mentone, running 14 trains a day.

But the town that held such promise is no longer a vacation destination. In fact, Mentone is hardly mentioned by outsiders any more unless it's as the butt of a joke.

"I don't know why. There's no reason for it, really," said resident Gilbert Soffel. "We've got no more beer bars here than in Redlands. We're not country hicks."

Soffel, 55, has lived in Mentone 38 years, reared his four children here and has been successful growing citrus, avocados and Christmas trees, and raising honey bees on his San Bernardino Avenue Ranch.

Citrus, boysenberries, apricots, pomegranates, figs, walnuts and almonds grew abundantly a century ago. Back then, Mentone raisins and olives were shipped nationwide.

Mentone's first building - its first business in 1887 - was a sandstone quarry.

Mentone rock was prized for its color and uniform composition. It was used in streets and buildings in Los Angeles, San Diego and Alhambra and it built the breakwater in San Pedro.

So what happened?

Mentone's fortunes began to change near the close of the 1800s, in part because the Redlands Light and Power Co. siphoned off the community's water source. The drought that followed threatened to turn the community into a ghost town.

Community members eventually plumbed deeper water sources, but by then Redlands' fame had eclipsed Mentone's.

Today, Mentone is home to professional golfer Dave Stockton Sr., former San Bernardino County District Attorney Dennis Kottmeier and yacht captain Peter Van Horn, who has an 8-foot Fiberglass chicken and a 25-foot lumberjack named Paul Bunyan in his front yard.

Most of Mentone's residents, though, are more ordinary folk - farmers, nurses and blue-collar workers. And now there's a mix of professional people moving into several new housing tracts.

Streets still bear the fancy names given by the land speculators more than 100 years ago: Anzio, Salerno, Capri, Naples, and Nice (that's "neece" like the swanky town on the shores of the Mediterranean).

But the new housing tracts have what some may consider more appropriate names: Sunchase, Sandstone and Boulder Creek.

"Mentone has been really, really nice," said Carla Raney, 45, who moved with her family from Fontana to the Sunchase development eight years ago.

"It's closer to the mountains. We don't have the traffic. It's very quiet up here."

And, when given the choice of sending her child to Crafton Elementary in Redlands or Mentone Elementary, Raney chose Mentone. "They seem like they care. It was more like a little country-type school."

The unincorporated village of about 6,000 residents lies along the mostly dry and rocky Mill Creek and Santa Ana river beds. Its location has been the source of many a joke - bumper stickers proclaiming "Make Mentone Beautiful, Take a Rock to Redlands" and "Where the Hell is Mentone Beach?"

But the location also is a source of pride. Residents have breathtaking views of the San Bernardino Mountains, they can take walks in the Crafton Hills or enjoy the historic Zanja irrigation canal as it trickles through the hand-hewn rock channels. And

every spring brings a spectacular show of orange and yellow African daisies.

Highway 38 - called Mentone Boulevard through town -brings a steady stream of out-of-towners going "the back way" to Big Bear.

Most residents are good natured about the ribbing. It is they who came up with the bumper stickers and T-shirts bearing funny slogans.

About 15 years ago, someone left a half-ton boulder in the Redlands Police Department parking lot. It bore the "Take a Rock to Redlands" sticker. After city crews carted the rock away, another was left.

Resident Sheryl Johnson, 27, doesn't care about naysayers or the self-deprecating humor.

"This is my home and I love it here. If they don't like it they can stay away."

## DATES IN MENTONE'S HISTORY

- 1862 - Myron Crafts and his family establish Crafton.
- 1873 - Mrs. Crafts opens "The Retreat" boarding house on Crafton Avenue, which later becomes a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients. It is the East Valley's only resort until one opens in Redlands in 1888.
- 1886 - The Mentone Company, a subsidiary of the Santa Fe Railroad, purchases 3,000 acres for a town site.
- 1887 - Town site is laid out. Name comes from a French Riviera resort. East-west streets are named after other cities on the Riviera; north-south streets are named after semi-precious stones.
- 1888 - William John Tench of New York is hired by the railroad as first real estate agent. Mentone Sandstone Company is established, with rocks from its quarry shipped throughout the Southland.
- 1891 - Mentone Hotel built in the style of Hotel del Coronado on east side of Opal Avenue south of Mentone Boulevard.
- 1892 - Santa Fe's kite-shaped track begins operating eight trains a day between Los Angeles and Mentone. Southern Pacific builds a line three blocks away with 14 trains per day between Los Angeles and Mentone. Mentone Community Church, a community social center, is built. Redlands Light and Power Co. takes most of the water from Mill Creek, leaving Mentone without an adequate water supply.
- 1897 - Mentone Hotel is purchased by Trinity Episcopal Church in Redlands and also turned into a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients.
- After several years of drought, Tench and employee Ah Yee hand-dig well 200 feet deep; Tench begins his own water company.
- 1903 - Tench builds big reservoir. Wells, reservoir and water system eventually sold to City of Redlands.
- 1906 - Mentone Heights Orange Company established.
- 1916 - Great flood brings even more boulders into town.
- 1917 - Mentone Hotel, once the town's crowning glory, is torn down.
- 1940 - Victorian-style Mentone Depot is torn down; replaced with another, smaller depot.
- 1946 - Universal Sanitary, later Universal Rundle, toilet pottery plant dedicated at north end of Opal Avenue. Closes 30 years later.
- About 1950 - Grand Central Rocket, makers of jet fuel, opens at Crafton and Madeira avenues. It later becomes Lockheed Jet Propulsion and closes in the mid-'70s. (annexed by Redlands)
- 1996 - East Valley High School under construction on Colton Avenue.