

Pioneer influence in Santa Clara shows history of Southern Utah

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Once Santa Clara, Utah, sat isolated along the river of the same name, separated by miles of desert from other communities in Southern Utah. That isolation and the necessity of self-reliance it engendered made for a strong community and a town whose hardy people built it to last. Remnants of Santa Clara's pioneer beginnings may be seen on every street.

Santa Clara is no longer isolated. The burgeoning growth of neighboring St. George has made it almost a suburb with new housing and businesses filling the intervening miles of desert.

Interstate 15 makes short work of the journey from Las Vegas to St. George and Santa Clara. Once travelers faced days of grueling progress across the desert, one of the worst stretches along the historic route followed by explorers, mountain men, adventurers, traders and pioneers.

To reach Santa Clara today, it is about a two-hour drive from Las Vegas. Follow I-15 north some 120 miles to the first St. George exit. Follow this street past its junction with State Route 18 and onward about five miles to Santa Clara.

Still quietly rural in character, Santa Clara basks in mellow, autumn sunlight amid pastures, fields and orchards. Trees that line the streets are now coloring up for fall. Some of those trees date from the early decades of the town, planted as saplings by pioneers who may have brought plants, cuttings, and seeds from homes far removed from the hostile climate of the desert.

Many of the first arrivals at the future townsite were Swiss immigrants, converts to the Mormon faith recruited in their homeland. The Swiss put the water of the Santa Clara River to good use in making the desert bloom. They brought the ways of the old country and adapted them to life in an alien climate.

The town nestles along the

Trip of the week

river and irrigated fields and orchards. Today the Santa Clara is a quiet stream, belying the hardships endured by the pioneers who tried to control it.

Until dams, reservoirs, channels and irrigation ditches brought it to terms, the Santa Clara River used to go on monumental tears, ripping through fields, washing out dams, and flooding out families. Just go upstream along that little river and see the canyons it has gouged out to see the real power of that innocuous stream.

Too much water or not enough of it, coupled with the constant worry of trouble with the Indians in those early days, made living at the edge of civilization a hard lot. Goods were in short supply, so the pioneers depended on what they could raise and make for themselves.

The church and its people had serious troubles with the United States government as well. Religious differences which had driven the Mormons into the deserts and mountains of the West were never very far from the surface in their dealings with other immigrants, some of whom were sworn enemies. The site of the Mountain Meadows Massacre lies just 30 miles distant along Highway 18, a monument to intolerance and duplicity.

Santa Clara is justifiably proud of its pioneer origins. Its well-preserved old buildings, early-day homes modified to meet modern needs, and historical markers are all monuments to the lives of labor expended by those early settlers.

Drive or walk along Santa Clara's streets to view many fine examples of architecture from the last century. Look for details such as bevelled glass, touches of stained glass, and gingerbread along eaves and porches. You may see homes built of brick fired in the area or of native stone quarried nearby and beams taken from stands of pine high in the mountains in the dis-

tance. It is likely those old buildings will still be standing when those being built today have fallen or been torn down.

At the far end of town, the hand-cut stone walls of the old Hamblin home rise strong and solid atop a slight rise. Built by Jacob Hamblin for two of his four wives, this sturdy structure is a fine example of pioneer architecture. The Hamblin home is a museum open to the public free of charge. Guides take visitors through the two-story structure daily except for religious holidays. The home is owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and staffed with missionary volunteers.

Jacob Hamblin was not a pretentious man, although he attained great stature and importance in his community and was the peacemaker with the Indians. His home reflects the man's simplicity. It is well-constructed with pride in the craftsmanship needed to create it, but its comforts are spartan.

The house is sparsely furnished with utilitarian items, all handmade. The two Hamblin wives had duplicate quarters downstairs in two big rooms with a common dining area in the central hall. Most of the upstairs is given over to a huge family room where family gatherings and entertainment followed the long day's work at home and in the fields. There also are upstairs dormitory-style sleeping quarters for the children.

How those pioneer women had time for handwork among all their other labors is a mystery, but there are handmade quilts on the beds and fine examples of needlework throughout the house. Indian handcrafts also figure prominently.

Santa Clara gives us a glimpse into this country's past and an appreciation of what our pioneer forebears did for us across the country. The pioneers would not recognize today the towns they created so long ago, but they laid the foundations upon which others have built a much easier way of life.