

# De Luz, the World's Smallest Post Office

By Philip S. Rush

Tucked away among the high mountains between Fallbrook and Murrieta is the pleasant little settlement of De Luz.

Its chief claim to glory is the fact that it has the smallest complete post office in the world—and that's covering a lot of territory. Equally significant to the casual visitor, however, is the fact that it has no gasoline station, no hot dog stand, no juke boxes. In fact, De Luz really isn't a town, as the post office is the only public building in it, and when you reach this focal point you can't even see many houses or ranches. But there are a lot of them, hidden in little valleys, or perched perilously on the tops of high hills. Some are just humble country homes, others are the hide-a-ways of wealthy folks, who like to live where living is easier and quieter, far from the maddening crowds.

Even the highway from Fallbrook to De Luz suggests adventure, for after leaving the outskirts of Fallbrook, the pavement soon dwindles away and you are riding on a good, but twisty, narrow decomposed granite road, of which there are few left in Southern California nowadays. Up steep hills, down others just as precipitous, around sharp bends, now and then a house is sighted, but mostly there is just scenery. Then all of a sudden you come to a wide place in the road and there is the tiny post office. Across the street is the modern and beautiful home of Dr. Samuel Wilson of Los Angeles, and a road sign pointing to the northeast that says Murrieta is 14 miles of more twists, turns, ups and downs. And this road, crossing the San Diego-Riverside county line, is in many places just about as it was in the horse and buggy days of 50 or 60 years ago. Narrow, lined with heavy growth of trees and brush, it winds through little valleys where streams trickle the year round, until it suddenly discovers the pavement that leads directly to the Murrieta post office. The only other road out of the De Luz Valley is a shelf in the mountainside that leads to the old Santa Rosa Rancho via a forestry service fire trail through Redondo Mesa in Riverside County; but this is the sort of road that most drivers avoid unless they have a yen for hazardous traveling.

Nearly two centuries ago (1769 to be exact) the Spanish explorers and settlers arrived in San Diego. After they had explored the coastal section and discovered San Francisco Bay, they fanned out into the mountains north and east of San Diego, seeking sites for missions and grazing lands for their rapidly increasing herds of cattle and sheep. Then, in a few years, some of the more energetic settlers established private ranches, and requested land grants from the Spanish and Mexican rulers. In fact, the private grants and mission establishments claimed virtually all the best land in Alta California.

The vast section of fine grazing land that is now the world's largest Marine Corps training center, was once the Santa Margarita y Las Flores Rancho of Pio and Andreas Pico. At one time it embraced some 226,000 acres in what is now San Diego, Orange and Riverside counties. Closely adjoining it on the northeast was the 11 square league Santa Rosa Rancho, granted in 1846 to Juan Moreno, and a little way to the southeast was the Monserate Rancho, granted in 1846 to Ysidro Maria Alvarado, 13,322 acres lying along the San Luis Rey River.

Probably by accident, since no accurate surveys were made by the first settlers, the Spaniards owning

these three nearby ranchos failed to claim the best lands of the whole area—a large tract extending north of the San Luis Rey River to the present Riverside-San Diego County line, and embracing the highly valuable and fertile Fallbrook district, Rainbow, and De Luz. It was a sort of wedge between the three ranchos, or in Spanish "desecho" or the part left over. Similar omissions have been found elsewhere in California but usually the wily Spaniards found ways to stretch their boundary lines so that they included all the best lands. But the Fallbrook-Rainbow-De Luz district was open at the time of the American occupation of California, so was settled mostly by homesteaders, with maybe now and then a squatter or claim jumper.

Nobody seems to know when De Luz first came into public notice as an entity in itself. But it is said that many many years ago a sheep man named Luz brought his herds into the mountains, and the spot became known as El Corralito de Luz, or the little corral of Mr. Luz—who was probably a Basque. For some unknown reason he did not patent the land, or leave any permanent record of himself except in the name of the location and the creek that flows through it. In 1861 a man named Spring squatted on the land, but did not complete title to it. In the 80's a number of persons were attracted to the area, and began homesteading tracts varying up to several hundred acres, and these persons became the first permanent settlers.

Among the earliest permanent settlers in De Luz was Rosseau J. Wilmot, who is said to have first visited the district as a member of the Government survey party of 1878. He was a thrifty New Englander, who homesteaded 160 acres, and later acquired other property; he also carried the mail from Fallbrook to De Luz for some years. His land is now the Bleecker-Mason Ranch of 400 acres.

James Garnsey and Harry K. Day were among the first homesteaders. They were the paternal and maternal grandparents of Felix Garnsey, one of today's most prosperous De Luz ranchers. Mr. and Mrs. Garnsey have a beautiful ranch home, shaded by the same ancient oak trees that years

ago surrounded the first cottages of his grandparents.

One of the most active citizens of the community, years ago, was the Rev. Henry Jay Camp, who came to San Diego in 1876 as an Episcopalian rector, and a few years later homesteaded at De Luz and became its second postmaster. He was a good farmer, but found time to act, also, as a missionary rector, working in the tiny congregations of Murrieta, Fallbrook, Temecula, Escondido and Bostonia.

One of the other first homesteaders was Charles E. Rubottom, who received a U. S. Patent to 80 acres near the Garnsey ranch in 1889; E. Hill and Mrs. Ida Thorkelson were other early settlers in the valley, but some believe that the oldest house still standing is that of Mr. and Mrs. B. R. Mosher, at the Diamond S Ranch—the former A. E. Everts' home. Several boards in the porch ceiling of this ranch house bear Everts' name and postal address at De Luz, indicating that they were shipped in by mail, either as lumber, or as casings around other merchandise.

The archives of the United States Post Office Department in Washington, D. C., show that the first post office was opened under the name DeLuz, November 1, 1882, Louis L. McClure being the first postmaster. Rev. Henry J. Camp was appointed postmaster April 24, 1883, and December 5, 1890, the name of the office was officially changed to De Luz—two words instead of one.

The mail was first carried on horseback from Murrieta to De Luz. When the California Southern Railway was built from San Diego to Temecula, a tiny station called De Luz was established near the intersection of De Luz creek and the Santa Margarita River, and the mail pouch was dropped off there, then carried to De Luz by horse. Now the mail is brought by auto thrice weekly from Fallbrook. Mrs. Chloe Baxter has been postmistress since 1938, and she has a distinction that few postmasters have, of personally owning the post office building, a frame structure 8 feet square, fully equipped for the needs of the 33 families that receive their mail at De Luz.

Agricultural activities at De Luz have always been diversified. From

the time of the first homesteaders the valley has produced grain, fruits, grapes, honey, poultry, etc. Most of the ranch residences are hidden under ancient oaks and cottonwoods.

Since its earliest times, De Luz has had a school, and the present ivy covered school building erected in 1924, is unusually attractive. Here Mrs. Catherine Hindorf teaches all the grades from primary through the eighth. The enrollment for 1950-51 consisted of Charlotte Surls, Regis Kinnell, Lee Surls, Dwan Surls, Wanda Surls, Jeanette Brain, Gary Surls and Jerry Jave. The school mascot is a big desert turtle.

Opposite the De Luz school is the attractive ranch home of Mr. and Mrs. Homer McDowell, and there are a number of other nice homes and small ranches nearby including the Surls, Brain, Jave and Holsworth ranches. Among the newer ranchers in the valley is R. C. Fass; and the Mathews ranch, now being developed just below the Riverside-San Diego County line, promises to be an outstanding one.

The most important event in the recent history of De Luz is the fact that the San Diego Gas & Electric Co. has extended its power lines to the valley, and found almost 100 per cent of the population eagerly waiting to be connected with the "juice." Already a number of new electric pumps with sprinkler systems have been installed, and the housewives are enjoying good lighting, electric refrigeration, and many other conveniences heretofore denied all but a few who had individual home electric plants.

De Luz has narrowly escaped complete annihilation by forest fires several times during the last ten years—the latest being a bad fire June 2 and 3, 1951, which burned over 13,000 acres mostly in Camp Pendleton.

And, like the rest of Southern California, De Luz has its worries over water. Ordinarily De Luz creek and its tributaries furnish as much water as the residents require, but the recent government suit to claim all the Santa Margarita watershed (including De Luz creek) for Camp Pendleton, regardless of the original rights of old established ranches, has caused some worry at De Luz. The site of the proposed Camp Pendleton Dam is near the old railway station of De Luz, just below the junction of De Luz creek and the Santa Margarita River, and if built to the height now contemplated, the back waters of the lake may inundate some of the more southerly ranches of De Luz.

While there is a lot of good land that can be cleared along De Luz creek (at a considerable expense), the settlement cannot expand westward because of Camp Pendleton, whose boundaries crowd the road from Fallbrook most of the way. And to the north, is the 90,000 acre Vail Ranch, with headquarters at Temecula, which owns all of the old Santa Rosa land grant except a few acres between De Luz and Murrieta owned by W. H. Saxman and his neighbors. Eastward is the populous Rainbow district, and to the south is the Santa Margarita River, which will become a vast lake whenever the Camp Pendleton Dam is constructed.

The photographer for The Southern California Rancher recently visited De Luz, and obtained a number of pictures of homes in the settlement. These, with views of the school, post office, the roads, etc., are included in the advertisement of the San Diego Gas & Electric Co., which appears on Page 31, of this month's Rancher.



When the California Southern Railway was completed from San Diego to Temecula, excursions were run frequently. This old photo shows an excursion train, stopped in the Temecula or Santa Margarita Canyon not far from De Luz Station. The tracks were washed out in 1884, and again in 1891, and never rebuilt after the second flood.