

Down Memory Lane  
*Mary Etta Broadwell*

**J.S. Phillips**

If there is any one man who can rightly be called the father of Covina, that man is the late Joseph Samuel Phillips. It was he who subdivided part of his 2000 acre holding into the present townsite, donated land for the grammar school and Methodist Church, named several of the streets, was responsible for bringing the first water supply to this part of the valley, and gave Covina, "The Cove of Vineyards", its name.

In 1860, J.S. Phillips, then a boy of 18, arrived in San Francisco from the eastern coast by way of the Isthmus of Panama. Since this was before the canal was built, the Isthmus was crossed by pack train; an exciting adventure for a young man coming west to make his fortune.

For two years he worked as a crew member on a river boat plying between San Francisco and Stockton. During the next few years he acquired ownership of a several acre ranch in the San Joaquin Valley. Selling this property, he came to Los Angeles where he invested in a plow concern and sometime in the late 1870's purchased 2000 acres of land in this district from the Hollenbecks.

It might be interesting to go back just a bit into the early history of this locality and point out that at one time this entire area was part of the La Puente land grant. The first man to cultivate any part of this district was Anton Badillo, a native of Costa Rica.

Because the climate was much like that in his native country, Senor Badillo planted the land to coffee. Although the temperature was much the same as that of Costa Rica, somehow, he seemed to have overlooked the average 300 inches of annual rainfall in that country and which is vital in the growing of coffee.

After failure of the coffee plantation, Badillo sold his holdings to the Hollenbecks who, in turn, sold 2000 acres to Mr. Phillips.

At that period only a few citrus trees had been planted and the great potentialities of that industry was yet to be realized. Mr. Phillips planted his 2000 acres to wheat and barley which was hauled to the Puente warehouse by 32 head of mules for shipment over the Southern Pacific.

A shrewd businessman, although on a somewhat speculative scale, Mr. Phillips was aware that his property, with its rich soil and mild climate would make ideal home sites and small ranches. With the thought of subdivision in mind, one of his first moves was to bring in a newspaper press and equipment from Santa Ana to publicize the new townsite.

In January of 1885, when the first issue of the Covina Independent, carrying the name of the new town in its masthead was published, it extolled the virtues of Covina as an ideal spot.

At that time negotiations were under way with a group of Dunkers to form a colony in Covina. One of their conditions before buying the land was that water be made available. Since the nearest source of water at that time was the San Gabriel River and even drinking water was hauled from the canyon in barrels, Mr. Phillips found this requirement almost insurmountable.

However, after tunneling into the canyon he developed several hundred inches of water. Construction was begun on an open mud ditch, which followed a continuous grade from the San Gabriel canyon to Covina and was routed in such a way as to carry water to this entire district.

Before the project was finished, litigation proceedings were brought by some of the early settlers in the northern end of the valley who claimed the water was an underflow from the river and infringed on their rights. It was approximately three years before a settlement was made and water turned into the Covina ditch about 1887.

In the meantime, the Dunker colony had lost interest in Covina as a settlement and when Mr. Phillips subdivided his land it was sold to individuals.

To finance the water development a company was formed which later became known as the Covina Irrigating Company. Stockholders were assessed their share of the expenses, and a great many were grateful to Mr. Phillips who paid their assessments when they found it impossible to do so.

Sometime after the subdivision was completed and the townsite surveyed and laid out by Fred Eaton, Mr. Phillips left his comfortable home at Hollenbeck and San Bernardino Road and with his family moved to Los Angeles where he passed away in 1902.

However, he lived long enough to see Covina become an incorporated city on August 14, 1901, with E.G. Clapp as president of the board of trustees, a position that would be known now as mayor of the city.

Other members of that first board were T.E. Finch, father of Tom and Raymond Finch, local jewelers; L.L. Ratekin, C.W. Potter, J.L. Moxley, who built the first house on the tract, E.B. Carrier, I.C. Fairley and C.E. Parker.

Two of Mr. Phillip's children, Nan and George, will be remembered by Covina pioneers as attending the grammar school, then known as the Phillips School. His granddaughter is Mrs. Jimie (Azola Phillips) Rehr, who with her husband owns the Sugar Bowl. Her sister, Mary, now Mrs. Fred Jensen graduated from Covina High School in 1939. Dexter Street was named for their father, Joseph Dexter Phillips, who resides in Monterey Park.

A colorful personality, J.S. Phillips was truly the “Father of Covina” and he would undoubtedly be immensely proud of this modern jewel in the heart of the San Gabriel Valley, could he see it today, one of the most flourishing and prosperous communities in Los Angeles County.