

## **HISTORICAL and CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **2.1 Early Man**

Long before pioneers made their way west to the Virgin River Valley, the land was visited by "The Ancient Ones." Anasazi Indians occupied the American Southwest between 200 BC and 1300 AD in an area called the Four Corners, the point at which Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona meet. It was an area rich in natural resources and it slowly transformed the Anasazi from a hunting and gathering people to one of agriculture.

Flat-topped mesas and sheer sandstone cliffs were hollowed to create the spectacular Anasazi cliff dwellings. The Anasazi seemed to have abandoned their dwellings quite suddenly in approximately 1300 AD. As many were left with pottery and necessities intact, historians suspect that a quick exodus was necessary.

Moving west, the Anasazi left remnants of pottery and skeletons on Pottery Hill outside of Mesquite. The Virgin River seems to have been a watering and resting place before moving on to Overton and other more forgiving desert environments.

The Paiute Indians, southern most descendants of the Utes, were primarily a hunting and gathering group ranging widely throughout Southern Nevada, California, North Central Arizona and Southern Utah at approximately the same time as the Anasazi. They occupied the lower mesas and desert areas during the winter and practiced simple agriculture in the Southern Rocky Mountain ranges during the summer. The Paiutes grew melons, beans, wheat and herbs, crafted pottery, weaved baskets and other textiles.

They left their trace in the Muddy River area of Nevada and, as did the Anasazi, occupied the Virgin River lands near Mesquite only as a temporary gathering place before moving on to a more hospitable environment. Historians speculate that it may have been the Paiutes moving west that caused the Anasazi to leave their Four Corners homeland, pressing them farther and farther west.

### **2.2 Mormon Pioneers**

The settlement of Virgin Valley did not happen by chance, but rather as a calling. In 1877, a group of Mormon settlers, living under the "United Order" came from the St. George Stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to



colonize a rich strip of land along the Virgin River. The co-operative settlement of twenty-three people lived under the leadership of Edward Bunker and called their town Bunkerville. Among them were the Bunker, Leavitts, Steele, Crosby and Abbott families. Under the communal organization, members shared their crops, meals, chores and animals collectively. The Mesquite Flat Ward was organized in 1880 with Brother Henry Branch appointed as Bishop. William E. Abbott wrote, "We were saying farewell to Utah the "Queen of the West" and saying "Hello Nevada," where we learned to sing "Nevada, My Own Nevada, I Love You."

Although a desolate land, many Indians of the Paiute Nation and even more coyotes inhabited the Virgin River. During long winter nights, the only sounds were the howl of the coyote and the song of the Paiute. The settlers found the Indians had little to eat and even less to wear, but they were not much better off themselves.

The lush greenbelt of the Virgin River gave the colonists a vision of hope for raising crops and building a new home for their families and church. Clearing away desert brush and mesquite root, they planted their crops and irrigated the fields from a large canal etched out of the desert landscape. Melons and cane were boiled down to make molasses. Barrels of molasses, wheat, bales of cotton and rock salt were hauled up to Utah and bartered for lumber, potatoes and other supplies. Livestock was cared for not only for food, but also for transportation and help in the fields.

Signs of life were springing up throughout the Valley in the 1880's. Adobe dwellings and the famous Rock House were among the first homes in Mesquite to be built on the Flat. Severe winds and torrential rains caused a great flood, washing away the settlement, along with their dreams. Discouraged and broken hearted, the colonists took what they could salvage from their Mesquite settlement and headed back to Utah. Those living in Bunkerville suffered the many hardships as well, but decided to remain.

Mesquite eventually dried up and went to ruin until 1887 when Dudley Leavitt, his 5 wives and 51 children came again, to settle on the Mesquite Flat. Struggling against great odds, they worked the land for four years until they too were forced to surrender to nature and leave in 1891.

Mesquite remained desolate until 1894, when the Knight, hardy, Dutton, Woodbury, Hancock and Waite families settled along the river, once again rebuilding the canal and establishing a permanent farming settlement.

On November 17, 1901, the Mesquite Ward, St. George Stake was once again organized with William E. Abbott as Bishop. Bishop Abbott is recognized as the founding father of the Virgin Valley. He stated that during the 27 years he presided over the Ward of some 500 people, no criminal or civil cases were on



the docket of the county. The Mormons led a simple, clean life with no grievous offenses, save a few petty jealousies and disputes.

The progress of Mesquite from 1908 to the 1930's was slow and steady as it remained primarily an agricultural community. But the future of Mesquite was about to change in 1933 with the construction of U.S. Highway 91, placing Mesquite in the path of a major transportation route for the Southwest; it was now connected to businesses and communities in Arizona, Utah, Nevada and California.

In the late 1930's, Mesquite acquired enough funds to extend their water pipeline to a large distributive water tank, thus securing water for their future. A power line from Boulder Canyon Dam was completed 1939, providing electricity for light, air conditioning and food preservation.

Mesquite's farmlands gradually evolved into a small city with the construction of private homes, the Southern Nevada Hospital, the Relief Society Home, general stores and cafes, a post office and fire station; all serving Mesquites' citizens and those passing through o other destinations. The crowning glory was completed in 1952 with the construction of the Mesquite Ward Chapel.

### **2.3 Agriculture**

From the earliest days of the Mormon pioneer trek into the Virgin River Valley, agriculture has been the heartbeat of the community. Prior to World War II, farmers grew melons, cane for molasses, grapes, wheat, cotton and various vegetables. With the coming of World War II, the needs of the American armed forces caused a shift in the type of crops grown. Alfalfa was in great demand to feed horses for labor, and cattle was needed to feed the troops.

### **2.4 Recent Developments**

In the early 1980's, the City of Mesquite took a great leap into the future. She began to open her arms to welcome visitors who came for recreation or to rest and refresh themselves en route to other destinations. Through the tireless efforts of many citizens, most notably the women of the community and Ed and Thelma Davis, Judge Del Guy signed a petition in 1984, officially making Mesquite an incorporated city.

Mesquite has been a winter home to small groups of "snowbirds" since the turn of the century. With the change in Utah's tax laws and the suppressed economic state of California, many of these same people have begun to make a permanent home in Nevada. New citizens come from many directions to take advantage of a more favorable tax structure and business climate. Affordable housing, sunshine



and a small town atmosphere are a welcome relief to the fast pace of urban living.

The Oasis Hotel and Casino acquired Western Village in 1981 and began a major expansion project. Expansion continued until 1989, followed by the addition of the famous Oasis Golf Course. The construction of Virgin Valley High School and Primex Plastics Plant in 1991, along with the Virgin River Casino and Hotel were indications of confidence in Mesquite's future growth. With the recent acquisition of an additional 1200 acres of BLM land, the City of Mesquite is paving the way for well-planned future development.

## **2.5 Festivals and Celebrations**

From the time of the first settlers to present day, festivals and celebrations have been an integral part of life to the citizens who call Mesquite home. Visitors and neighboring cities alike are invited to share in the special events held each season.

Summer celebrates Independence Day with a fireworks display and a variety of patriotic programs. In early summer, Mesquite Days recall the spirit of the old west with a rodeo, parade and barbecue. Fall brings the Sky Festival to the Municipal Airport along with the Arts Festival held at Mesquite Library. Winter months are naturals for the Winter Follies Talent Show and Hometown Christmas Days.

Throughout the year there are softball tournaments, motorcycle races, roping tournaments for the youth and a wide variety of concerts and art programs. The spirit of Mesquite's early days continues as citizens celebrate their proud tradition of "Pioneering with Pride."