

## Once Upon A Time in North Park

El Cajon Boulevard, Old U.S. Highway 80

by Donald Covington

Before University Avenue was cut through the Georgia Street ridge in 1907, El Cajon Avenue was the main wagon road connecting San Diego with the rural settlements of the east county. That single lane, dirt road was the site of frequent auto races between the few men who could afford the early recreation machines. By 1911, with the growing popularity of the motor car as a major mode of transportation, a national movement encouraged the link up of local roads to form intercontinental highways. One of those was the southernmost route across Arizona through Phoenix to the California border at Yuma.

In 1912, Los Angeles made a bid to be the western terminus of the interstate highway with a link across the southern Mojave Desert from Yuma. Several of San Diego's leading citizens took that bid as a challenge and set out to prove that a San Diego to Yuma link was more practical and shorter. A public subscription raised \$60,000 to cut a road through the mountains and to construct a wooden plank highway in the sand hills east of El Centro. To prove that the road would be not only passable but also faster than the one planned by Los Angeles, they sponsored, in October 1912, a race of automobiles to Phoenix leaving San Diego at the same time as those leaving Los Angeles. One of the San Diego cars won the race, arriving in Phoenix approximately sixteen hours after the start. San Diego, thereby, became the official terminus of interstate highway 80, which joined the eastern end of El Cajon Avenue at the city limits.

In the immediate years following the 1912 race, El Cajon Avenue was the site of several upgrades. Over the decades, it was paved and widened. After years of neglect during the Depression years of the early 1930s, the street was due for a major overhaul and became the site of an important renewal in 1937. In March of that year, recognizing its importance as the entrance into San Diego from the east, the city council voted to change its name and status from avenue to boulevard. The ordinance to allow the name of El Cajon Boulevard was effective March 12, 1937. As part of the renewal project, the boulevard was widened by 100-feet. Three miles of new pavement from Park Boulevard to Euclid Avenue and new ornamental lights were added for a total expenditure of \$600,000.

In August 1937, the newly formed El Cajon Boulevard Civic Association made plans to celebrate the project completion and the official acceptance of the street as the terminus of Highway 80. The celebration, The El Cajon Boulevard of Progress Festival, was scheduled for October 15, 1937. An estimated 40,000 people clustered along the three-mile stretch of newly paved and widened El Cajon Boulevard to celebrate the governmental acceptance of the boulevard as the official entrance of Interstate Highway 80 into San Diego. The honored guest of the Boulevard Civic Association was California Governor, Frank Merriam, who opened the celebration. The Governor led a spectacular

parade of 80 floats and decorated automobiles for two hours down the boulevard. In praising the completion of El Cajon Boulevard, Governor Merriam predicted that all highways would soon follow the model of separating the two directions of traffic by a center divider. That arrangement, a modern trend in highway construction, he claimed, would reduce the hazards of travel.

The opening of the new boulevard quickly led to commercial development of the junction of 30th Street and El Cajon, giving North Park an additional commercial focal point. In 1938, two new structures were completed on the north side of the 2900 block of El Cajon Boulevard. These two *streamline moderne* buildings became boulevard landmarks along with the businesses they housed, Rudford's and Gustafson's.