



## ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with  
**Abigail Carson Swain, 1878-1973**  
*(Mrs. Willis W. Swain)*

**February 21, 1961**

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**This interview was conducted by:** Edgar F. Hastings

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### INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

Mrs. Abigail Carson Swain was interviewed at her residence in San Diego, California on the 21st of February 1961 by Edgar F. Hastings for the San Diego Historical Society. Such extraneous matter as the interviewer's comments and questions and material of no local interest, etc., has been omitted. The complete interview is on Dictaphone Belt No. 151.

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My father's folks were from Missouri and my mother's folks were from Michigan. Her parents went to Missouri when the government opened up some public lands for homesteading. Mother and father were married in Kansas City, I believe, after the Civil War sometime in the 1870s.

We came out to San Diego by train in 1885. Mother and father and my sisters, Elma, Shirley, Viva, and I came directly to San Diego and located on 27th and H Streets - now Market Street. My sisters, Myrtle, Ethel and Rachel were born after we came to San Diego.

Father had been a farmer before but he went into the plumbing business here - not much plumbing business in those days for there were no sewers - but he dug wells, cisterns and put up windmills and like that. He didn't have a store - just went around and got the jobs.

I went to school first at the Little Sherman. Sherman was a lumberman and he brought all the lumber into San Diego. He donated the lumber of Sherman Heights School and I believe he gave the lumber for the Little Sherman, too - that was built on 17th and H Street in 1886. They tore that down just this last year. I think my teacher's name at the Little Sherman was Freese. We just had a two-room schoolhouse and then they built the big Sherman School up on 24th Street. There was a little two-room school before they built the big school. It got too crowded so they built the big one. My teacher was Miss Patterson and we had a music teacher named Mrs. Rite. They were my two favorite teachers. Mrs. Rite was a beautiful woman and I just loved her. We moved into the big Sherman School in 1889 and my teacher was Miss Patterson; she moved over with her class. And then I had Miss Wheeler; she was a very good teacher. Mrs. Peck was the principal. I went through Sherman and when I finished the 8th grade I went to work. My main job was taking care of children. All my life I have done that. I started when I was about six years old holding a baby and I am still doing that kind of work.

I worked for Reverend Crabtree and his family - raised their two girls. The whole family have all passed away now and the only one left of the family is her sister. At that time she was Beulah Good, but she married a teacher up in the ... I worked for the Crabtrees off and on for years.

I worked for a Marine doctor, Dr. Coffey, who lived up on Maple and 3rd. We lived next door to the banker Sefton on 6th Street for a long time. When Dr. Coffey was sent to Honolulu I wouldn't go with him. I went down and got myself a job in the first five and ten cent store here. It was on the east side of 5th Street between D and E Streets. They had just everything in the store just like they have it now. This was before W. W. Whitney's store. He might have bought out this store and if he didn't, he started in right next door to it.

When my family came to San Diego we lived on 28th and then we moved on 24th and L Street. We rented from Mr. Ellsworth when we first came here; he had Ellsworth's Grocery Store on 12th and H Streets. My folks later lived on 16th Street between K and L for awhile, but I never lived there. But some of my sisters were down there.

My husband, Willis W. Swain, was born in Ohio and came out to California with his family in the (18) '50s. His family came to San Diego before there was a San Diego. There were cows, chickens and everything right where the Grant Hotel is now. His father was Will Swain and they were miners and lived mostly up in Julian where they did placer mining and worked in the Stonewall Mine.

My husband grew up in Julian. His father was a mason man and he did masonry work on the lighthouse when they moved it up on the Point [Loma]. It used to be right down on the water at Ballast Point, but there was a big storm in the [18] '80s and they moved it up on the hill.

I met my husband in San Diego. They lived on 18th and Market Street [and] had quite a lot of orange trees there and an old pink plastered house. I had known him long before, but we both had a friend who had a little restaurant on F Street, Mrs. Fitch. Mrs. Fitch had lived up in San Pasqual for a long time and then they came down to San Diego and started a restaurant. Her husband died and she had just the one girl, Elda. Elda was married first to a man by the name of Grove and then later she married Harry Haelsing and their son, Harry, is on the planning commission now.

My husband had a brother named George, but he left San Diego and went to Tombstone, Arizona. He was a lawyer and he became the district attorney over there. There was a big bunch of Swains, but they are up around Marysville. My husband was a building contractor, no big buildings, just residences. Carl and Jessie Gilmore and Houser were in the real estate business and he used to get jobs of fixing up old houses for them. He died in 1921.

About 1924 I went to work for Charles Hardy in the slaughterhouse in Old Town across the river. I also worked there for Cudahy, too. I went to work as a seamstress, doing first-aid work, taking care of the lockers, and things like that. They had the laundry done but I had to keep their long, white coats and aprons repaired. I didn't make the coats or aprons, but I did make the bologna sacks or tubing out of cloth. There was always lots of sewing to keep me busy at an electric power sewing machine.

I was custodian of the locker rooms where everybody kept their clothes. I worked around all over the plant and for a long time I was the only woman out there until they got a girl who worked in the office. I worked there for 19 years until I retired in 1943. The men all wanted me to come back for they said that no one could wrap up their cut fingers and hands like I did.

I had known one of the foremen at the plant before I got my job out there. I had got acquainted with Mr. McCorkle when I was working down at the fish cannery during the First World War. Mr. McCorkle had two daughters and when the war broke out we all went down to work at the Neptune Cannery, which was the first cannery in San Diego. Irene McCorkle worked at the slaughterhouse with me for awhile, but she was too young and couldn't keep up with the work.

I don't remember where the stages going out to the Stonewall Mine left from San Diego, but I do remember seeing them go out K Street, and then they hit Chollas Valley and then went on up Chollas Valley. They didn't go out Imperial Avenue because it wasn't graded then. And when we moved out on 24th Street I can remember that there was a big camp of Indians right out there - hundreds of them camped there.

The water from the bay used to come clear up to 22nd Street. We had an old friend who lived up in Julian and she told us that when it was the rainy season here, the bay water would come up the slough and come clear up to Golden Hills and up to 25th Street. The water used to come right in from the ocean and in bad storms the water used to wash all over the Spanish Bight between Coronado and North Island just like it washed in over the Strand.

We were never mixed up in any of the floods; we always lived on high ground. Fourteenth Street and B Street were just terrible under water. There used to be a big flume that came down Switzer's Canyon and went down B Street and emptied into the bay. Then another one came down what they call Pershing Drive now in the Park to 16th and then hitched on to 14th Street and down to 12th and emptied about at 12th Street into the bay about where the car barns and all that is. Down in there used to be all under water in bad weather.

I was always scared of the Chinamen who came around selling their fish. They would have a stick across their shoulders and one each end of the stick they would have a great big basket filled with fish. They trotted all over town with their baskets selling fish from house to house.

In the early days Isaac Urbin had a little grocery store on 16th and K, and in later years he had a feed store. He used to sell strawberries and fruit and he would go around and peddle, too. He didn't wait for anybody to come and buy. If they had anything for sale they just went all over town selling it.

The Clapps had a grocery store on 17th and K where Cahlen later had a store - Munster and Cahlen. They were German people. We used to trade mostly with Hamilton's. I can remember the wagons that the grocery stores used to use to make their deliveries.

When we first got to San Diego we stopped at the Commercial Hotel and daddy went uptown to find out what he could. And when he came back he said that the town was full of typhoid fever. It was my sister's birthday and she cried and begged for daddy to send her home. She didn't want to stay here; she knew she was going to die. And a year later she passed away. That was my oldest sister, Elma. The first doctor we had here was Dr. Valley. There were three doctors in together, Valley, Northrup, and someone else.

I don't remember any Chinese funerals going out K Street, but I know they used to go out to the cemetery and put all their jewelry and things in the grave and bury them with the body.

The Saw and Hatchet were perfectly harmless. Lots of people were afraid of them because they were rather queer and everybody took advantage of them and would make them work all day long for just a nickel or a dime. And those two little guys would just take it and be happy and go on. Old Saw, the tall one, always walked in the front; and the other one walked behind and they never walked together. And they went all over town chopping wood and cleaning up yards for people.

I never was a member of any church. My mother was an Adventist. Archie Julian, who used to be sewer inspector. married my husband's sister. We used to have some pretty good rains off and on and they used to wash out all of Tijuana Valley and up on Sweetwater - and wash the land and houses and everything out in the bay. But along about 1891 and 1892 there was a drought and everything went dry, just like it does now. My daddy thought this was the worst place that ever was.

Our wells all went dry and we had to buy water down in Old Town where the Bandini House is now. There were two big wells in the back there. We had to buy drinking water and cooking water from them. They had a big sprinkler wagon (like they sprinkle the streets with) and it had a big tank on it and they would come around with a hose and fill your barrels up, fifty cents a barrel. And they came around sometimes twice a week. We had to be very careful with the water. All the wells went dry and ones that weren't dry were alkali and so strong that you couldn't use the water; and others were just salt water.

I remember Gregory Springs and there was a spring right down on 30th Street where the Cuyamaca train goes over. When we first came here there was no train there. They put in the Otay and the Belt Line and then the Cuyamaca. I remember the train went out N Street - commercial. The Otay went out Harrison Avenue right by our place - came out M Street, Imperial, and over to Otay where they were going to have a big city.

They built a watch factory and I don't know what all down there, but they never did develop it. The Santa Fe wouldn't run their trains down there.

***END OF INTERVIEW***

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