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AUG 17 1990

Order Number 8919655

The rise of the southeastern Salt River Valley: Tempe, Mesa,
Chandler, Gilbert, 1871-1920

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ABSTRACT

The towns of Tempe, Mesa, Chandler, and Gilbert, situated in the southeastern Salt River Valley in central Arizona, came into existence during the period from 1870 to 1920. Each town developed out of its predecessor. Tempe grew out of the business endeavors of Charles T. Hayden who built a store, mill, and ferry south of the Salt River. Two other elements helped bring about Tempe: San Pablo, the early Mexican town, and the Johnson community of Latter-day Saints. During the 1880s, Tempe embarked on a movement to improve the quality of life for the entire community. This movement was a part of the Progressive Movement.

Tempe, in turn, gave the support that helped make possible the founding of Lehi and Mesa. Latter-day Saints from Utah started the community of Lehi in 1877. The second colony that arrived the following year chose to move from the Lehi Valley up to the mesa where they located a village. During the 1890s the homogeneous Mormon village metamorphosed into a heterogeneous town. This period also saw the beginning of a Progressive Movement similar to that of Tempe.

South of Mesa, Alexander John Chandler acquired, using loopholes in the land laws, a huge ranch. During 1911-12,

tracks east to College Avenue. Of the 300 acres about 70 acres were in the riverbed or covered by Tempe Butte.¹⁸

When the Salt River was at a high stage, travelers depended on Hayden's Ferry to transport their teams and wagons across the swollen river. The wooden ferry boat ran from the northwest base of the butte to the north bank of the river by a cable on poles. By lowering the boat's rear end, the current would swing it across the stream. Several times floods washed out the cable supports on the north side of the river and took the ferry boat downstream. Hayden had only to send a team of horses downstream to haul the boat back because it would only float a few miles before landing on a sandbar.¹⁹

Hayden's estate was not only the beehive around which swarmed the economic activity of the community, but it was also the cultural and social apiary. The Hayden home housed the largest library of the area, and the parties and other social events that took place there were always well-reigned over by Sallie Davis Hayden.²⁰

Although Hayden was the important leader of early Tempe, other men obtained their own modicum of power and prominence. Canadian born James T. Priest, for instance, who came to the Salt River Valley in 1871, took a leadership role in the Tempe Irrigating Canal Company, and he was that company's second zaniero or water master. He became a leading Republican in Maricopa County, and he served on that county's board of supervisors for a number of terms.²¹

recitations, and a brass band with G. H. Kelly as bandmaster and main soloist.²

Traveling entertainments such as musicals that performed "Pinafore" and circuses came through Phoenix on a regular basis by 1880. The first performance given by a circus in Phoenix took place in June 1878. This was George Ryland's Circus which featured "Mrs. Ryland" in both a bareback equestrian and a slack wire performance along with Tracy the clown, an Indian rubber boy, and George Ryland himself performing with trained horses and dogs.³

Early Phoenicians could participate in a variety of sporting activities either as spectators or players. Hunting and fishing were popular outdoors activities. One hunter, for instance, claimed that duck hunting was so good in February 1880 that he killed nineteen ducks with one load of buck shot. Judge Porter hunted on horse back following his pack of hounds. The dogs were splendid runners as they scared up hares or even a fox. Fishing in the Salt River was quite good where an abundance of fish could be caught including "that prince of Arizona waters the Colorado Salmon." That fish could be as long as five feet and could weigh as much as forty pounds. Occasionally, someone would use "great powder" to kill fish in the river causing great outrage by local sportsmen against such an opprobrious practice.⁴