

City of Alhambra - History

JAMES DeBARTH SHORB

1842-1896

James DeBarth Shorb was born in Frederick County, Maryland, the seventh child of Dr. James Aloysius Shorb and Margaret McNeal. He was married in 1867 in California to Maria DeJesus “Sue” Wilson, (1844-1917) daughter of Benjamin David Wilson and Ramona Anselma Yorba.

James DeBarth and Maria DeJesus Shorb had the following children:

1. 1868 Maria Inez “Ynez” Shorb (1868-1933)
2. 1870 James DeBarth “Barty” Shorb, Jr. (1870-1907)
3. 1871 Margaret Nina Shorb (1871-1875)
4. 1872 Edith Octavia Shorb (1872-1954)
5. 1874 Ramona Yorba Shorb (1874-1921)
6. 1876 “Benito” Shorb (1876-1877)
7. 1878 Joseph Campbell Shorb (1878-1919)
8. 1880 Ethel Rebecca Shorb (1880-1959)
9. 1883 Donald McNeal Shorb (1883-1933)
10. 1887 Norbert Newland (1887-1951)
11. 1888 Bernardo Yorba Shorb (1888-1928)

James DeBarth Shorb shared a vision and similar political views with father-in-law B. D. (Don Benito) Wilson, and was compatible in his outlook for the Los Angeles region. He raised his family on the Lake Vineyard rancho in southern California – the expansive rancho owned by B.D. Wilson encompassing thousands of acres. He was adept at handling Wilson’s business affairs, running the ranch, orchards and wineries.

In 1869, Wilson and Shorb ran an ad in the *Los Angeles Star* newspaper that turned out to be a most unusual real estate venture: “Valuable Lands To Be Had Without Capital!” indicating they had a tract of land of about 2000 acres adjacent to Lake Vineyard, with a ditch of never-failing water in it, in sufficient quantities to irrigate the entire tract; surveyed and offered in 40 acre subdivisions thoroughly adapted to cultivation of vine and semi-tropical fruits. It further offered a deed to the land with water privileges to any man willing to work the land. Early attempts at colonization failed, but were not made in vain. A group of citizens from Indiana incorporated as the San Gabriel Orange Grove Association, later colonizing the area which would eventually become the City of Pasadena.

Shorb became a leader in the colonization movement encouraging war refugees and immigrants from the east and south. Disappointed in earlier attempts at oil and gold prospecting, he found the greater value in land. In 1871, Shorb laid out 1000 acres in smaller 20 acre lot spreads just southeast of Lake Vineyard. At the urging of 10-year-old Ruth, Wilson’s youngest daughter, he named it “Alhambra”. Ruth and sister Anne had been reading Washington Irving and were

enchanted by the Moorish palace of the same name. *Shorb distinguished himself by laying iron pipe throughout the settlement, and is believed to be the first anywhere in the country to do so.* A reservoir of ample capacity to furnish water both for irrigation and household purpose for the whole tract had been constructed. The water furnished from the never-failing streams was described “as inexhaustible in quantity as is pure in quality”.

In 1873, Shorb had worked six years for B. D. Wilson, but as yet had nothing of value to call his own. At the urging of wife Sue, he wrote and requested “half interest” in the lands adjacent to Lake Vineyard, below Stoneman Ranch and the water rights to same, plus what he described as Oak Knoll and the lands meant to be attached to this property. Wilson agreed and drew up articles of incorporation for the partnership. Shorb named his rancho Mound Vineyard.

Shorb had his hands full working both Lake Vineyard and Mound Vineyard. To give an idea of the expansive responsibilities, visiting newspaper columnist Ben Truman of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote a letter giving some idea of the magnitude of the business carried on and the executive abilities required for successful management and profit-making:

“I have been domiciled for a day or two at the Lake Vineyard homestead, presided over by James De Barth Shorb, Esq., son-in-law of proprietor Don Benito Wilson, whose name is a household word in Los Angeles County. A portion of the original estate has been segregated and is now the property of my host and known as Mount [sic] Vineyard.”

He went on to describe Lake Vineyard as 1300 acres, and Mound Vineyard as 500. Eleven miles of picket and capped board fencing enclosed and subdivided the ranches. There were 102,000 grapevines in Lake Vineyard, 129,000 in Mound Vineyard. 1600 orange trees in Lake Vineyard; 500 in Mound Vineyard. Lake Vineyard had 550 lemon trees, 500 lime; 500 olive and 450 walnut trees. Similarly Mound Vineyard had near an equal amount. In a single harvest, the ranches had shipped 560,845 oranges and over 75,00 lemons. 1500 additional acres were planted in grains and outlying areas created pasture land for grazing herds of cattle.

Additionally, Shorb planted 30,000 raisin cuttings and 1200 orange trees in Oak Knoll, laying 300,000 feet of 4” iron pipe conveying the water necessary for irrigating the fields and orchards, and installing hydrants at proper distances to furnish water in exact amounts required and no more.

“Where so much has been done by Mr. Shorb, and is being done, to improve and utilize the natural resources of a great estate, it is a matter of impossibility within the limits of such a letter to particularize. A gentleman of liberal education and enlarged views, a careful student of whatever promises to inform him of the new and advantageous processes as well as of old in farming, viniculture and fruit growing, he spares no pains nor expense to introduce whatever method to improve the soil and economize the labor. He has already claimed several tracts of what was hitherto worthless bogs, by the construction of drains, using for the purposes the tiles with which many of the old buildings of the Spanish settlers were covered.”

“The system of reservoirs determined upon by Mssrs Wilson and Shorb will enable them to husband an enormous amount of water. Wherever the site of the dam is fixed upon, a canal or trench will be dug across the arroyo and the soil removed to the hard pan upon which the superstructure will be raised. No room left for seepage, no root of tree or bush, along which the water can find it’s treacherous way,

beginning with a silver thread and ending with a rushing torrent. Distributing pipes of iron with patent iron gates will regulate the water supply according to demand. In due time, iron pipes will convey surplus water to the outlying tracts to the south of the estate, hundreds of acres will thus become available for the creation of new estates where now only wildflowers and grasses are to be seen.

Shorb wrote “ There is an abundance of water furnished by our magnificent water-sheds, if properly reservoired and distributed in iron pipes (such as in the Alhambra tract), to supply all our dry lands with the life-giving and wealth-producing element.” Shorb had done his homework, a noticeable trait that was directing him into the leadership of the southern California irrigation movement.

In 1871, he filed the corporation papers of the *Lake Vineyard Land and Water Company* to buy land, develop, irrigate and sell it. In 1874, the Lake Vineyard and Water Association, Inc. acquired a large tract of land including Kewen Canyon (located near what would become the San Marino and Pasadena city borders) and partly within the present-day limits of the City of Alhambra.

But by 1876, the Los Angeles first boom years were at an end. Land sales all over the country began to lag, including Shorb’s Alhambra tract. Shorb was deeply in debt due to several bad business ventures and desperate for money. In a correspondence, Shorb wrote: “ *I believe this is still the cheapest property now offered for sale in the entire county and is surely worth more now than the lands of the San Gabriel Orange Grove Association, which are worth more than three times the price we put our lands at; and we have three times the water they have..Besides, one half of all the water they are now using belongs to us..we have given them the privileges of using it for a limited time as we had more water than we could utilize..*”

“The water supply is most ample..of so pure a spring water all rising on the place to which therefore the title is perfect and admits of no influence by legislative enactments..”

For the country’s Centennial and the Los Angeles County celebration, he was called upon to write a chapter on irrigation and the California citrus farming industry, drawing from his own experience at Lake Vineyard and with the Alhambra tract. Under his supervision, four miles of cemented trench had been constructed on the former to supply a three-million gallon reservoir, and on the latter, a one-million gallon reservoir, supplied with iron pipes able to distribute water over several hundred acres selling at between \$75 and \$100 an acre. He was already busy designing the project that would supply the village of San Gabriel with water. In the same booklet, the author slated to write the section on “Vines and Vineyards” failed to produce, and James Shorb wrote this section too.

With the completion of the Southern Pacific railroad line connecting San Francisco with Los Angeles, Shorb saw progression of the colonization of the Alhambra tract. By the end of the year, he tallied \$300,000 clear profit from sales of real estate and water investments.

In March of the following year, James Shorb lost the man who had not only been a father to him, but his best friend and business partner, when Don Benito died of a heart attack. Shorb had little time to grieve in light of tremendous responsibilities. In addition to overwhelming business and family obligations, James Shorb would take up where Wilson left off, in carrying on the work of

developing the county and the country. In little more than a decade, he had become one of Los Angeles County's leaders and southern California's staunchest supporters.

In 1883, the Lake Vineyard and Water Association conveyed part of its land and water rights in Keweenaw Canyon to a syndicate which transferred them to the Alhambra Addition Water Company upon its formation that same year. The Alhambra Addition Water Company was acquired by the San Gabriel Valley Water Company in 1907. In 1903, the City of Alhambra was chartered. The City of Alhambra, in 1916, purchased all pipelines within the City's boundaries, including twelve wells and several reservoirs for water storage. This purchase was the genesis of the City's present-day water system.

Written by Christine Montan, Director of Utilities City of Alhambra January 2003

References

Paraphrased and summarized with excerpts taken from:

Sherwood, Midge (1982). "Days of Vintage-Years of Vision - the Life of James DeBarth Shorb of San Marino Ranch, Today the Site of the World Famous Huntington Library, is the story of a family, including his father-in-law, Benjamin D. Wilson, Charter Mayor of Los Angeles, and his brother-in-law, George Smith Patton, founding Mayor of San Marino and father of General Patton of WWII. They planted vineyards and built cities to establish southern California, a state in itself for one brief moment in the history of the American frontier west." published by Orizaba Publications, San Marino, California

City of Alhambra Annual Water Report. (1997) Introduction.

<http://archiver.rootsweb.com/th/read/SHORB/1998>