



Del Mar Historical Society Newsletter



Winter, 2025-2026

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GROWING FIELDS

By

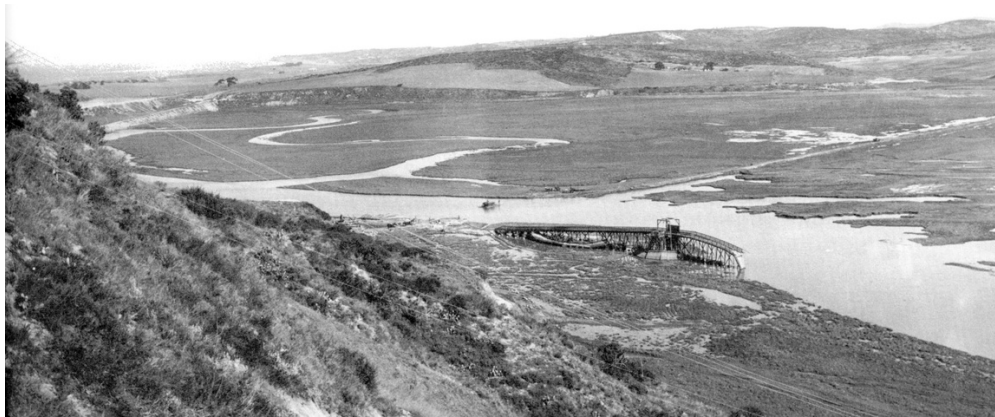
Susie Stevenson

One of the surest ways to tell that the Holidays are here is the glorious profusion of poinsettias everywhere we turn: the poinsettia plant has become the perfect holiday decoration—the cheerful symbol that even in the dead of winter in New England, we can still have living color on our mantelpieces and coffee tables! Originally from Mexico and brought to this country by botanist and ambassador to the country Joel Poinsett, they were pretty much a one-size, one-color-fits-all kind of plant.

But thanks to the vision of one man and his family in neighboring Encinitas, Paul Ecke, the world of poinsettias has grown exponentially over the past 100 years so that they now come in an almost unimaginable array of colors: white, pink, deep orange, burgundy, peppermint swirl, pale yellow, and even pink and red polka dots! And the list keeps growing as they come up with new varieties almost every year. Poinsettias are the December birth flower, and symbolize good will and community spirit. They can be found throughout the world, in sizes anywhere. from 3" to 3' tall in pots, and they grow much taller when planted in the ground, as you can see from the picture below of Paul Ecke with some of his plants.



Paul Ecke was one of the most successful growers in the San Dieguito region, but he certainly was not alone, nor was he the first. Beginning with the Kumeyaay Indians, settlers who came to the area were welcomed with a climate that was perfect for growing everything from vegetables to citrus and avocados to all different kinds of flowers. In the late 1800s, people who moved to this region built their houses and towns close to the coast, leaving huge tracts of land to the east free for agricultural expansion. The sea of houses that is now Carmel Valley used to be fields of lima beans, sugar beets, tomatoes, onions, and more. The photo below shows a loading dock for shipping sugar beets that was built near what is now the Viewpoint Brewery.



While the area east of Del Mar was dedicated to growing vegetables, the land behind the towns of Cardiff, Encinitas and Carlsbad began to see more and more flower growers, with growing fields surprisingly close to residential areas. The Frazee family started the trend when they planted flower fields in Carlsbad in the area now known as the ranunculus fields, and there was a time when Encinitas was called “The Flower Capital of the World.

But history is always about the people who created it, and the history of the growing fields of Del Mar and the San Dieguito region is no different. I have lived in this area for 80 years, so my roots are deep. As a result, I was privileged to know many of the families of these early growers, and I went to school with many of their children. Somewhere in Carmel Valley, there is a plaque dedicated to one of these early pioneer farmers, Anton Knechtel. From first grade at Del Mar Elementary through San Dieguito High School, one of my classmates was Martha Knechtel. Bobby Zurcher, from another of the prominent growing families was in my sister’s class; and Ruth Niemann, from yet another prominent growing family was the principal of Del Mar Elementary School and my sixth grade teacher.

When I started 7th grade at San Dieguito High School (there were no Junior High Schools then), my circle of friends from growing field families grew much larger. My first crush was on Robert Thornton, always known as “Thorny”, whose father Robert, Senior, started Thornton Flowers, a company that at the time was almost as large as the Eckes. There were many Japanese families who were flower growers in the region, too. Janice Nakagawa was a dear friend, along with Alvin Funaki; their parents grew carnations. The step-mother of my boyfriend in Junior and Senior years was Paul Ecke’s cousin.

People often think all the growing was done east of what is now I-5, especially in Del Mar, but in the 1950s, about three blocks from what is now the Winston School, the Phillips Family grew orchids in a big greenhouse. The Tascher Family also had a large orchid greenhouse south of Del Mar Heights Road, near Nob Avenue. Both Calvin Phillips and Stephanie Tascher were in my class and we graduated together in 1958.

If you look closely you’ll still see a few greenhouses and fields sprinkled in very odd locations throughout the San Dieguito area on both sides of the freeway, and there are some inland fields along the Hwy. 56 corridor. Luckily, the Frazee Family’s growing fields in Carlsbad are still with us—the colorful ranunculus that raise their heads every Spring. These are the last remnants of what was once a huge and prosperous industry, and they are welcome reminders of our region’s rich and important agricultural heritage.



Although almost all the fields and groves are gone now, plowed under to make way for houses, shopping centers, hotels and roads, fortunately many of the descendants of the growing families are still living in the area, and their names bring back so many memories. The Medinas, the Ivicivics, the Bumanns, the Leffingwells, the Itos, the Dollimores, the Shulls...Their roots are deep, too, and they have lots of stories to tell about growing up surrounded by acres of flowers and lima beans. We just need to listen to them and learn from them, for they always have something to teach us.

So...during this festive season, take a little time to think about the people whose hard work and creativity made it possible for you to have a pink-and-red polka dot poinsettia on your dining room table! It's a beautiful reminder of our heritage and history, and a remembrance of how fortunate we all are to live in this area.

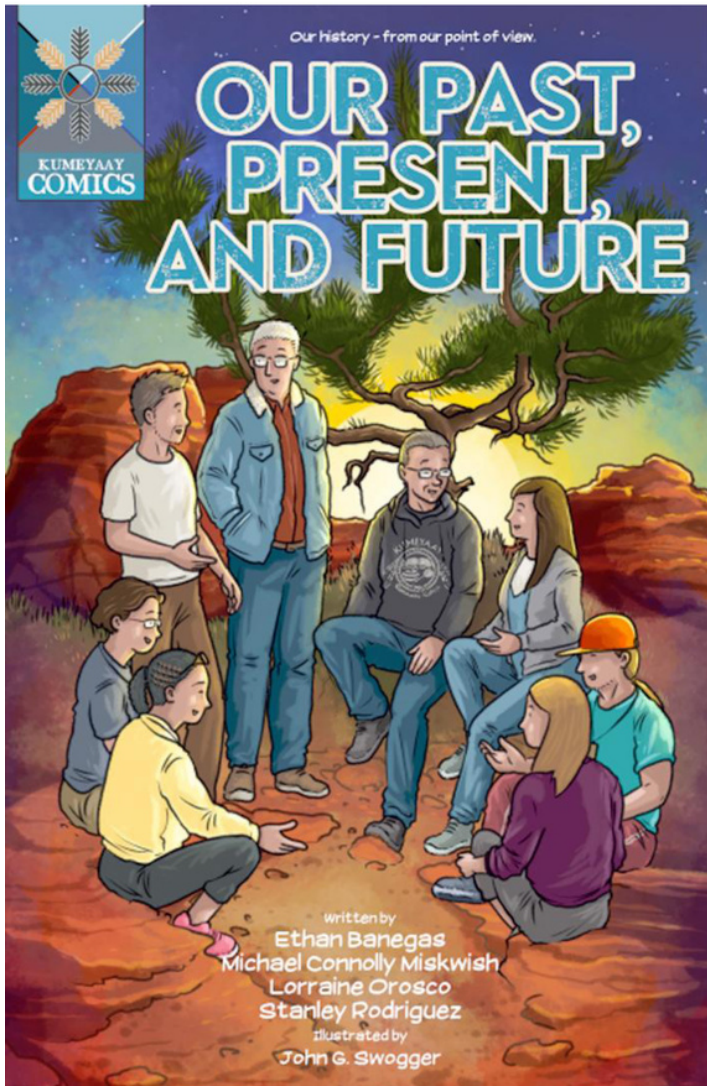
HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL!



Paul Ecke and his sons



Winter 2026 Members Event



Honoring the Kumeyaay Nation

A talk with Kumeyaay historian Ethan Banegas

Wednesday, January 7, 2026, 6:30 pm

Del Mar Town Hall

FREE for DMHS Members

\$25 donation requested from non-members

Kumeyaay historian, Ethan Banegas, will discuss the process to develop a community engaged comic that speaks from the perspective of the Kumeyaay people. This comic is a way to tell stories of Kumeyaay people from past to present and engage with their own communities, schools, and beyond. Hear more about how tribal historians are driving the work of this visual storytelling project as a creative team brings it to life.

Ethan grew up on the Barona Reservation in San Diego County. He received his Bachelor of Arts in History, Religious Studies, and Political Science in 2009 and his Master of Arts in History in 2017 from the University of San Diego. Banegas is an historian for the San Diego History Center, which operates the Junípero Serra Museum. In 2020 he published the Kumeyaay Oral History Project, a community-based research project, after collecting thirty-three personal interviews, video-taped oral histories, and photographs from San Diego's First People. In 2024, he published two comics – “*Beyond Gaming*” and “*Our Past, Present, and Future*” – and served as project director and author of the Kumeyaay Visual Storytelling Project.

Through these community-based projects, Professor Banegas collected the voice of the Kumeyaay people, giving a voice to the voiceless.



Kumeyaay Historian Ethan Banegas

UPCOMING EVENTS



33rd Annual The Red Nose Run

This year's The Red Nose Run will be held on Saturday, December 13th. It is sponsored by the Del Mar Foundation, with support from The Poseidon Restaurant, Board and Brew, Viewpoint, and many others. The event benefits two worthy non-profits: Semper Fi & America's Fund, and San Dieguito River Park. It will be held on the beach in Del Mar, and includes a 3K and 5K distance run, depending on beach conditions.

And remember: nobody has to run! You can walk, stroll, or just come for the fun, and to attend the after party which includes a hot buffet, compliments of the Poseidon, live music, ice cream, Viewpoint beer and much more. Two adult and two youths receive prizes for the fastest run. The event is organized by volunteers, and everything is donated. For more information about this very worthwhile event, go to their website: www.therednoserun.com.



SAVE THE DATES

October 8-11, 2026

DEL MAR SURFING REUNION



The Del Mar Historical Society is planning an exciting four -day event to celebrate Del Mar's iconic role in the history of surfing, and to honor the people who have created and contributed to the culture of surfing. There will be exhibitions with legendary surfers, storytelling sessions, a Surfwriter's Book Fair with well-known local authors, an Art Walk, a climate Symposium on surfing and sustainability with researchers from Scripps Institute of Oceanography, music, films and much more.

Del Mar Historical Society members will have complimentary access to many of the events and exhibitions. We're looking for volunteers who want to join in the planning, so email Susie Stevenson at goodstevenson@yahoo..com if you're interested in helping to create this exciting event for next year!

