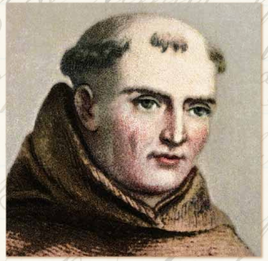
Community Beginnings

Fra Junipero Serra



A Franciscan monk named "Little Juniper" (Fra Junipero Serra) founded our mission in 1782 and Chumash Indians lived here long before that, but officially the City of San Buenaventura marks its birth from March 10, 1866, when the legislature of the new State of California granted our city, now nicknamed Ventura, one of the first charters in southern California.

Saint Bonaventure

In California the Franciscans named their missions – and the cities that grew along side them – after saints from their order in the Roman Catholic Church. San Buenaventura – Serra's ninth and final mission he lived to see established before his death – is named after Saint Bonaventure, a mystic priest who wrote a famous meditative book called Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum or "The Mind's Road to God." The city's official name, deemed too long to write out completely on railroad schedules was shortened by half to become "Ventura" – and this nickname has remained in common use today.

Ventura's First City Council

Spear's Saloon
Palm & Main Streets, J.C. Brewster photo c.1882
Photo courtesy of Museum of Ventura County

Ventura city and county government began in and above a liquor establishment. When our first mayor, Walter Chaffee, wanted to convene a City Council meeting, he had only to leave his general store, cross the street and climb the stairs above Spears Saloon – where Capriccio's Restaurant is located today – to the first offices of Ventura City Hall and, in 1872, the first Ventura County Courthouse.

Then as now, the City of San Buenaventura was a bilingual community. Our second mayor – saloonkeeper Angel Escandon – was Latino. Half the sindicos or council members spoke Spanish as their first language and the other half spoke English. The minutes of the first meetings – kept today between leather boards in the archives of the City Clerk's office – are written in Spanish in the beautiful cursive handwriting of the day.

That first year of government, Ventura's staff of five spent a budget of $7,465 – for which residents paid an annual tax of one dollar per head. Council actions that first year included building a public well for $50 – for which water users paid 25 cents per month – and paving Main Street – then called Camino Real – to the river.

The City of Ventura charged 24 cents per head to check cattle brands during slaughter to prevent cattle rustling, and an entertainment tax of $2 per billiard table.

By fine or 10 days in jail, the City government outlawed cattle driving, horse racing and bull fighting on or near Main Street [$100 fine], limited milking on the main roads to one cow per family [$25 fine] and forbade concealed weapons within city limits [$100 fine].

City Hall Centennial Timeline 2013
City of Ventura Parks, Recreation & Community Partnerships Dept.
1866 Ordinance Book Background, Courtesy of City of Ventura Archives