

'But leave the oaks'

William Monroe

The idea of building a town may have been the farthest thing from William Newton Monroe's mind when he made his sojourn to the future site of Monrovia.

A railroad man, he had spent most of his adult years moving across the country with the iron horse. By 1884, he was ready to settle down in a country home and enjoy the pastoral life of Southern California.

It was in April of 1884 that Monroe set off with his family to visit the foothills of the San Gabriel Valley. The first stop came at the Santa Anita Rancho, home of E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin. That visit sealed the future of Monrovia for Baldwin had land to sell and Monroe had \$150,000.

Together they travelled east along the base

of the foothills. Monroe's eyes took in the view — a barley field, the gentle slopes of the foothills, the low-lying valley and, perhaps most of all, the ancient oaks — and his mind was set. He purchased eight of the 30-acre tracts. The land ran from Hillcrest Boulevard on the north to Colorado Boulevard on the south, from Myrtle Avenue on the east to Mayflower Avenue on the west.

With the deed in hand, Monroe returned a month later and set up housekeeping under the cluster of oaks that still stands at the southeast corner of Hillcrest Boulevard and Magnolia Avenue. He shipped in mules and workers, established a camp and began his work. "Clear the land of boulders and brush," he ordered, "but leave the oaks."

By June, the family had constructed a small cottage at 225 Oak Avenue. A year later, he had constructed "The Oaks," a permanent home for the wandering family.

At the same time, three men who are also important in the Monrovia story — Judge J. D. Bicknell, former Los Angeles Mayor E. F. Spence and J. F. Crank — purchased land from Baldwin. Buying property had become a second occupation for almost everyone during that period of time. The years of 1885-87 are remembered as a "boom" period for Southern California. The completion of railroads and glowing reports of the climate brought hordes of Easterners to the area. Real estate prices skyrocketed.

Excited by the boom, Bicknell, Spence and



TOWN FOUNDER — There's no doubt that William Newton Monroe was named as the longest Monrovia resident at the first Old-Timers Luncheon in 1931. The town's founder came to Southern California in 1884 to build a country home and went on to build the city that now bears his name.

— he started it all

Crank had plans of starting a town. Monroe was asked to join the project. The four partners formed a townsite company in 1886 with Monroe presiding as president.

Engineers laid out 60 acres in town lots (50 by 150 feet) with the intersection of Orange and Myrtle Avenues selected as the center of the community. After the streets were established, 3,600 pepper

trees were planted. Water was piped in from Sawpit Canyon.

It was Spence who suggested that the city-to-be carry the name of Monrovia to honor the first homemaker. The idea was met with enthusiastic agreement. Monrovia was ready for the marketplace.

Brass bands, picnics and enthusiastic hopes were all in order on May 17, 1886 when the townsite was opened to prospective buyers.

Prices started at \$100 for a town lot; yet within a month properties were sold for over \$1,000. Monrovia was ready to become a full-fledged city.