The Birth of Orange County

When California became a state in 1850, what is now Orange County was a part of Los Angeles County. It took nearly 20 years of struggle for the area to break away and create a county of their own.

The story begins in 1870, when Max Strobel, the first mayor of Anaheim, helped push a bill through the State Assembly to form Anaheim County. This new county would have taken in everything south of the San Gabriel River – a much larger area than today. Unfortunately, the bill failed in the Senate.

In 1872, a second bill was introduced in Sacramento. It never even came to a vote, but it did give the proposed county a new name – Orange County. The citrus industry was just getting started here then, but the name had an attractive, semi-tropical flare to it. (See *How Orange County Got Its Name*.)

Attempts to form a new county continued through the 1870s and ’80s. Not all of the proposals were for Orange County. In 1876 Anaheim leaders made another big push under the name Santa Ana County, hoping to gaining support from that city. But since Anaheim would have still been named the county seat, Santa Ana was not interested.

Which town would become the county seat was a major issue in all these campaigns. An 1881 bill, again under the name Orange County, tried to compromise by naming Anaheim the county seat, but only for the first two years. After that, an election would be held to select a permanent site. That bill also never came to a vote.

The last failed attempt was in 1885. That Orange County bill made it through the Assembly but died in the Senate.

Four years later, the area’s lone Assemblyman, Col. E.E. Edwards of Santa Ana, introduced a new bill to create Orange County. Santa Ana’s founder, William H. Spurgeon, a prominent Democrat, joined local Republican leader James McFadden in helping Col. Edwards lobby the State Legislature. They had a war chest of perhaps as much as $30,000 put up by the businessmen of Santa Ana. They also enlisted the support of the San Francisco delegation, who were more than happy to see Los Angeles County lose some of its population and power.

Los Angeles County’s leaders were not pleased to see a third of their county cut away, even after Edwards agreed to trim the northern boundary several miles south to Coyote Creek, where the county line is today.

This time the lobbying efforts finally paid off, and the bill passed in both houses of the State Legislature. It was signed into law by Governor Robert Waterman on March 11, 1889. But the Edwards bill did not create Orange County. It only allowed for a vote of the local residents to decide the matter, requiring a two-thirds majority.

The campaign was not all smooth sailing. Anaheim was upset over the boundary shift, which left them in the north end of the county, and strengthened Santa Ana's claim on the county seat. So they fought against the creation of a new county. Fullerton, Buena Park, and some of the other northern communities soon joined them. But support was so strong in the rest of the area that when the vote was held on June 4, 1889, the measure passed easily: 2,509 to 500.

Once Orange County was approved, a second election was held on July 17th to choose a county seat and elect a full compliment of county officers. With Anaheim on the wrong side of the county formation vote, Orange decided to make a run for county seat, but it was obvious to everyone else that Santa Ana was going to be the winner.

With everything now in place, Orange County was officially born on August 1, 1889. The Board of Supervisors met for the first time on August 5, 1889, and William H. Spurgeon became the first Chairman of the Board.

When Orange County was formed, there were just three incorporated cities here and a population of about 15,000. Today, there are 34 incorporated cities, and a population of more than three million.