

Down Memory Lane
Mary Etta Broadwell

Thomas F. Griswold

Over the shining newly-laid Union Pacific tracks, a freight train with two passenger cars hooked on the rear carries eight members of the Griswold family toward their destination in southern California.

In that spring on 1879 they spent 11 days en route from Chicago to Los Angeles. Among the many pieces of baggage were bundles of bedding and immense lunch baskets. The cars of that period were the most primitive of day-coaches, without either sleeping or dining facilities, few people having ever heard of George Pullman, future inventor of the coaches which bear his name.

After an exhausting trip for the adults but an exciting one for the children, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Griswold, their four children, and the former's parents, Chester and Paulina Griswold, arrived at the old San Fernando Street depot in Los Angeles.

The family came immediately to this area where three years before, Mr. Griswold's brother, Eugene, had established a residence. This district was then known as the Azusa Valley, as it wasn't until five years later that J.S. Phillips bestowed the name "Covina" on a part of the 2,000 acres of land he was subdividing.

After purchasing 20 acres of land at Citrus and Cypress avenue, plans were completed for the building of the home where Mr. and Mrs. Griswold were to finish out their lives. While the house was under construction, the family took up residence in the building where Sedlacek's garage is now located.

That summer and fall of 1879 Mr. Griswold worked a gold claim in the San Gabriel canyon above the "Narrows". Six individual claims were worked on a cooperative basis, the six owners assisting each other in placer mining for the precious metal which was one of their main sources of cash income.

Yet to be known as the "Heart of the Orange Empire" very few citrus trees had been planted in the valley. At this period landowners had found the growing of garden peas for the San Francisco market to be the most profitable crop.

One of Mr. Griswold's earliest boyhood memories of life in California, was when he and his father irrigated the garden for the first time. The elder Griswold was notified that water from the San Gabriel river would be turned into the mud ditch on his property from midnight until 2am on October 12, 1879. Conscientiously doing their duty, they doggedly irrigated despite the first

rainfall of the season, which measured an inch before morning. Needless to say, the garden received a thorough soaking.

“Uncle Tom” Griswold, as he was known throughout the valley, was a factor in the early development of the district, serving as one of the directors on the old ditch company, the Contract Water Company, and Covina Irrigating Company. One of a small group that organized to bring the first water to the lower valley, he was instrumental in making this one of the most prosperous agricultural districts in the county.

Mr. Griswold was postmaster in Covina from 1900 to 1904, receiving his appointment from President McKinley. In the early days “Uncle Tom” was one of the few Republicans in the valley, the greater portions of the citizens being Democratic at that time.

Living many years beyond his allotted three score years and ten, Mr. Griswold’s life was a monument to the lusty pioneer spirit of our country. At the time of his death in 1934 he lacked less three years before reaching the century mark.

His life span encompassed the Civil War, and he grieved with the whole world when the Great Emancipator was assassinated. He rejoiced for the future of America when railroad tracks joined the east and west coasts, and with his friends discussed the laying of the Atlantic cable. The miracle of electricity and radio, the invention of the telephone and telegraph and the new methods of transportation occurred in those 97 years of his life.

One of the greatest disappointments was being rejected for the Union Army because of defective eyesight. An interesting sidelight into that war was that a perfect set of teeth was a prime requisite to be accepted as a volunteer. Not for health purposes as might be supposed, but the young soldiers had to bite off the end of the cartridge cases, a military duty no longer necessary.

A member of the Masonic Lodge for 54 years, one of Uncle Tom’s most prized possessions was the gold button showing he had completed 50 years of Masonry. In 1870 he was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason. Identified with all branches of Masonry in the San Gabriel Valley, he held the positions of eminent commander in Covina Commandery, Knights Templar, and High Priest of the Royal Arch Chapter of Azusa.

Active both mentally and physically, he took a keen interest in his business affairs until shortly before his death. A familiar sight was Mr. Griswold driving his own car down Citrus Avenue when 92 years of age.

Mrs. Griswold passed away in 1928 after they had enjoyed 66 years of married life together. Six years later he followed her, dying quietly in his sleep at the family home, and was laid beside the body of his wife at Oakdale Cemetery.

Children of Mr. and Mrs. Griswold are Mrs. J.R. Elliott of Covina Boulevard, Eugene Griswold, living at the ranch home, W.M. Griswold, former manager of the Covina Fruit Exchange, and May E. Griswold, member of the high school faculty.

His children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were all educated in the Covina schools. Surely this is something of a record in a state where native sons are at a premium.