



CITY OF BREA  
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CITYOFBREA.NET

## CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

### A CONDENSED HISTORY

#### **Early discovery**

The first written record describing land that is now Brea are notes from an early mission expedition of Portola and Father Juan Crespi in July of 1769. At that time, this was an undisturbed natural place to camp overnight near a small group of Tongva Indians, which were the largest among the Gabrielino tribes for about 3,500 years. In subsequent decades that same Brea Canyon outlet was but a small notch within a broad sweep of territory identified for mission expansion.

By the late 1830s the area was within the Mexican land grant system and recognized under ownership by the Ontiveros family. It sat within a vast cattle ranching enterprise blending across neighboring ranches. Following absorption of California into the United States and politics that led to breakup of large ranchos, Abel Stearns became the second recorded owner of property that would later become Brea. He purchased 30,672 acres in 1863 from a descendent of the original Ontiveros land for less than twenty cents an acre!

A drought period ensued and by 1868 Stearns was mortgaging his vast holdings that also spread across Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. While he sold off cattle acreage to remain solvent, he never subdivided the Brea landholdings for sale. Instead, beginning in 1870, he leased this area as pasture for Basque sheep men and Domingo Bastanchury introduced a profitable new venture. Wool was sold to supply eastern textile factories recovering from the Civil War period. Mutton was marketed to fast growing new population centers like Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Over the next decades, children of less than a dozen Basque families built shearing sheds and then small houses as they started their own families. Some diversified into dry farming and those with reliable wells planted walnuts or citrus. These profitable enterprises continued until about 1913.

#### **Fueling a Village**

A troublesome characteristic of local pasture and hillside land was persistent seepage of a sticky tar-like substance that oozed from cracks and mixed with the soil. This “brea” provided a hot, dirty source of cheap fuel. Sheep men despised the eruptions and allowed pioneer families from the region to pull up wagons and freely cart loads of it away.

While sheep continued grazing the land for about 40 years, other types of commerce progressed elsewhere. The industrial revolution had brought forth new tools, new techniques and new inventions that needed to be powered. And oil was emerging as the increasingly

essential source of fuel for modern life. By the turn of the century, the Union Oil Company had established vast leases across southern California. This included successful operations within the Puente Hills area. Oil operations were concentrated in each of two canyons; Brea Canyon cutting north, and Carbon Canyon, winding towards the east. Landscape that remained unblemished since mission days suddenly became studded with wooden derricks, tanks, pipes, engines and other equipment.

Drilling in the Brea-Olinda field began in 1896. Wildcatters brought in a major strike in 1898. The oil campsite called Olinda grew into a small village to accommodate employee bunkhouses plus tidy cottages for workers bringing along families. By 1902, new rotary drilling tools had been introduced and the oil leases became ever more productive. Communities to the west, La Habra and Whittier, were also establishing strong agricultural identities during this period. In the background, the politics of water and rail transportation played out as southern California land developers competed for new residents.

### **City Formation**

Olinda in Brea's rolling northern hills continued to draw workers and many felt it was time to organize a real town to prepare for continued growth. A schoolhouse, a shop, and a social hall had been established to support oil lease workers. However, many services were still lacking. So, in a more level area to the west of the dirty oil operations, land speculators began actively promoting a town site called Randolph. They started by declaring a school district in 1903 and engaged with the railroads and oil companies in attempting to establish a permanent new community. Ultimately, this first attempt was unsuccessful as the agricultural pursuits of long-term locals were negotiated alongside a frenzy of competing oil companies' interests. Efforts to formalize Randolph were quickly abandoned.

But growth still continued. On January 19, 1911 a new group re-filed the old map with the County under a name more traditionally referenced for the area: Brea. A tract of about 230 lots was defined and oil equipment suppliers were enticed to open for business. By 1912 things were well underway with a variety of enterprising businesses offering goods and services that directly supplied the oil operations, as well as workers' family members during off hours.

A Chamber of Commerce was organized with its first meeting in March of 1913. With a strong booster mindset, one of their earliest activities was to organize a baseball team to help win recognition for the area. But more practical needs had also been identified. Law enforcement came from the sheriff in far-away Santa Ana and rarely arrived on-scene in a timely manner. Fire protection became an urgent priority after several newer structures burned down in the middle of town for lack of any suppression resources. With a growing desire for improved services, an incorporation election was scheduled once it could be confirmed that the permanent local population had exceeded a requisite 500 minimum.

However, the original petition had to be withdrawn for a period as more rancher and oil company opposition played out. Town boundaries were disputed and concerns about reduced tax revenues for the County had to be appeased. After eventually aligning support from the Board of Supervisors and Union Oil company officials, revised incorporation documents were filed and a vote was scheduled for February 15, 1917. The tally was verified four days later at 245 "yes" and 45 "no." Official confirmation arrived from the California

Secretary of State on February 23, 1917. The first meeting of newly elected trustees for Orange County's sixth incorporated city took place three days later.

### **Growing Up Fast**

Mere months after Brea's incorporation, the United States declared war on Germany. The City's attention was diverted from pressing organizational details to the higher national calling. War bonds and Red Cross campaigns won hearty support from Brea's citizens. In four successive bond drives, the new little city oversubscribed its quota. In addition, the service flag hanging in the town center boasted stars for each of its boys sent to war. By war's end, 38 had gone and another 35 were preparing for their military service in training camps.

With the end of WWI, full attention returned to city matters. Responsibility for budgets and resource management was difficult for early leaders. Among key priorities to be financed; streetlights, roads and traffic signals to manage an ever-increasing number of automobiles. And a pivotal goal for 1920 was success in approving water bonds to initiate a reliable water system for the City. Subsequent bonds were sold, wells were dug and a storage tank built. Over these early years, other utility needs were also very challenging: electricity, telephones, natural gas and sanitation. City leaders' worked hard to establish such services. It was difficult to balance the desire for self-sufficiency and total cost control against opportunities to participate with increasingly efficient regional systems.

Early years of cityhood also brought an unrelenting demand for housing. The Union Oil Company set aside several streets for a neighborhood of efficient tract homes near the city center. Local schools collaborated to declare as the Brea Olinda Unified School District rather than merge into the Fullerton-La Habra system. Civic service groups formed and influenced social activities. Orange County's largest PTA group was Brea's. An academic-minded ladies group was instrumental in persuading the County to establish a free library system with its first branch located here.

An exciting diversion during those early years was the rise of aviation. Brea played a part in pioneering new concepts. With its then remote location, two airfields attracted inventors, test pilots and barnstormers. Their exploits at local airshows have now become a treasured legacy.

### **Turning Points**

As oil production waned, the next three decades brought more business diversification and additional housing developments to Brea. The oil boom lasted until the 1940s as the citrus industry had also emerged with groves across flatter areas with nearby packing houses. This industry had provided an alternative source of employment and a small measure of stability through tough depression era years when oil demand plummeted. However, with subsequent disease and decline in many orchards, acreage began to give way for lucrative new tracts to meet residential and industrial demands as the 1950s arrived. Subsequent expansion became possible with more certainty in the water supply through affiliation with the Metropolitan Water District. Union Oil remained an important catalyst for commerce. By the early 80s their state-of-the-art research operation provided higher paying jobs for 700 employees and helped attract other related enterprises.

The 70s ushered in major growth and expanded Brea's profile "on the map" with opening of the Orange (SR-57) freeway and construction of the Brea Mall. Large industrial parks and retail areas thrived in Brea over the 70s and 80s as more companies took advantage of the City's strategic location near the intersection of four Southern California counties. Entire new neighborhoods emerged and home builders quickly sold out hundreds of houses. Additional elementary schools had also been built to accommodate new students flowing into the District.

### **A Renewed Identity**

In 1980 a new Civic & Cultural Center was dedicated as a fitting physical representation of Brea's emergence from small town roots into a center of economic promise. The City also successfully established itself as a welcoming home to cultural arts through a nationally recognized Art in Public Places outdoor sculpture program. Yet another significant community asset took shape during this period. City leaders cooperated with the school board to finance an entirely new campus for the aging Brea Olinda High School. A state-of-the-art facility opened in 1989, built atop a northern ridge overlooking the city.

Brea's original downtown had suffered in the shadow of the highly successful enclosed mall just a mile east. Several revitalization schemes proved too little for lasting results. With a bold vision and the strategic use of redevelopment funding, Brea's downtown became a construction zone in the 1990s. This process included a major community outreach; relocation of a few historic homes; then scraping to the ground blocks located to the north of the key Imperial Highway and Brea Boulevard intersection. This re-invented downtown has since become a unique entertainment, retail, restaurant and special events destination.

By inviting public input, setting policy direction and practicing careful planning, the City of Brea also added other significant community amenities over the last 20 years. Residents enjoy a multi-purpose Community Center and a 20-acre Sports Park. An east-west 4-mile trail is well underway for walkers and cyclists to easily cross the city. Together with an expanded Senior Center, two golf courses, two museums, and over a dozen parks, these locales are the settings of daily activity for all ages.

Meanwhile, in just the last decade, over 2,000 new housing units are being added into the City inventory from three new master planned developments. Employment is running above county averages and commercial vacancies are well below the average.

### **Celebrating a Century**

Brea has always been an above average town. As it enters a new century, there are strong traditions linking the generations who live here. From the very beginning, foundational values were civic engagement, education, business opportunity and service to others.

The City, School District, Chamber of Commerce and numerous civic groups promote events that bring people together for learning, discussion, community projects and frequent celebration. These shared experiences connect a caring community. Brea's Centennial year is an important time for pride and re-dedication to healthy future progress.