A Place Called Home

City of Palmdale

Original Palmdale schoolhouse, built in 1888

The first city council Domenic Massari, Marlin Gilmour, Richard Linaker, (seated) Larry Chimbole, Dr. Lester Nichols

Palmdale, circa 1918, looking northwest from 6th Street East

Palmdale Avenue S circa 1890-1895

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IT WAS A TYPICAL DAY ON AUGUST 24, 1962 — hot and dry along Route 6 on the edge of the Mojave Desert. But for the 7,000 residents living in the high desert community known as Palmdale, an important event was about to take place.

Unlike many of the historical events occurring in this center of the aerospace universe, there were no sonic booms created by test pilots or space shuttles returning home, but the simple signing of a document that declared Palmdale into existence as the first city of the Antelope Valley.

1962 brought many world events that would affect Palmdale's growth, including the beginning of the Space Race, Americans in space for the first time, and military conflicts such as the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis. In many ways, aerospace engineering was born right alongside this little city in the high desert, their futures intertwined from infancy.

Early History

Hundreds of years before the City of Palmdale was formed, hunters and gatherers such as the Kitanemuk Indians occupied the area, depending mostly on the natural productivity of the land and the foothills of what is now called the Antelope Valley. It is believed that many other tribes also roamed the land at one time or another, including the Yokuts, Chumash and Shoshone.

California was discovered in the 16th century, but the Antelope Valley was left relatively undisturbed until the arrival of the railroad in 1876, which brought with it early pioneers. The first small community developed at the crossroads of two major routes on the Valley floor; the Southern Pacific Railroad and Fort Tejon Road, now known as Barrel Springs Road.

In 1886, about 60 families of Swiss and German descent, predominantly from Nebraska and Illinois, moved westward to California. They had been told that when they saw palm trees, they would be close to the Pacific Ocean. As they arrived in the Antelope Valley and saw the unusual looking Joshua trees, they mistook them for palm trees. They decided to settle in the area and called their town Palmenthal.
Palmdale's Beginning

The original settlement gave way to Palmdale, and the only evidence of that early settlement now is the historic Palmdale Cemetery on 20th St. East, which is the final resting place of some of the City's pioneering families. Palmdale's population began to steadily increase in the early 20th century, from 250 residents in 1886 to 500 by 1929. By then, residents were enjoying new pavement installed in 1921 on its main road, today's Sierra Hwy.

Incorporation

Very quickly, a new vision for Palmdale's future began to come into focus and many community members dedicated their time and money to making the dream of a city a reality. This group of civic leaders, who later became known as the "50 Grand Men," launched a fundraising campaign to begin the process of incorporation. After an earlier failed attempt, Palmdale was incorporated in 1962, forever transforming a small-town community with no hotels and only a few restaurants into the gateway to the Antelope Valley.

Growing Fast Along the Antelope Valley Freeway

Beginning with only 2.1 square miles within its borders, Palmdale grew slowly and steadily in both size and population. By 1965, Palmdale measured 22.4 square miles and just two decades later, it was twice as big.

In 1974 construction of the Antelope Valley Freeway was completed, making the drive to the San Fernando Valley just 30 minutes from Palmdale, allowing commuters to work "down below" while living in an affordable, less congested community. The growing population created a need for more amenities. One of the first projects was the opening of the Palmdale City Library in 1977, the first building constructed by the City of Palmdale, paid for and funded by its citizens. Three years later, the City introduced its iconic gathering place for meetings and social events with the opening of the Palmdale Cultural Center, later dedicated as the Chimbole Cultural Center after Palmdale's first mayor, Larry Chimbole, one of the City's original "50 Grand Men."

With a new civic center developed, Palmdale would begin its greatest period of residential growth. With attractive and affordable housing and a drivable commute to Los Angeles, Palmdale became a place for young families to get their start and participate in the American Dream of homeownership. During the 1980s, Palmdale was the fastest growing city in the state, increasing from a population of 12,227 in 1980 to 68,842 in 1990.

Meanwhile, the aerospace industry remained the area's largest source of employment, providing thousands of good paying jobs for Antelope Valley residents, as well as playing a vital role in the safety and security of our nation. US Air Force Plant 42 is home to Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman and is home of the B-1 and B-2 Bombers, the space shuttle and next generation space shuttle, X-33, solidifying Palmdale's reputation as the Aerospace Capital of the United States.

In 1981 celebrated the landing of the first Space Shuttle at Edwards Air Force Base, bringing professionals and spectators alike. The need for quality, short term accommodations for specialty contractors related to the design and testing of aircraft also heralded the beginning of a blossoming hotel and lodging business boom that continues to this day.

Quality of life improved greatly for Palmdale residents as the business boom that continues to this day.
celebrated opening of Palmdale’s first community theater in 1994, the Palmdale Playhouse, culture, arts and music began to flourish. Growth continued throughout the 1990s as Palmdale was named the fastest growing City in the nation from 1990 through 1996 and its population soared to 117,324 by 1999.

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Palmdale’s Retail Arrival & Revival

The opening of the Antelope Valley Mall in 1990 and the Antelope Valley Auto Center in 1991 heralded another dimension of growth — this time in the retail sector. No longer did Antelope Valley residents have to travel 50 miles for quality shopping. It was all right here in Palmdale.

2000 rang in not only a new century but another decade of solid growth in Palmdale. Popular retailers continued to join the ranks of Target, Barnes and Noble, Lowe’s, Best Buy, Trader Joe’s, and T.J. Maxx, which were the first of their kind to arrive in the AV and made Palmdale a shopping destination for the entire region. Special events expanded to provide more services and cultural amenities for residents. Thursday Night on the Square, a weekly summer event series, debuted in 2000 at Poncitlán Square. Today the tradition continues with Music in the Parks at both Poncitlán Square and Domenic Massari Park.

Palmdale citizens began to experience a superior quality of life in our beautiful City as parks and facilities were created at the beginning of the new century. Palmdale Oasis Park opened with a rec center, swimming pool, and DryTown Water Park. Marie Kerr Park was expanded with a rec center, Best of the West Softball Complex, and the Palmdale Amphitheater. The City hosts world class entertainment, festivals, tournaments and cultural activities at the venues.

The opening of Macy’s in 2010 solidified the Antelope Valley Mall as the region’s retail powerhouse. More restaurants arrived, bringing big names such as Yard House, Claim Jumper, and BJ’s Restaurant & Brewhouse.

Happy 60th Birthday Palmdale!