

Los Angeles's Olvera Street



Named after the first County Judge, Agustin Olvera, in 1877. Converted to a colorful Mexican market place in 1930 by Mrs. Christine Sterling, it is also the setting for holiday celebrations and Mexican style dancing and music.

Historic Olvera Street started out as a short lane called Wine Street. In 1877 the street was extended and its name changed to Olvera Street in honor of Agustin Olvera who owned a home at the end of the street across from the Plaza. He was the first county judge of Los Angeles.

Several historic buildings line the street including the Avila Adobe, built around 1818 by a former mayor, Francisco Avila, the

Pelanconi House, oldest brick house in the city, dating from 1855, and the Sepulveda House built in 1887 as an Eastlake Victorian business and residential building. By 1903, the street had considerably declined and a large and noisy substation was built next to the Avila Adobe to provide power for the city's electric street cars. The Italian Hall, a center for Italian organizations, was constructed in 1907 at the north end of Olvera Street and, across the street, the Italian winery expanded its building in 1914.

When Christine Sterling walked through the Plaza and Olvera Street in 1926, she was shocked by the dilapidated condition of the oldest part of the city and started a campaign to save it. With funding provided by six influential men and publicity from the Los Angeles Times, she started a corporation to revitalize Olvera Street. Descendants of the Avila family allowed her to renovate the Adobe and with enormous effort she solicited money, materials and labor to accomplish the repairs. The City Council closed Olvera Street to vehicle traffic in 1929. Unusual help received by Mrs. Sterling included engineers from the city Department of Water and Power who drew up plans to grade the street and the Sheriff's Department who provided prisoners to do the labor. To show where the original Zanja Madre (or mother ditch) had brought water to the pueblo, its path was marked on the street with diagonal bricking.

Trees were planted and a large wooden cross erected at the south end of the street which opened with great festivity as a colorful Mexican market place on Easter Sunday (April 20), 1930. It offered Mexican American vendors an opportunity to sell traditional wares and to make the street a place "to preserve and present the customs and trades of early California." One well known business that moved to Olvera Street in 1930 was La Golondrina Cafe, the first restaurant in the city to serve authentic Mexican food. Olvera Street has always been and continues to be a major tourist attraction attracting as many as two million visitors per year. It is now part of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, which is a department of the City of Los Angeles.

