

# A National City Investor:

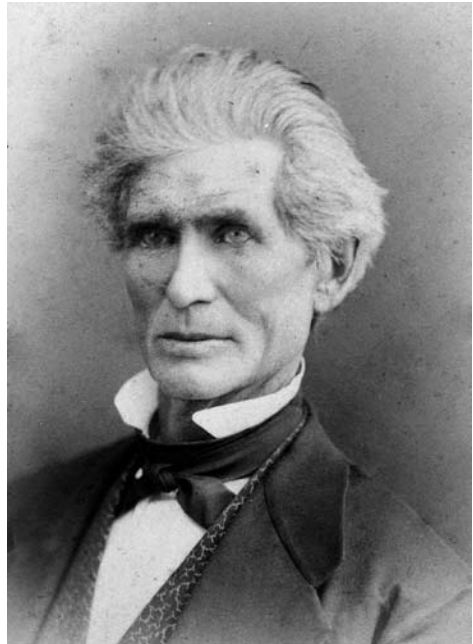
## Theron Parsons (1805-1893)

Molly McClain

In 1868, National City was known as “Kimball’s town,” the property of Frank Kimball and his brothers Warren and Levi. They purchased the former Rancho de la Nación, intending to develop a powerful trade city that might compete with Los Angeles for the terminus of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>1</sup> An early settler, Theron Parsons, described the transformation of National City over twenty-five years. He noted the introduction of commercial agriculture, the development of the railroad, and the “boom and bust” of the 1880s and early 1890s. His diaries complement the important Kimball family collection at the National City Public Library. They also shed light on the activities and attitudes of an early American settler and his extended family.<sup>2</sup>

Theron Parsons was the son of Noah Parsons (1780-1859) and Thankful Edwards (1781-1814), both of Westhampton, Massachusetts. He grew up in Onondaga County, New York, and worked as a printer in Adams and Watertown during his teens and early twenties. In the late 1820s, he established two newspapers, *Thursday’s Post* and the *Censor*.<sup>3</sup> He married Lovina Collins (1807-1873) on September 25, 1827. Six of their children survived to adulthood: Marie Antoinette, La Rue Perrine, Silenus DeWitt, Harriett Amelia, Latricia Jane, and Josephine Arthusa.<sup>4</sup>

Like many men of his generation, Parsons looked for real estate opportunities in the West. He moved to northern Illinois with his brother Timothy in 1832, not long after the Black Hawk War, and remained there until 1854. For several years, he kept a temperance tavern at “Hafda,” or Half Day, village in Lake County. In 1842, he and his neighbors formed an abolitionist society, the Lake County Liberty Association, which aimed “to effect the entire abolition of slavery in the United States.”<sup>5</sup>



*Theron Parsons, n.d. A farmer and land speculator, Parsons was one of the early settlers of National City. Private collection.*

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Parsons visited San Francisco in 1852, one of thousands who headed to California after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma. He most likely accompanied his sister-in-law, Cynthia Elvira Parsons, whose husband Timothy had died in Illinois in 1849. She and her sons, Francis Marion, Theodore La Rue, George Henry, and Augustus Belding, and her daughter Agnes Olivia, moved to California and eventually settled in the Santa Clara Valley.<sup>6</sup> Parsons did not stay, however, perhaps feeling that he would get a safer return on his investment in the upper Midwest.<sup>7</sup>

In 1854, Parsons moved with his family to Mankato, Minnesota Territory, shortly after white settlers had staked the first claims to lands occupied by the

Dakota tribe. They took a steamboat, the *Black Hawk*, up the Minnesota River, expecting this new form of transportation to bring additional settlers. Parsons bought farmland and built several houses. His diary for these years contains brief descriptions of trips from Mankato to St. Paul and Chicago to buy and sell goods like writing paper and shoes. He returned, occasionally, to Half Day, Illinois. He wrote of his success at developing and renting out property, made reference to growing apples and wheat, and noted the income received from a stone quarry in 1866.<sup>8</sup> He did not mention the election of Abraham Lincoln, the start of the American Civil War, or the Minnesota Indian War of 1862. The latter led to the trial of over three hundred Dakota and the execution of thirty-eight warriors in Mankato, one of the largest mass executions in American history.<sup>9</sup>

By the time the railroad came to Mankato in 1868, Parsons was a modestly well-to-do man. At the age of sixty-three, he began to travel again. Accompanied by his wife, he went to Virginia with daughter Latricia Jane and son-in-law Peleg Griffith to see where the latter had fought during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> A captain in the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, Griffith had been involved in the James River Valley campaign and the siege of Richmond. Three years after the war had ended, the relics of his encampment at Evergreen Plantation were "very visible, although in quite a dilapidated state. Peleg was able to distinguish the quarters of each regiment, and...his own tent of poles and cedar bows, together with his sleeping couch, which served to bring the scenes of the past into fresh recollection." Parsons noted, "I am certain that it made the matter seem more real to myself."<sup>11</sup>

They ended their trip with a three-month visit to Vineland, New Jersey, where their friends, John and Portia Kellogg Gage, had helped to found a progressive community that supported abolition, women's suffrage, temperance,



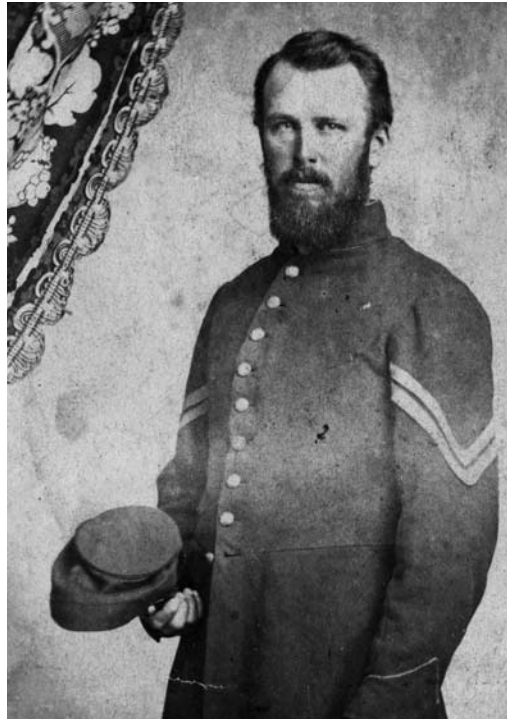
*Lovina Collins Parsons (1807-73), n.d., created a scrapbook album of romantic poetry before her marriage to Theron Parsons in 1827. She moved from Watertown, New York, to Illinois, Minnesota, and California. Private collection.*

and spiritualism. Parsons spent Thanksgiving Day 1867 with Lucy Stone Blackwell, a well-known abolitionist and pioneer in the women's rights movement, and Robert Dale Owen, son of the founder of the Utopian community of New Harmony, Indiana, and one of the early advocates of birth control. Parsons described it as "as pleasant Thanksgiving time I think as I ever enjoyed." After dinner, he went to hear Lucretia Mott speak at Union Hall before the opening of what would become the New Jersey Women's Suffrage Association. He and his wife attended the convention and listened to speeches by Blackwell, Owen, and others. Several months later, their hostess Portia Kellogg Gage would become the first New Jersey woman to attempt to vote in a municipal election.<sup>12</sup>

Parsons held liberal opinions and strong religious convictions. According to his son-in-law, Parsons



*Parson's daughter, Latricia Jane Parsons Griffith (1839-1922), ca. 1886. She became involved in the spiritualist movement in San Diego and, in 1888, attempted to communicate with her deceased daughter, Josephine. Private collection.*



*Peleg Griffith (1836-1918), a captain in the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, toured Civil War sites with Parsons, his father-in-law. He worked as a retail dry goods merchant in Mt. Tabor, Vermont, before moving to National City with his wife, Latricia Jane. On the reverse of the photograph he wrote, "Taken at Norfolk, Va. June 1865, 29 yrs. old." Private collection.*

was "the most honest man I ever saw. I have put him down as being of that character and as being disposed to do right, let consequences be what they may." He added, "I recalled a quotation from some worthy old patriarch which he frequently used to make use of. It is 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,' putting an accent upon 'will.' I used to think it was rather an orthodox idea he intended to convey, but I have more recently given a more liberal interpretation."<sup>13</sup>

In 1868, Parsons decided to move with his extended family to California. His daughters and their husbands left Mankato early in the year. Josephine and Thomas Walker and Harriett and David Lamb traveled to California via



*National City, 1874.* ©SDHS #10527-2.

steamship and stayed with relatives in Santa Clara before heading south to San Diego. Parsons wrote, "Were it not for the expectation we have of joining them soon in their new home in the far west, we should miss them still more."<sup>14</sup>

In November, Parsons and his wife left Mankato for New York. They purchased tickets from the Pacific Mail Steam Ship Co. and arranged for boxes of sewing machines to be shipped to San Diego where they would be sold. On November 16, they boarded the *Rising Star* for California. He described the voyage through the Caribbean, the trip across the Isthmus of Panama, and the fifteen-day journey to San Francisco. At Acapulco, "the boat commenced coaling soon after anchoring and we were surrounded in a short time by Mexicans in small boats with tropical fruits, coral, etc." Going ashore, he found that the town had altered little in the seventeen years since his last visit. In San Francisco, however, he found a "great change." They spent one night at the International Hotel before heading south to the "picturesque" Santa Clara valley. He noted that the land was "highly cultivated and commanding a high price—from \$150 to \$1,000 per acre."<sup>15</sup>

Parsons and his wife took the steamer *Orizaba* from San Francisco to San Diego, arriving on December 22, 1868. He wrote, "We arrived in San Diego at 9 o'clock a.m. and were thankful that we had reached our destination in safety, and we were glad to see our dear children and grandchildren once more." On the 24th, he traveled south to the Tía Juana River Valley where Lamb had a claim. He thought that it would be "a pleasant place to live when it is settled and improved." On Christmas Day, he "looked about some and made a claim." On his way back, he stopped at Frank Kimball's place "and examined some lots in his town site." Six months earlier, Kimball and his brothers had bought 26,612 acres of Rancho de la Nación for \$30,000. They surveyed the land, which extended from San Diego in the north to Tijuana in the south, and chose the northwest corner as the site for the first building development, National Ranch, later incorporated as National City.<sup>16</sup>

Parsons began purchasing land almost as soon as he arrived in San Diego. On





*Parsons' first home at 606 8th Street, National City, ca. 1942. ©SDHS OP #12423-1335.*

January 5, 1869, he and W. J. Pettit, a former state representative from Owatonna, Minnesota, bought a block of Alonzo Horton's Addition for \$1,000 and a corner lot owned by Captain S. S. Dunnells for \$300. On January 12, he bought ten acres of land from Kimball for \$300. A few days later, he "commenced to build our house" on 8th Street between E and F Avenues. He then purchased another forty acres of ranch land in National City at \$25 per acre. A hand-drawn map in his 1889 diary showed properties bounded by 15th and 16th Streets and 7th and 8th Avenues. He and his son-in-law Thomas Walker later built rental houses west of National Avenue, near the waterfront.<sup>17</sup>

Parsons was well aware that he was investing in property only recently seized from Mexico. Soon after his arrival, he "went to the sea shore and saw the monument erected between the United States and Mexico defining the boundary line" established twenty years earlier.<sup>18</sup> He noted his son-in-law's frequent trips to collect wood in Tijuana and watched as nearly five hundred soldiers "passed on their way to Tía Juana" between October 1870 and January 1871. He recognized the fluid nature of the border, writing that he had seen a flock of 5,000 sheep from Los Angeles head to their grazing lands in Baja California. Still, he liked to remind himself of the safety of his investment. When he visited Pettit on his ranch in the Tía Juana River Valley, he stopped to visit the border monument on the Pacific Ocean. He and his daughter Josephine often visited the monument, sometimes bringing out-of-town visitors to admire the view. In 1887, "Mr. and Mrs. Shaubut, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, Peleg and Winnie and Phenie and Josephine went to the hot springs, monument, etc."<sup>19</sup>

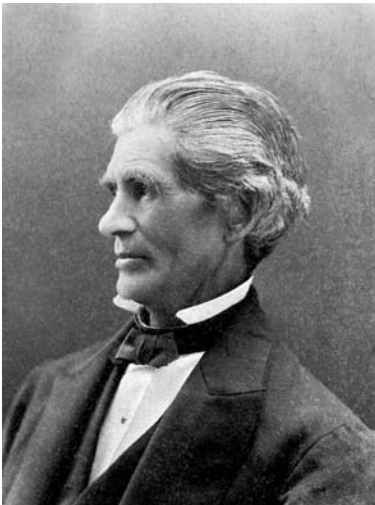
Parsons rarely mentioned ethnic or racial groups, despite the large number of non-whites living and working in San Diego county. He continued to be interested in the plight of freed slaves, keeping an article on "Race Prejudice in Georgia"

in the back of his 1887 diary. He employed a worker, "Congo" or "Condo," who "hoed in the beets," planted barley, and ran the mower. He recalled buying celery and turnips from an Italian and, in December 1887, noted that "John Chinaman called with an assortment of China goods."<sup>20</sup> But he did not document either Mexican or native inhabitants of the area.

Parsons shared Kimball's dream of transforming the former Rancho de la Nación into a New England-style town and economy. He particularly wanted to expand the agricultural potential of the region which, traditionally, produced only wheat and wool in considerable quantities. To this end, he began to experiment with a variety of crops. On arriving, he planted peas, potatoes, onions, beets, beans, butter beans, watermelon, musk melon, cucumber, winter squash, sweet corn, peanuts, early Dutch turnips, corn, cabbage, and tomatoes. He "set out 140 grape cuttings" and planted



*Parsons and his family often took visitors to this boundary monument marking the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Unknown couple, ca. 1880s. ©SDHS #80:7974.*



*Parsons sat for this photograph while on a trip to Rochester, New York, in 1875. He frequently returned East to visit family in Alabama, New York, and Vermont. Private collection.*

"70 trees of different varieties" that had arrived by steamer, including fig, chestnut, lemon, orange, almond, plum, and English walnut. In early 1870, he measured a sweet potato that had been raised by R. S. Pardee "which was 23  $\frac{1}{4}$  in length and 13 inches in circumference." In 1873, his son-in-law Walker "raised a peach measuring 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches in circumference, weighing 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz."<sup>21</sup>

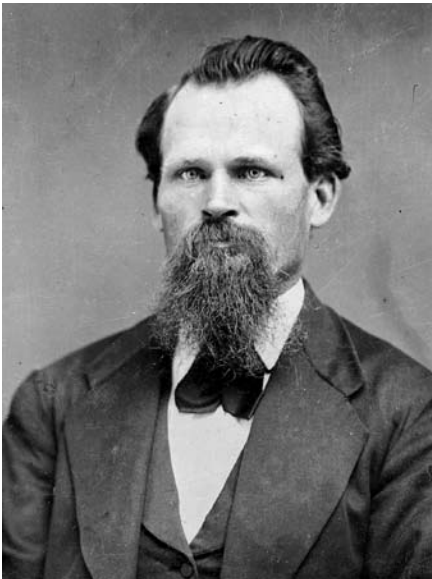
Like many early settlers, Parsons was encouraged by San Diego's mild climate. He made a daily record of morning, afternoon, and evening temperatures, comparing it favorably to the weather in the East. On his first trip back to Minnesota in May 1872, he noted that "the atmosphere is damp and unpleasant as compared with the climate in California." In 1875, he went to Tusculum, Alabama, where his daughter Antoinette Wardlaw lived with her husband on a "very secluded place." He noted that the temperature at noon was 92 degrees

with “no wind at all—could not be induced to live in such a climate.”<sup>22</sup>

Parsons learned what crops would grow by traveling throughout Southern California. In 1872, he learned from Captain Henry James Johnson that the steamship *Orizaba* laded 5,000 boxes of oranges per month from Los Angeles. Shortly afterwards, he visited Anaheim, Santa Ana, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Santa Barbara. He noted that “Mr. Russell started a nursery at Riverside in the spring of ’72 and has a fine lot of trees of different varieties and is prepared to fill orders for all kinds of trees—has 13,000 orange trees 2 years old last spring—offers to deliver 1,000 trees next spring at San Diego for 50 cents.” He admired Hollister Ranch in Santa Barbara where “we saw an almond orchard of 25,000 trees” and remarked that Santa Paula had “more land that will produce a crop annually without irrigating it than I



*Josephine Parsons Walker Faatz (ca. 1846-1923) moved with her husband, Thomas Walker, from Mankato to National City in early 1868 after a serious illness. She raised money for a variety of charitable causes and was an active member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Private collection.*



*Thomas Walker (ca. 1842-ca. 1910) worked with Parsons to develop a farm and orchard in National City. He and his wife, Josephine, took frequent excursions to places such as Julian, Pasadena, Santa Barbara, San Jose, San Francisco, and Yosemite. Private collection.*

have seen before in the southern part of the state, and more timber also, and on land that is good for cultivation.”<sup>23</sup>

He also participated in activities organized by the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, a fraternal organization for American farmers founded after the Civil War. The group worked to protect the interests of farmers and farming communities, fighting railroad monopolies and pushing for rural mail deliveries. A chapter was organized in National City in 1874, with Frank Kimball as Master. Parsons mentioned lectures at Grange Hall and, in 1889, went with “a delegation of National Grangers...to the Mexican line and also to Sweetwater Dam.”<sup>24</sup>

By the 1880s, Parsons and his son-in-law Walker had developed a successful orchard and fields that produced apples, oranges, peaches, apricots, barley, corn and strawberries, among other crops. In 1879 he



*Parsons' house and barn with rows of beets in the foreground. The spire of the First Congregational Church, at that time located at 8th Street and A Avenue, can be seen in the background. Private collection.*

reported, "I have received \$5.38 for apricots sold from one tree" after paying Mr. Sheldon a 25 percent commission for marketing them. In October 1881, they picked 1,300 pounds of apples and 25 pounds of pears. They experimented with twenty-two guava trees and several thousand olive cuttings. In 1886, Parsons noted that "vegetation is growing rapidly—the whole face of the country, as far as can be seen, is clothed in a beautiful garb of green."<sup>25</sup>

The development of a "fruit growing community" attracted considerable investment. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* observed: "The subdividing of many of the old Spanish grants and the cultivation of the rich soil has been accompanied by planting numerous large orchards and vineyards, which have abundantly repaid investments."<sup>26</sup> Over eight hundred people attended the county fair in 1880, hosted by National City. Its success led to an annual springtime Citrus Fair, first organized by the National Grange in 1881. Parsons described it as "a large and splendid exhibition of citrus fruit, as also other fruits, raisins, etc., and the fair was in all respects a success."<sup>27</sup>

Transportation, however, would be the most crucial factor in the successful development of National City. Kimball and his brothers knew that they had to attract a transcontinental railroad in order to develop a commercial port. To that end, they offered land and money to General M. C. Hunter, a backer of the Memphis, El Paso & Pacific Railway Company, who visited in 1869. When that company went bankrupt in 1870, they turned to Colonel Thomas Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, at that time one of the largest corporations in the world. He proposed to bring the Texas & Pacific Railroad to the Pacific and sought a suitable site for a terminus. But this railroad never reached California. Next, Kimball tried to attract the interest of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. In 1879, he went to Boston to persuade the company's president, Thomas Nickerson, to build to National City. The deal, which was finalized in 1880, required a land subsidy of 16,000 acres from the Kimballs. In October, the California Southern Railroad was chartered for the purpose of constructing a line from National City





*In 1869, Parsons helped to establish the first church in National City, the Congregational Church. Meetings were held in his home until 1882 when a church was built on property donated by Parsons at 8th Street and A Avenue. The organ installed in this church in 1888 is the oldest in the county. The church moved to a new building at 16th Street and Highland Avenue in 1947. Courtesy of the National City Public Library, Morgan Local History Room.*

through San Diego to San Bernardino. Parsons noted the arrival of engineers, contractors, "lumber and timbers for R.R. Co," steel rails and coal. Schooners and steamships from Britain, Canada, Belgium, and the Netherlands arrived with steel rails and coal. He thought that "all the improvements being made present a business-like appearance."<sup>28</sup>

In the early 1880s, Parsons began to improve his properties. In 1881, he sold his remaining properties in Mankato to his son, La Rue, for cash. The



*In January 1882, Parsons built a new home at 11th Street and E Avenue at a cost of \$1,000. He wrote that the balustrade "improves the looks of it very much." Private collection.*



*Parsons' home viewed from a distance, n.d. ©SDHS #10772.*

following year, he sold one lot in National City for \$1,000 and used the money to build a new house on 11th Street and E Avenue. He hired Messrs. Brown & Arnold to build a two-story Victorian with two fireplaces, a cellar, and hot and cold running water, and an ornamental balustrade. Doors and windows arrived via steamship from San Francisco. He deeded two lots next door to his farmhouse on 8th Street to the Congregational Church which he and other early settlers had founded in 1869. The church was dedicated on December 3, 1882. He also encouraged his daughter Harriett to exchange her land on the Sweetwater for a house and two lots in National City.<sup>29</sup>

In 1884, trains began to run between National City and San Bernardino. At the end of 1885, the first transcontinental train left for the East. *The San Diego Union* speculated that the coming of the Santa Fe Railroad might start "a period of moderate expansion."<sup>30</sup> In fact, it attracted thousands of new residents and created an unprecedented economic boom.

The railroad brought friends and relatives to National City. In 1886, Dr. and Mrs. Lewis visited "the first *family* that have been here from our old home in Minnesota (Mankato) since we have lived here over 17 years." Michael Hund, formerly of Mankato, "bought a round trip ticket from Topeka to San Diego for \$10.00." That same year, his daughters Maria Antoinette and Latricia Jane, with her husband and children, moved to



*Parsons's daughter, Maria Antoinette Parsons Wardlaw (1828-?), moved to National City in 1886. Private collection.*



*Silenus DeWitt Parsons (1834-1916), eldest son of Theron and Lovina Parsons, in Mankato, Minnesota, n.d. He moved to National City in 1887 and remained there until his wife's death in 1903. He then moved to Hawaii to make his home with his son Charles F. Parsons, Judge of the Circuit Court of the fourth district in the territory. Private collection.*

National City from Danby, Vermont. Parsons built them a house, a barn, and farm buildings. In January 1887, George Marsh of Mankato arrived with an excursion party and expected to remain in California for four months. Parsons' son Silenus arrived via the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in May. At the end of the year, he wrote, "I think that we must have had quite an acquisition to our population in the last few days by the loads of trunks that have passed by and household goods."<sup>31</sup>

Visitors came from across the country. Parsons mentioned friends and acquaintances from Mankato and Vineland, New Jersey. He recorded the arrival of four hundred Civil War veterans who had been to San Francisco for the Grand Army Encampment in August 1886. He took note of visiting speakers such as "Mrs. Green, a temperance lecturer from Santa Cruz"; Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Waldron of the Women's Christian Temperance Union; and former

presidential candidate John Pierce St. John of Kansas "who is to give a Prohibition lecture Friday and Saturday of this week in San Diego." Edward Fabian, a "distinguished elocutionist and basso teacher of New York" stayed with Parsons and his family as did many other visitors associated with the Congregational Church.<sup>32</sup>



*In 1882, Josephine and Thomas Walker moved into a large Victorian house at the northwest corner of 8th Street and B Avenue. Theron Parsons stands, left, and Peleg Griffith stands, right. Josephine and Thomas appear in the second story bay window. Private collection.*





*Parsons's family gathered at Josephine Parsons Walker's newly decorated home, April 12, 1886. Josephine and Thomas Walker are seated, left, while Theron Parsons is seated right surrounded by his daughter Harriett Lamb and his granddaughters Cora, Minnie, and Grace. Private collection.*

Parsons sold some of his property to new arrivals eager for land. In 1886, he sold fifteen lots for between \$200 and \$600 each. The following year, he remarked on the sale of a five-acre property for \$5,000 to William Green Dickinson who managed the Land & Town Company, the real estate arm of the California Southern Railroad.<sup>33</sup> He wrote, "several sales of town lots and small tracts of 5 acres eligibly located are reported at advanced rates" and observed that "real estate agents are active, carrying customers about in different directions." He added, "I was enquired of this morning by a real estate agent if I had any lots to put into market for sale, remarking at the same time that they were troubled to find lots enough on the market to supply demand." At the end of 1887, Parsons sold one lot for \$900. He also raised rents on single rooms from \$10 to \$25 per month.<sup>34</sup>

Population growth led entrepreneurs to open new businesses and build additional houses. In April 1887, Ferris & Hill "opened a Drug Store on National Avenue." A San Francisco firm purchased property at the corner of National Avenue and 24th Street "for a large manufactory of wagons and carriages of all descriptions." J. A. Rice "built a fine two story building next to Mr. Field's for an office and a dwelling." Kimball "commenced ten brick two-story dwelling houses on the block east of his residence," later known as Brick Row. Contractor Elizur Steele, meanwhile, put up "a large two-story building on the back side of his block on National Avenue for furniture rooms for Chadburn's Furniture Store." In April 1888, Parsons walked down 8th Street to 3rd Avenue "where the Coronado Motor RR is being built, and was surprised to find so many buildings in that locality, back of the Steele Block. I should think that between 25 and 30 dwellings had been erected north of 9th Street in the last 6 or 8 months and of a good class of buildings."<sup>35</sup>

In June 1887 the National City & Otay Railroad Company began taking passengers from San Diego to National City, the Sweetwater Valley, Chula Vista, and Tijuana. Parsons described it as the "Moto Road" or "Moto Railway" and





*Parsons built this National City house for his daughter and son-in-law, Latricia Jane and Peleg Griffith. Private collection.*

wrote that it carried 550 passengers on the day after its grand opening. He went with his daughters and their families to San Diego and bought a pair of shoes at Wright's Shoe Store before going to Coronado to see the new hotel and the ostrich farm. A few days later, he observed that "a picnic party from San Diego, two car loads this afternoon, went over to the picnic grounds on the Sweetwater." The railroad also brought San Diegans to National City for the first service in the newly built St. Matthew's Episcopal Church (1887). Parsons wrote, "there was a large congregation—from 75 to 100 persons came out from San Diego on the cars."<sup>36</sup>

The railroad made possible the construction of Sweetwater Dam, completed in 1888. On New Year's Day, 1889, the Parsons family and friends "went up to the Sweetwater Dam and stayed until 4 o'clock—had our lunch on the south side of the reservoir where we witnessed the *eclipse* and spent the day very pleasantly. There were several small parties scattered about us, that appeared to enjoy themselves." On another occasion, he watched water "rushing through the waste gates, several feet deep, tumbling and foaming over the rocks for 80 or 90 feet—which makes a grand waterfall worth seeing."<sup>37</sup> In 1891, he observed the effects of development on the region: "Went up the Sweetwater with Thomas this afternoon...and was surprised to find so many improved places. It has changed the appearance of the valley wonderfully, so that it is now quite an attraction and you feel well paid for a drive through it."<sup>38</sup>

Parsons was optimistic about development. At eighty-six years old, he had seen his share of "booms" and "busts" and remained untroubled by the vicissitudes of the railroad. By 1888, the Santa Fe had completed a line from San Bernardino to Los Angeles and had begun moving its terminus and machine shops out of National City. As one historian noted, "the Santa Fe Railroad realized that it had made a mistake betting on San Diego; the future of southern California lay in the city of Los Angeles and the port of San Pedro."<sup>39</sup> Parsons responded by moving his rental houses from the waterfront to his subdivision at E Avenue between 8th

and 10th Streets. He noted with dismay the falling prices of agricultural products: "Peleg took 1,300 limes to San Diego and could only get 40 cents for the *lot*." But he continued to be hopeful about the future of the region. In 1890, he "rode out to Chula Vista" and remarked, "It has been built up and improved wonderfully in the last 3 years."<sup>40</sup>

Parsons continued to observe the progress made in transportation and technology. In 1891, he and family members rode on the newly established cable car line from L Street to a park and pavilion overlooking Mission Valley, later known as Mission Cliff Gardens. They "called at the cable car works to see the machinery and at the Chamber of Commerce where we found fine displays of the products of San Diego county." He looked forward to the opening of a match factory in National City, hoping to be soon "supplied with home production of that article." He also mentioned that the city had raised a \$200,000 subsidy for "an *iron and steel* manufactory" established by Charles Eames in Point Loma.<sup>41</sup>

Others were not hopeful about San Diego's future. E. W. Scripps described the city as "a busted, broken-down boom town...probably more difficult of access than any other spot in the whole country."<sup>42</sup> Many newcomers who had gambled on a transcontinental railroad left town in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Parsons mentioned that "Miss Ida Murry, who had been living at Doctor Risdon's for a year or more past, left this morning for her former home in Vermont." He also complained that the Handley brothers started back to Minnesota after a visit of only a few days, "the consumptive discouraged in not finding *immediate* relief from his disease in coming here." He remarked on the lack of public spirit, writing on July 4, 1892: "There was no public celebration at National City. Some of our citizens went to Point Loma and other places of interest."<sup>43</sup>

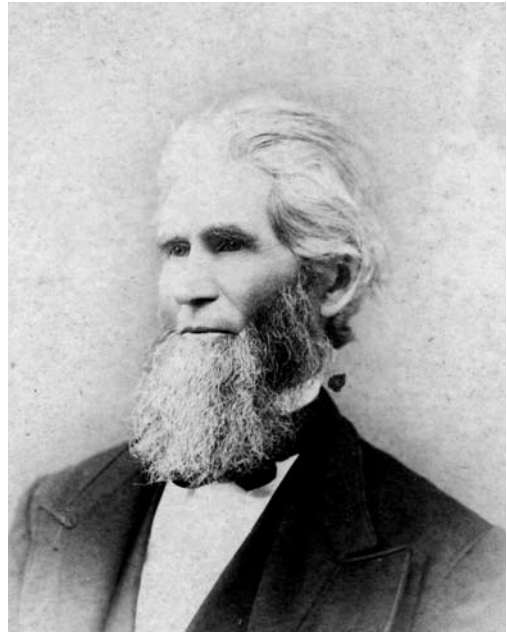
As Parsons approached the end of his life, he recorded the passing of other early settlers. In July 1891, he wrote "Mr. Moses Norris (aged 74 years) died this afternoon. He was an old settler and well respected." Orlando S. Chapin, a prominent nurseryman in Poway, died in February 1892. Gail Borden, who settled in National City in 1868, died the following month at the age of seventy-seven. In June: "Captain Amos Crane was found dead in his bed this morning—age



*Theron's granddaughters: Josephine (ca. 1874-1888), Ethel Lydia (1881-1958), and Winifred Griffith (1872-1957). Private collection.*

87 ½ years...he was an old settler, came here in 1868—had been a sea captain and was a man of general intelligence.” In July, Parsons described the passage of the railway promoter J. S. Gordon, aged 59 years: “Mr. Gordon was an old settler—came to San Diego in 1870, and for several years past resided at National City.” In August: “Doctor Lewis Post died in his 97th year—was an old settler.”<sup>44</sup>

Parsons died on September 26, 1893, at the age of eighty-eight. Like many of his contemporaries, he had taken advantage of the investment opportunities offered by the forced resettlement of Native Americans and the U.S.-Mexican War. He combined strong religious convictions with a belief in individual liberty and progress. He also worked for social justice, endorsing the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and the prohibition of alcohol. He is remembered as one of the founders of the First Congregational Church in National City. He also joins the ranks of San Diego’s early investors and entrepreneurs.<sup>45</sup>



Theron Parsons at the end of his life, ca. 1890. Private collection.

## NOTES

1. Theron Parsons, Diary, January 16, 1869, Huntington Library, HM 1556, vol. 2. The Ranchó de la Nación, a 26,631-acre Mexican Land grant, was acquired by a British merchant, Don Juan (John) Forster from his brother-in-law Governor Pío Pico in 1845. From 1795 to 1845, it had been known as El Rancho del Rey and used by soldiers from San Diego’s Presidio to graze horses and cattle. In 1856, Forster sold the rancho to two San Francisco bankers, Francois Louis Pioche and J. B. Bayerque. They, in turn, sold it to Frank Kimball and his brothers on June 16, 1868. Cecil C. Moyer, *Historic Ranchos of San Diego* (San Diego: Union-Tribune Publishing Co., 1969), 90-91. For information, see Leslie Trook, *National City: Kimball’s Dream* (National City: National City Chamber of Commerce and the City of National City, 1992); Irene L. Phillips, *El Rancho de la Nación* (National City: South Bay Press, 1959) and *National City: Pioneer Town* (National City: South Bay Press, 1960); Francis X. King, “Frank A. Kimball: Pioneer of National City,” master’s thesis, San Diego State University, 1950.

2. Parsons’ eighteen pocket-size appointment diaries, written between 1854 and 1892, are preserved in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Parsons wrote in pencil and occasionally used one diary to record the events of two or three years. He sewed together two books that included information about the years 1854 to 1866. There are no diaries for the years 1883-1885. Several diaries contain newspaper clippings, names and addresses, and records of financial contributions to social and religious causes. He also described the activities of many National City families, including the Kimballs, the Copelands, the Vaughans, and the Steeles. Spelling has been modernized and abbreviations extended.



## *A National City Investor: Theron Parsons (1805-1893)*

3. *History of San Bernardino County, California, with Illustrations...Including Biographical Sketches* (San Francisco: Wallace W. Elliott & Co., Publishers, 1883). He published *Thursday's Post* (1826-28) and the *Censor* (1828). J. H. French, *The Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Syracuse: R. Pearsall Smith, 1860), 352; Marjorie Haskin Berry, "History of the Town of Adams," *Jefferson County Journal*, August 10, 1955.
4. The names of their children are written in the back of Lovina Collins Parsons's book of poetry. They differ slightly from the names listed in the *Parsons Family*. Collection of Marjorie McClain Reeves, Rancho Santa Fe. See also Henry Parsons, *Parsons Family: Descendants of Cornet Joseph Parsons* (New York: Frank Allaben Genealogical Company, 1912), 298.
5. Charles A. Partridge, *History of Lake County* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co., 1992); Elija M. Haines, *Historical and Statistical Sketches of Lake County, State of Illinois*, (Waukegan: Gage's Print, 1852); *Little Fort Porcupine and Democratic Banner*, March 10, 1846. Parsons and his brother, Timothy Edward Parsons (1802-49), arrived in Chicago in 1832. His brother located near Downer's Grove in DuPage County but Theron traveled north to look for land, staking a claim just outside the boundary of Lake County in 1833. He was listed with Captain Daniel Wright, Hiram Kennicott, and William Cooley as one of the first settlers of Vernon township. Half Day village derived its name from a Native American settlement on that site, the home of Chief Hafda of the Potawatamie tribe. Parsons, *Parsons Family*, 297.
6. Cynthia Parsons and her sons met Theron and his family on their arrival in 1868. The latter wrote: "...started for Santa Clara at 8 ½ by rail, arrived at Sister Cynthia's at 11 o'clock a.m. and was kindly and very affectionately received by all of our connections. Walked out to the farm and saw Francis, Theodore, and George and wife and was cordially and affectionately received...In the evening Augustus and wife came in and spent a short time." Parsons, *Diary*, December 11, 1868; Parsons, *Parsons Family*, 297. Theodore L. Parsons and his wife Anna moved to San Diego from Santa Clara in July 1880. Parsons, *Diary*, July 30, 1880, vol. 9.
7. Other Parsons relatives also moved to California. Erastus Parsons (1822-92) arrived around 1852 and worked as a miner in various places, the last in Shasta County, near Redding, where he died. In 1852, William Fiske Parsons (1820-52) was drowned off the coast of California. Parsons, *Parsons Family*, 237, 290, 297.
8. Parsons, *Diary*, May 30, 1854, and passim, vol. 1.
9. For more information, see Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988); Isaac V. D. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863* (1864; New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1975); and Douglas O. Linder, "The Dakota Conflict Trials," *Famous American Trials* (1999) [http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/dakota/Dak\\_account.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/dakota/Dak_account.html) (accessed April 4, 2008).
10. Peleg Griffith (1836-1918) was the son of Hiram Griffith (1800-1833) and Betsey Jacobs Griffith (1798-1884) of Danby, Vermont. He panned for gold in California in 1859; worked a farm in Amador County with his brother John Marcellus Griffith in 1860; fought in the American Civil War; ran an eating house in Vineland, New Jersey, in 1867; worked as a retail dry goods merchant in Mount Tabor, Vermont, in 1870; and moved to National City, California, with his wife Latricia Jane Parsons Griffith in 1886. He and his wife had five children: Elva J. (ca. 1864-64), Winifred Parsons Griffith McClain (1872-1957), Josephine Griffith (1874-1888), Theron Parsons Griffith (1869-1965), and Ethel Lydia Griffith Bailey (1881-1958).
11. Parsons, *Diary*, September 28, 1867, vol. 2.
12. Parsons, *Diary*, November 28-30, 1867, vol. 2; "Portia Gage Tries to Vote in Vineland, 1868," *New Jersey Women's History*, [http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njwomenshistory/Period\\_3/portiagage.htm](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njwomenshistory/Period_3/portiagage.htm) (accessed November 21, 2007); "Jersey Women Voted in 1776: Used Ballot Till 1807, When Democrats Abolished It, H. B. Blackwell Says," *New York Times*, March 7, 1909. Parsons' daughter Latricia Jane and her husband Peleg Griffith stayed in Vineland to run an "eating house" before moving to Vermont. In 1882, Parsons received "a beautiful photograph, cabinet-size likeness of John Gage and wife and their sons and their wives and children, a beautiful picture of an interesting family group which I shall praise highly—many, very many thanks to the generous donor," Asahel Gage of Chicago. He also noted "the death of John Gage of Vineland, N.J. (an old friend 60-odd years acquaintance) aged 88 years and 5 months." Parsons, *Diary*, January 21, 1882, vol. 11; January 8, 1891, vol. 17. In the back of his 1880 diary, Parsons kept a newspaper clipping of a sermon preached by Rev. Robert Collyer, "Tribute to Lucretia Mott," *New York Weekly Tribune*, November 24, 1880.
13. Peleg Griffith to Jane Parsons, [December 1860], collection of Marjorie McClain Reeves. In the

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back of diary for 1875-76, he set down "My Religious Belief": "1st God is one in essence and in person, in whom there is a distinct and essential Trinity, called in the word the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus Christ is God, and the only object of worship. 2nd In order to be saved, man must 'repent of his sins, and believe in the 'Lord Jesus Christ' and strive to obey his commandments— looking to Him alone for strength and assistance, and acknowledging that all life and salvation are from him.' 3rd 'The Sacred of Scriptures' are 'not only the revelation of the Lord's will, and the history of his dealings with men, but also contain the infinite treasures of His wisdom, and should be taken as the rule and guide of our life.'" Parsons, Diary, vol. 6.

14. Parsons, Diary, April 6, 1868, vol. 2.

15. Parsons, Diary, November 9-December 12, 1868, vol. 2.

16. Parsons, Diary, December 22-25, 1868, vol. 2; Richard F. Pourade, *The History of San Diego*, chap. 2, passim. The name of Rancho Tía Juana was derived from a Kumeyaay word, *Tihuan*. Early sources refer to it as Tía Juana, Tía Juan, Tijuán, Tehuan, and more recently, Tijuana. Antonio Padilla Corona, "The Rancho Tía Juana (Tijuana) Grant," *The Journal of San Diego History* (hereafter *JSDH*) 50, nos. 1-2 (2004), 31.

17. A year later, he sold the contract for land in Horton's Addition for \$100. Parsons, Diary, January 12, 1869; February 8, 1869; notes at the end of volume 2; December 15, 1869, vol. 2; 1889, notes at the end of volume 15. Frank Kimball noted in his diary: "Received of Mr. Parsons \$1,000 as payment on ten acre lots 16, 15, 14 & 13 in qr. Sec. 154, price of the 4 \$1,000. Also No. 8 in sec. 153, \$300. Also block \$200. Balance of \$1,490 to \$1,500 to be paid in 4 equal annual payments." Frank A. Kimball, Diary, February 8, 1869, Kimball Family Collection, Morgan Local History Room, National City Public Library.

18. For information on the border, see Charles W. Hughes, "'La Mojonesa' and the Making of California's U.S.-Mexico Boundary Line, 1849-1851," *JSDH* 53, no. 3 (2007): 126-47.

19. Parsons, Diary, January 10, 1869, vol. 2; October 19, December 31, 1870, vol. 3; January 8, January 26, 1871, vol. 3; April 18, April 21, 1871, vol. 3; June 24, September 16, 1879, vol. 8; August 20, 1881, vol. 10; February 3, April 12, 1882, vol. 11; May 24, September 24, December 8, 1887, vol. 13; February 4, 1890, vol. 16; October 1, 1891, vol. 17.

20. Parsons, Diary, March 30, April 16, April 23, 1886, vol. 12; November 28, 1879; December 19, 1887, vol. 13; "Race Prejudice in Georgia," *Evening Post*, August 4, 1887.

21. Parsons, Diary, February, March 9, March 17, 1869, vol. 2; August 16, 1873, vol. 4.

22. Parsons, Diary, May 21, 1872, vol. 3; June 22, 1875, vol. 6. He took several trips east between 1872 and 1875 to visit family in Rochester, New York; Mount Holyoke and Northampton, Massachusetts; Danby, Vermont; and Mankato, Minnesota.

23. Parsons Diary, August 31, October 13, October 17, 1874, vol. 5.

24. Charles P. Gilliam, "A Short History of the Orders of Patrons of Husbandry: The National Grange," [http://www.geocities.com/cannongrange/cannon\\_nationalhistory.html](http://www.geocities.com/cannongrange/cannon_nationalhistory.html) (accessed November 26, 2007); Irene Phillips, "National City in Review," *JSDH* 8, no. 3 (1962): 31-43; Parsons, Diary, January 16, 1875, vol. 6; July 24, 1881, vol. 10; May 28, 1882, vol. 11; December 3, 1889, vol. 15. Grange Hall should not be confused with the Granger Music Hall built by Ralph Granger in the 1890s.

25. Parsons, Diary, 1878-79, end of volume; October 17-22, 1881, vol. 10; March 16, 1887, vol. 13; January 28, 1886, vol. 12; February 21, 1888, vol. 14. In 1881, he gave his "assessment of real and personal property to the *Union*, amounting to \$6,600.55." Parsons Diary, March 23, 1881, vol. 10.

26. "San Diego: A Condensed and Meaty Sketch of the City and County," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1885.

27. Parsons, Diary, September 22, 1880, vol. 9; March 10, 1881, vol. 10. In 1886, "the display of citrus fruit was larger than usual and of a better quality, but there was not as many present as at previous exhibitions held here." Parsons, Diary, March 13, 1886, vol. 12.

28. Parsons, Diary, June 30, September 18, 1869, vol. 2; August 8-9, 1877, vol. 7; November 8, 1879, vol. 8; September 27, 1880, vol. 9; April 16, 1881, vol. 10; June 29, 1881, vol. 10; Franklyn Hoyt, "San Diego's First Railroad: The California Southern," *The Pacific Historical Review* 23, no. 2 (1954), 137. In the back of his diary for 1880, Parsons kept a slip of paper in his hand that read: "Names of the men who have agreed to build a rail road from bay of San Diego to connect with the Atlantic & Pacific road in California: Thomas Nickerson, Kidder, Peabody & Co., B. P. Cheney, Geo. B. Wilbur, and Lucius G. Pratt."

29. Parsons, Diary, August 11, 1881; January 9, January 11-February 28, May 11, August 12, 17, 28, December 3, 1882, vol. 11. In 1869, Parsons held a meeting at his house "for the purpose of organizing an Independent Congregational church, which was effected with a membership of 11 persons." Parsons Diary, November 20, 1869, vol. 2. In 1887, he wrote, "Mr. Andrews, of Oklahoma, commenced setting up the church organ," referring to a pipe organ used by the Congregational Church. He added that he had donated \$25 towards its purchase. Parsons Diary, March 7-8, 1887, vol. 13; Claire Goldsmith, "A Venerable Pipe Organ, *JSDH* 9, no. 2 (1963): 26-27.
30. Hoyt, "San Diego's First Railroad," 144.
31. Parsons, Diary, January 24, April 12, August 25-October 8, November 15, 1886, vol. 12; January 11, May 16, 1887, vol. 13. Silenus DeWitt Parsons married Frances (Fanny) Howell White on December 28, 1869. He died on January 15, 1916, in Hilo, Hawaii, and was buried at Homelani Memorial Park, Hilo, Hawaii. Thanks to Gary Parsons for this information.
32. Parsons, Diary, June 21, August 18-19, 1886, vol. 12; March 24-25, September 29, 1887, vol. 13; December 6, 1890. Josephine Walker attended three-day meetings of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1887 (San Diego) and 1891 (Escondido). Parsons, Diary, September 21, 1887, vol. 13; April 28, 1891, vol. 17.
33. Dickinson built an eighteen-room Queen Anne home on the site, now known as the Dickinson-Boal Mansion (1887) at 1433 E 24th St., National City.
34. Parsons, Diary, March 26, June 3-4, December 7, and end of diary 1887, vol. 13; August 7, 1888, vol. 14.
35. Parsons, Diary, April 12, June 1, 7, September 26, December 5, 1887, vol. 13; April 7, 1888, vol. 14.
36. Parsons, Diary, June 16, 18, July 3, 1887, vol. 13.
37. Parsons, Diary, January 1, March 19, 1889, vol. 15.
38. Parsons, Diary, May 4, 1891, vol. 17.
39. Hoyt, "San Diego's First Railroad," 145.
40. Parsons, Diary, December 20, 1889, vol. 15; February 11, 1890, vol. 16.
41. He also described a new saw mill in National City. Parsons, Diary, April 10, 1890, vol. 16; April 1, June 25, July 9, 1891, vol. 17. See also Leland Fetzer, *San Diego County Place Names A to Z* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005), 68.
42. Albert Britt, *Ellen Browning Scripps: Journalist and Idealist* (Oxford: Scripps College, 1960), 66.
43. Parsons, Diary, March 28, 1889, vol. 15; December 23, October 18, 1890, vol. 16; July 4, 1892, vol. 18.
44. Parsons, Diary, July 22, 1891, vol. 17; February 12, June 13-14, July 29, August 21, 1892, vol. 18.
45. Parsons left behind two sons, four daughters, and nine grandchildren, many of whom continued to reside in National City. Josephine and Thomas Walker had a large Victorian house at the north-west corner of 8th Street and B Avenue, surrounded by palms and a rubber tree. Jane and Peleg lived in a modest farmhouse close to an orchard with orange and lime trees. Their son Theron worked as a buyer, and later executive, for the Marston Department Store; their daughters Winifred and Ethel married William McClain and Clinton J. Bailey, respectively. Winifred and William McClain are the great-grandparents of the author. Harriett Lamb and Antoinette Wardlaw also lived in National City. Harriett's daughter, Minnie, married Asa W. Vaughan in 1888. They had a new house on 3rd Avenue, east of National Avenue, and two children, Hazel and Russell.