

How did Cowan Heights get its name?



Cowan Heights has lost little of its rural charm with development. A favorite neighborhood in unincorporated North Tustin, it is now the site of many million dollar homes.

By [Juanita Lovret](#) | Orange County Register
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How did Cowan Heights get its name? Was Cowan a Tustin pioneer? How did he get all that acreage?

These are questions that newcomers to the area often ask after driving through rustic Cowan Heights with its fabulous views and beautiful homes.

Walter R. Cowan acquired nearly 1,000 acres northeast of Old Town Tustin in 1944 from George E. Marcy who had purchased 17,000 acres from James Irvine in 1910. Marcy, a Chicago meat packer, built ranch headquarters on Newport Avenue near the present Marcy Drive and

developed the property for both citrus orchards and grazing land. Cowan purchased his acreage intending to become a rancher.

After remodeling an old ranch bunkhouse, Cowan and his wife Elsie moved onto the property with the intent of building a house later. As they developed their plans for a huge home taking advantage of the panoramic view of the Santa Ana Valley and Catalina Island, Cowan came up with the idea that others would love the area as much as they did. Soon he was developing Cowan Heights Ranch, using his engineering background from 15 years with Union Oil Co. as well as president of the Natural Gasoline Co. which he founded in 1935.

Cowan eventually sold large sections of the land to developers who went on to plan and build many of the homes there now. Newspaper articles described the development as reflecting “the results of conservative planning by a man endowed with terrific business acumen who has attained his great success in a quiet, considerate and unassuming manner.”

Both the Cowans were second generation Californians. Mrs. Cowan had spent her growing-up years in Santa Ana, living with her grandfather, Rev. William Wilhite, a Southern Methodist minister. She had fond memories of picnicking in the hill area as a girl.

They built a 22-room house on a 16-acre site near the old bunkhouse. This home became a meeting place for the Kirpal Singh Organization composed of disciples of Kirpal Singh, head of a religious cult in India. He visited the Cowans during his journeys to the United States and they made several trips to India.

Eventually the Cowans became disenchanted with the group and switched their allegiance to Sai Baba, another religious movement in India. They founded the Sathya Sai Book Center of American, also known as the Tustin Book Center, in 1969, and continued their pilgrimages to India. While visiting India in 1971, Cowan allegedly died and was brought back to life by Sai Baba.

Two years later in 1973 Mr. Cowan died here with no revival. Elsie died in 1988. Both are buried at Fairhaven Cemetery.

Their house can no longer be seen in Cowan Heights, but the Tustin Book Center is still in business.

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