They made Chula Vista History!

John Rojas, Jr.

John Rojas, Jr.: a Chula Vista History Collector

John Rojas, Jr., pictured here in 1948, was always interested in cameras and photography.

Thousands of items from Chula Vista's past—including historic photographs, written documents and artifacts—have been preserved thanks to the energetic work of John Rojas, Jr.

John Rojas, Jr., was born on Jan. 6, 1930, in Los Angeles. His family lived in the Central Avenue and Florence districts of that city and he attended John C. Fremont High School. After graduation, John worked at two photographic stores in downtown Los Angeles. Coincidentally, both stores were owned and operated by men who were born in England.

These photo shops drew interesting customers from around the world. The customers and the stories they shared generated an interest in traveling in young Rojas. At the time he had never been more than 50 miles from his Los Angeles home. In addition, this early work experience also lead to a lifelong interest in photography and cameras.

John joined the U.S. Navy at the start of the Korean War in 1950. He served two years in the Naval Reserve before enlisting in the regular Navy. He served on several types of ships and traveled to many foreign countries during more than 20 years in the service.

This early 1990s portrait of the Rojas family includes John Rojas, Jr., and his wife, Mina, seated with their two grandchildren. Standing are the couple's children Anthony (far left), Nancy (middle) and Elizabeth (second from right) with their spouses.

When he was at home on leave, occasionally he would go into a book store that specialized in Spanish-language books published in Spain, Argentina, Chile and Mexico. It was there that he first met Guillermina "Mina" Patino Aguilar. While John and Mina had casually known each other for a while, they started dating after formally meeting at a birthday party for his cousin's daughter. In 1957 the couple married in Los Angeles.

They lived in San Diego and Long Beach before deciding to make Chula Vista their home in 1960.

While camera equipment changed over the years, John Rojas, Jr., continued to take and collect photographs all during his life.

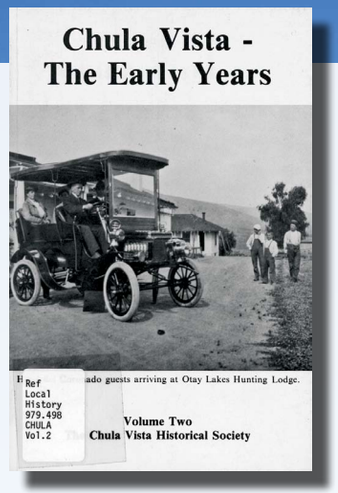
Although John's Navy career took him to numerous different ports around the world, Mina stayed in Chula Vista to raise their three children. The only exception was when the family moved temporarily to Guam when John was stationed there.

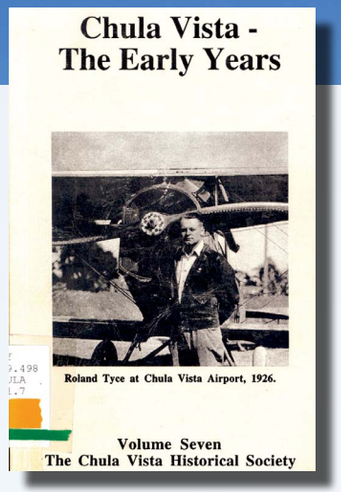
In 1972, John retired from active duty in the Navy and started a second career working for the U.S. Postal Service.

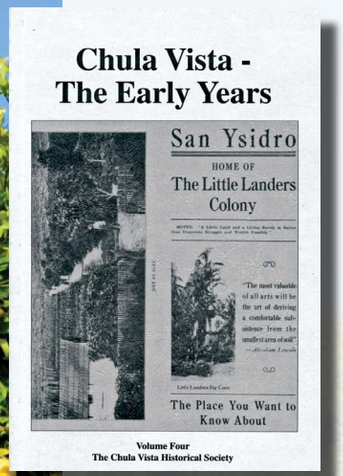
Around that time, a nationwide movement had started which sought to preserve historic sites and artifacts. Chula Vista was no exception as a number of residents began to take an interest in the city's history. Because of their efforts the city established an official Historic Sites Board that began to recognize a number of important homes and other buildings. A group of longtime residents organized an annual Heritage Days event during the summer to celebrate the city's past.

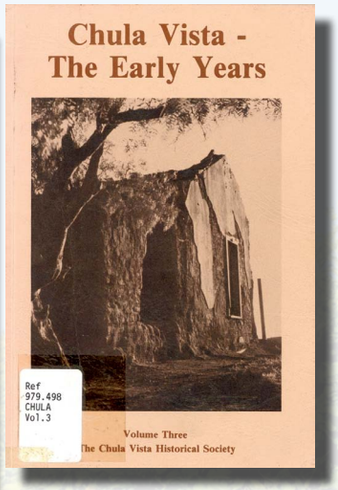
These activities sparked the interest of John Rojas, Jr. He joined a former Chula Vista resident, Ruby Peters Machado, to ask the community for old photographs and other memorabilia for the Chula Vista Library's local history room. The response from residents was overwhelming. Originally, more than 500 photographs were loaned and copied or donated to the library. Because many in the city were interested in viewing these historic photos, John organized an exhibit at the library.

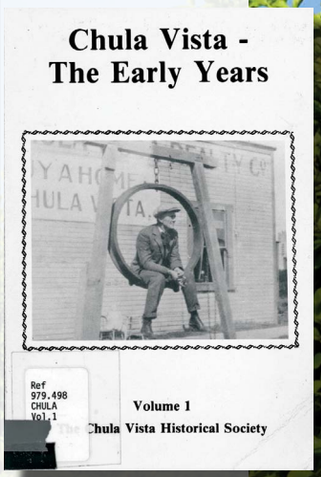
These efforts led to the organization of the Chula Vista Historical Society, founded by Rojas and Machado in 1981. In addition to collecting photographs, the Historical Society also asked residents for written histories, programs, letters, books and invitations.



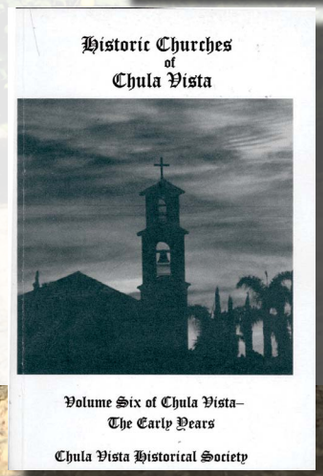








Through the efforts of John Rojas, Jr., the Chula Vista Historical Society published a series of books with stories about the city's early history.



This was only the beginning for John Rojas, Jr. After co-founding the Historical Society, he continued a tireless pursuit to collect photographs, artifacts, research documents and "all things Chula Vista." Some of those materials provided information for the Historical Society bulletin that John published for 10 years. He wrote stories about the early settlers who founded Chula Vista, the businesses that started on Third Avenue, and the schools, churches and clubs in the community. All of these contributed to the growth of the Historical Society membership.

During the 1980s this interest also led to John joining with other Chula Vista Historical Society members and historic home owners to take the first official inventory of the city's historic sites. They walked the streets writing down details and taking photographs of old houses and buildings. Following that inventory, John wrote a number of booklets about historic homes.

With a growing number of residents eager to learn more about the community's history, John began recording and writing longer local stories. Eventually that led to the publication of a series of seven Historical Society books called "Chula Vista—The Early Years." John wrote some of the articles and edited those written by other authors.

"Chula Vista—The Early Years" featured stories from around the South Bay area. Titles included the

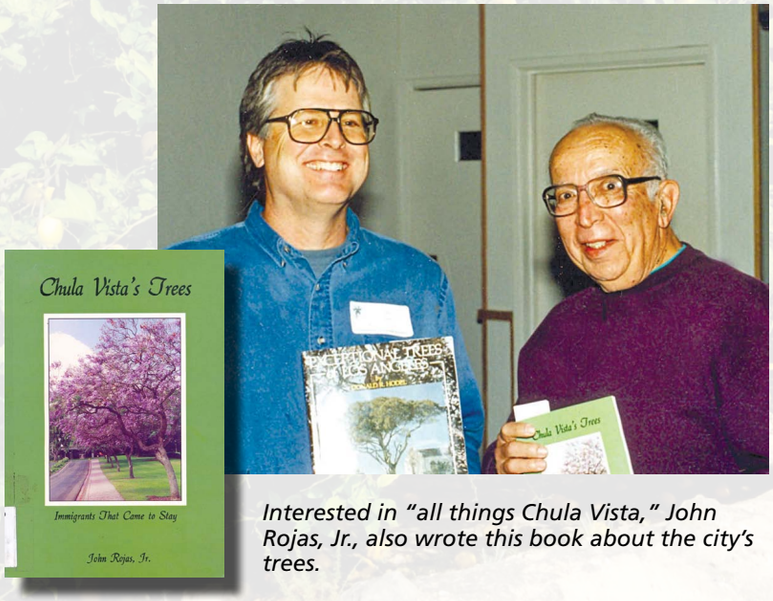
Led by John Rojas, Jr., the Historical Society opened the Chula Vista Heritage Museum on Third Avenue at the edge of Memorial Park.

Indians of Otay Mesa, adobe houses, the Cook (Lemon) Ranch, Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association, Sweetwater Dam, the Bonita School, historic church buildings, the Otay Watch Factory, the Japanese-American community in Chula Vista, Hercules Powder Company and Western Salt. The articles were illustrated by some of the historic photos that John continued to collect.

John also was instrumental in publishing "The Chula Vista Historical Society Presents Family, Friends and Homes". The book compiled dozens of family stories and photographs as well as items about historic sites, groups and organizations. Included in the profiles were stories about the families of John and his wife Mina. John also authored the book "Chula Vista's Trees: Immigrants that came to stay".

In 1993, John joined with other Chula Vista Historical Society members to open the Chula Vista Heritage Museum on Third Avenue. The society had successfully asked the city to use the small building at the edge of Memorial Park and received a $5,000 grant to prepare the first exhibit. Originally, the museum was staffed by Historical Society members.

In recognition of John's important contributions to preserving Chula Vista's history, in 1999 the Chula Vista Public Library's Local History room was named for him.



Interested in "all things Chula Vista," John Rojas, Jr., also wrote this book about the city's trees.

When the Chula Vista Heritage Museum opened in 1993, it displayed many of the old photographs that John Rojas, Jr., had collected.

On Jan. 22, 2000, John Rojas, Jr., died. After his death his wife, Mina, donated his vast collection of photographs and other historic items to the Chula Vista Library.

Fortunately for Chula Vista, the Los Angeles native left an important legacy to his adopted city. John Rojas, Jr.'s, lifelong interest in writing and photography inspired numerous books and vast collections documenting the city's history for future generations to enjoy.

The Heritage Museum also became the home to a number of old items that John Rojas, Jr., collected. One of those is this "smudge pot" that was used on the lemon ranches during cold nights.

This booklet is one of five produced cooperatively by the Altrusa Club of Chula Vista Inc. Foundation; the Chula Vista Elementary School District; and the Chula Vista Public Library. Altrusa initiated the project and its Foundation printed the brochures as the club's contribution to the celebration of the City of Chula Vista's Centennial in 2011. The project leads were Altrusa member Jeri Gulbransen Gustafsson, who researched and wrote the brochures; CVESD Assistant Superintendent John Nelson, who edited the copy and coordinated use of the booklets with the third grade local history curriculum; and CVPL Librarian Donna Golden, who provided research materials and photographs from the library's Local History Collection. The graphic design was completed by Komin Design.