



The Heritage Junction Dispatch

A Publication of the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society

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Calendar

Due to ongoing construction, Heritage Junction is closed until further notice.

Tuesday, February 1

Deadline for the March - April Dispatch

Check www.scvhistory.org for other upcoming events when Heritage Junction reopens.

President's Message

by Alan Pollack



As mentioned in the first part of this report, Gus LeBrun, Jack Pilcher, and Ed Brown came together on September 14, 1924, and they all met violent ends, two on that day and one shortly thereafter.

The Killings of Deputy Ed Brown and Gus LeBrun

Gus LeBrun's trouble-making days did not end with the Thibadeaux feud (described previously). In fact, his last stand occurred after being scorned by a woman. She was Nellie Bayless, an actress who went by the stage name Bonita Darling. Bayless hired handyman LeBrun to dig a well for her and then gave him other work as well at

her pigeon ranch in Tunnel Canyon, which he performed for almost one year. LeBrun mistook Nellie's attention for love. He claimed that she had promised to marry him if he would loan her \$200. However, after lending her the money, LeBrun said she turned him down and "gave him the horse laugh." He further stated in a letter written in September, 1924, that "he was going to end his middle age life, which he alleged she had ruined, and expressed a determination to fix her so she would never fool anyone else as she had him."

One week after LeBrun wrote his letter, on September 13, 1924, he and Bayless appeared before Newhall Judge P.C. Miller after LeBrun was charged with disturbing the peace. He claimed that Bayless owed him money, and she agreed to give him \$150 in exchange for an order prohibiting LeBrun

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President's Message

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from going on her property. Despite the money, this order did not sit well with LeBrun.

September 14, 1924, was the day that fate brought three men together. As reported by the Newhall Signal, that morning, LeBrun drove to the Bayless ranch in a jealous, probably drunken, rage, and was armed with a rifle and revolver. He confronted Bayless, telling her that he was going to kill her and himself. Bayless proceeded to faint at the thought of LeBrun's threat. When she revived, she asked for time to get something to eat and tried to persuade LeBrun to bring her some bread. He refused this but allowed her to go herself with the understanding that she would come right back and not go near any police officers, or he would kill them as well. Of note, other newspaper reports had LeBrun showing up at the Bayless home the night before with the threat to kill her. In these reports, she used the bread excuse to leave for the night and returned the next morning to find LeBrun on her front porch with a rifle across his knees.

Fearing for her life, Bayless did not heed LeBrun's warning. Instead, she went to Newhall and notified Judge Miller of LeBrun's threats. Miller sent Constable Jack Pilcher and Deputy Constable Ed Brown to arrest Gus LeBrun. The two officers arrived at the Bayless ranch at 9:30 am. According to the Newhall Signal, "LeBrun jumped from behind a bush and ordered them to throw up their hands, at the same time covering them with a rifle. Mr. Pilcher swung the car around, so the back was toward LeBrun just as the latter opened fire. The first shot came through the back seat and cut a top standard close to Mr. Pilcher's head. The officers threw themselves out of the car and returned the fire. Both Brown and Pilcher made their shots count, and after emptying his rifle, shooting part of the time from the ground, LeBrun cried, 'You've got me boys; I'll quit.' The officers had escaped injury so far and walked over to where LeBrun lay crumpled on the ground, his hands clasping his body. As they stooped to lift him up, he suddenly brought a large revolver from beneath his jacket and fired two shots, one at each officer. Quick as a flash both officers fired, and it was the finish for LeBrun. Brown clapped his hand to his side remarking, 'Well Jack, he got me that time.' Mr. Pilcher saw that Brown was hard hit, and hurried him to town, where Dr. McAdory gave him first aid. He was then removed to the General Hospital at Los Angeles, where an operation was performed, but the wound was found to be in vital parts, having gone entirely through the body, just below the ribs. He never rallied from the operation, and passed away about four o'clock, Sunday afternoon."

Gus LeBrun's Suicide Letter

LeBrun's body had several wounds, any of which could have been fatal. The letter he had written one-week prior, threatening Nellie Bayless' life, was found in his pocket. It was sealed and addressed "To the officers." Inside was a penciled sheet with the heading "My reason for committing this crime." The Los Angeles Times published part of the letter: "Dear folks: understand folks that I have been with Miss Darling for close to one year; have kept her in money, grub, fuel and everything else. Everything built on this place I put up by my own hands. She promised to marry me if I loaned her \$200. Since she got all she could off me, she turned me down. Her word was no good. She made me go in the hole at different places and has worn my life down to nothing. But, remember folks, that I loved her with all my heart, and I hated to part from her. She pretended to comply with my love but was false. I decided my life wasn't worth living and go through all I have. Don't make it hard for my poor mother. Bonita has kissed me, loved me; my life is a wreck, so goodbye to all my dearest friends. I will now end my middle-aged life, and all on account of Bonita Darling, but she will not stay on earth to give me the horse-laugh again." LeBrun was estimated to be between 36 and 40 years of age upon his death. Although Miss Bayless denied ever having a love interest in LeBrun, investigators found letters she wrote to "Dearest Jack" and others in which LeBrun signed himself "Your Hubby."

The funeral for Ed Brown was held on September 17, 1924, with one of the largest groups of mourners ever to attend at Grand View Cemetery in Glendale. Out of respect for Brown, businesses in Newhall were closed for the duration of the funeral. His obituary in the Newhall Signal stated, "Ed Brown was born in Missouri forty-four years ago and was one of a family of several brothers and sisters. About fourteen years ago, he with his wife came to Saugus from Nevada, where they have since lived, with the exception of one year spent on their ranch at McFarland. About two years ago, he was appointed deputy constable and at once made his mark as a brave, efficient and competent officer."

The Accidental Death of Constable Jack Pilcher

Two of the three men who met on September 14, 1924, were killed. But what of the third man? He survived that day, but his luck ran out the following year. On the afternoon of June 4, 1925, Constable Jack Pilcher, along with deputies Biddison and John P. Selzer, and accompanied by John Pilcher, Jr., went to the Gage Ranch in Bouquet Canyon to investigate the theft of some doors and windows from

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an unoccupied house. The house had been used by the Saugus Community Club for a barbeque a few nights before. The Newhall Signal reported that, upon entering the house, the officers noticed a large lizard running across the floor and disappearing underneath a wall-bed. Pilcher and Selzer gave chase for the lizard. As Pilcher was stooping over to find the lizard, a revolver fell out of Selzer's pocket and hit the floor. It discharged, sending a bullet through Pilcher's upper forehead, passing entirely through his head, and lodging in the ceiling above. Of note, the Los Angeles Times had a differing account, where the officers were sleeping overnight at the ranch house when the lizard woke them up from sleeping. In this account, Selzer got up out of bed and attempted to kill the lizard with a stick, when he dropped his revolver.

Deputy Biddison described what happened next: "I was standing by a window near where the boys were, looking out. I heard them talking about the lizard, and when I heard the shot, I thought they had shot at the lizard. I turned around just as Jack slumped down against my legs. I tried to catch him, but was not in time, and he fell. He lived an hour and ten minutes after the shot. I little thought that I would ever have to stand by and see Jack pass out." Selzer had just started his duties as a deputy three days before. The gun was given to him by Pilcher. Pilcher was laid to rest at Grand View Cemetery. At the time of Pilcher's death, he was carrying a revolver presented to him by other deputies in honor of his actions in the battle with Gus LeBrun the year before.

On June 27, 2012, the 40th anniversary of the local Sheriff's Station in Santa Clarita, Deputy Constable John Edward Brown was remembered and honored with a color guard and the unveiling of a plaque on the station's memorial wall. He is considered to be the first Santa Clarita Valley sheriff's deputy killed in the line of duty.

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Saugus Deputy Ed Brown Dies in Gun Battle, 9-14-1924.

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Another Prayer Gets Answered

by Paul McClure

The last person to see St Frances dam and live to tell about it was Ace Hopewell, a carpenter living in the construction camp at Powerhouse No. 1, who had crossed by the dam's east abutment sometime around 11:50 p.m. on March 12, 1928.

Driving alone in a motorcycle with sidecar, he should have been able to notice if anything significant was occurring, but he did not. About halfway across the reservoir, atop the wall of the dam, Hopewell stopped suddenly, sensing an unusual sound and shaking. He pulled over, but kept the engine running on his motorcycle, smoked a cigarette, and listened to strange crashing sounds. Then he continued up the canyon to Powerhouse No. 1 and later learned of the disaster he had so narrowly missed.

Dam keeper Tony Harnishfeger and his common-law wife, Leona Johnson, must have been alerted to something, because her fully clothed body was found wedged

between displaced blocks of the dam upstream of the dam keeper's cottage where she lived.

A 125-foot wall of water, moving at about 18 miles per hour, soon engulfed Powerhouse No. 2, demolishing the plant and killing the on-duty crew. Twenty miles further west, many Edison workers at their Blue Cut temporary camp were already in their sleeping tents when the water hit them. Of the 150 workers, only 66 survived.

For miles up and down the valley, isolated survivors were being rescued from trees, rooftops, and utility poles; tragically, once caught in the swirling waters, few had escaped. By 10

o'clock in the morning, the grim task of bringing the dead to makeshift morgues was assuming shocking proportions. Hastily commandeered farm trucks were making trip after trip to the lowlands for their gruesome freight.

There were many other surprising and tragic stories.



The only known photo of Tony Harnishfeger, with his family in 1927. The couple subsequently split up.

Dear Diary,

I [Leona Johnson] fell to my knees and said, "Heavenly Father, please Help me to meet the man of my dreams."

The men I've dated usually acted infatuated,
But they were always transient workers of lowly means.

I wanted to be whisked away from my job at the café,
To a home with children and a normal family life.

I envisioned a heartthrob with a well-paying job,
That allowed me to stay home and be a housewife.

Then the Lord showed He cared. He answered my prayer!

Tony ordered the pancake special and left a generous tip.

He asked to see me again, and I knew right then

That this was the beginning of my prayed-for courtship.

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Another Prayer Gets Answered

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At the end of my shift, Tony showed up with a gift.
We sat under a tree and poured out our lives to each other.
I learned that night, he worked for LA Power & Light.
When we kissed, sparks flew, and he became my lover.
But to start our life, he had to dodge an accusatory wife
Who constantly yelled at him for doing everything wrong.
Because he felt so deflated and continually berated,
He knew the time had come to say, "So long."
After one terrible standoff, his wife just took off.
She kept their girl but left behind their little boy.
So, in just a heartbeat, our family was complete.
I was in love and had never experienced such joy.
Every day Tony worked hard and earned high regard
For his duties as dam keeper and security guard.
He had the responsibilities of looking after the facilities
Of the magnificent St. Francis Dam and reservoir.
Our daily life has seemed like a heavenly dream,
And every night when I prayed, I thanked the Lord.
He'd rescued me from calamity with a wonderful family,
So, I decided to ask for something more.
I prayed to be blessed with one final request
That would see us through hard times or bad weather.
With a home now secure, I asked the Lord to ensure
That Tony and I would spend the rest of our lives together.

Leona Johnson

March 11, 1928

This poem is from the new book *Tragic Heroes of Los Angeles*
by SCV Historical Society member Paul McClure.

Still More UFOs in the SCV

by John Boston

More spooky happenings around here . . .

THE DEAD MAN'S METEOR

Bouquet Canyon is one of the Santa Clarita's longest-lived typographical errors. It was inaccurately translated in 1850, when federal cartographers started tromping around the valley, making right angles and naming things. A former French sailor, Francisco Chari, bought a huge chunk of property in the area and named his spread the Rancho Buque. It was half Spanish, half French for "Ship Ranch."

The cartographers saw all the flowers in the canyon, shrugged and took a wild guess that "Buque" meant "Bouquet." It didn't.

Santa Clarita was the site of one of if not THE largest range war in American history. The Castaic battle lasted about 40 years and took the lives of an estimated 27 men. One of the feudists was lynched in Bouquet Canyon, and for years the place was called either "Hangman's Canyon" or "Dead Man's Canyon."

That range war was still going on in 1901 when Bouquet/Texas Canyons were struck by a great fireball.



French representation of ball lightning, from 1901

I know. I know. People didn't dress like this in 1901 and certainly they didn't dress like this up Bouquet Canyon. BUT, had the cast of "It Came From Outer Space" been in the SCV when the meteor landed, this probably would have been their reaction...

The Los Angeles Times reported on the extraterrestrial August 7th strike, noting:

"...dazzled the residents of a large section of Southern California with its brilliancy and caused some of them to think the end of the world had come, fell to earth.

The exact spot where it alighted will perhaps never be known, as it appears to have exploded into atoms which were consumed by the intense heat engendered by its rapid flight through the terrestrial atmosphere, before reaching terra firma."

The Times reporters spent nine days and covered nearly 200 miles, trying to find some trace of the flying object. Their report went on:

All sorts of queer characters live in the lonely mountain region where the meteor fell. Some of these mountaineers are very superstitious, and the meteoric phenomenon filled them with awe. Of all the unique theories advanced as to the cause of the strange freak of nature, that of old Jack Temple is perhaps the most interesting.

When The Times' explorers reached the Temple ranch in Mint Cañon, they knew that they were not very far from the spot where the meteor fell. Temple said he saw a great ball of greenish white fire drop into Texas Cañon, just west of his place, with a terrific noise. He was surprised that anyone should come all the way from Los Angeles to learn what it was.

"Do you know what it was?" he was asked.

"You bet I do," was the laconic reply. "It was ol' man Rush's spirit come back to ha'nt the cañon, that's all. You know he was murdered over there. It's his spirit, all right."

"Did you go over to see whether it really was Rush's spirit, or is that just your guess?"

"No, I didn't go over to see. I didn't need to do that. I know; and I ain't looking for any spirits, even if they was friends and neighbors once."

Old man Rush lived the life of a recluse in Texas Cañon, and he was found dead in his cabin there a few months ago, with a bullet hole in his head. The Coroner pronounced it a case of suicide, but some of the mountaineers believe to this day that the old hermit was murdered. According to reports of residents on all sides, the big meteor fell at no very great distance from the old hermit's cabin, on a ridge of the Chicapolus Range, between Texas and Deadman's Cañons.

It was a pretty exciting story, filled with prose, metaphor and flowery descriptions. The reporters wrote of being presented with the choice of "rat juice" to drink. That was a well filled with dead rats. Wisely, they passed. They interviewed three vets, holed up in a canyon, who described the great explosion like canons from the Civil War. Another "character" thought it was a volcano and took off for a distant peak so as not to be inundated with lava.

Excellent travel piece on Santa Clarita in 1901. Not much on the meteor.

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John Boston Article

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DID ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS VISIT THE PIRU WILDERNESS AREA?

The ancient Tataviam/Alliklik peoples who have been in this valley since around 450 A.D. were said to visit a hidden Piru canyon because it was a good spot to see ball lightning.

For centuries, all around the world, there have been reports of this strange natural phenomenon called Ball Lightning. Theories abound as to what causes this spectacular event, but, so far, nothing has been proven.

A lightning bolt lasts less than a second. Ball lightning can last for more than a minute, plus, it's in the shape of a ball, ranging from the size of a BB to orbs yards in diameter. Reports have noted ball lightning can explode and leave a horrific sulfur smell. People have reported its having the ability to go through metal walls, without leaving a trace of damage, entry, or exit. Often, the event is accompanied by thunderstorms. Since 1960, there have been 10,000 witnessings of the phenomenon. Way back in 1638, in an English church, a floating orb of energy flew into the church at Widecombe-in-the-Moor. It was about 9 feet in diameter and split in half. It struck the church with a fury, nearly destroying the chapel and sending huge rocks crashing through walls. Four people were killed, 60 injured. The event was blamed on two men playing cards in a back pew during mass.

Out in Piru, from 1932-1934, archeologists Iral Alcock and Richard Van Valkenburg separately trekked into the Piru wilderness along Sespe Creek to explore three large caves and the old Indian gathering place, Huvung. Translated, Huvung means: The Place of Ball Lightning.

The Tataviam used the caves to store acorns, and a year's supply of fresh water from nearby Arabian Springs for times of drought. Reportedly, the Tataviam would huddle together during rare thunderstorms to see ball lightning and its magic dances.

No theory has advanced as to why the Indians watched the glowing, often slow-moving electrical orbs. Might be a primitive bar mitzvah ceremony, might be just fun to watch. No one knows.

John Boston has been named best newspaper columnist in America, several times. Read his Mr. SCV column in Friday's Signal and his Time Ranger SCV history column in Saturday's. DO go buy his books at johnbostonbooks.com.

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A view of most of the length of San Francisquito Creek, running southeast to the Valencia area of Santa Clarita. The Santa Clara River runs along the bottom of the picture, and the penstock of Power Plant #2 is visible toward the top. The St Francis Dam site is just above that.

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An aerial view of Castaic Lake on Nov 18, 2021, shows low water in the main reservoir due to the ongoing drought.