



The Heritage Junction Dispatch

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Calendar

Monday, August 3

Deadline for the September-October *Dispatch*

Check www.scvhistory.org for future events.

President's Message

by Alan Pollack



While we're on the subject of calamities, catastrophes, and disasters, let's talk about the great fire of August, 1962. The dry and flammable chapparal of the Southern

California mountains has long been the fuel for devastating summer and fall wildfires. 1962 was no exception. Less than a year previous, in November, 1961, the affluent neighborhoods of Bel-Air in the Santa Monica Mountains had gone up in flames, causing the destruction of 484 homes, including those of celebrities like Zsa Zsa Gabor and Burt Lancaster. After the Bel-Air conflagration, the city of Los Angeles passed new laws banning wood shingle roofs on new construction and strengthening brush-clearance mandates.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when a brush fire started near Placerita Canyon on August 28, 1962. The weather that day featured gusty afternoon winds and low humidity, with temperatures in the upper 90s. One of the first casualties of the fire was Gene Autry's Melody Ranch movie studio.

Ernie Hickson and Placeritos Ranch

The ranch was originally owned by Ernie Hickson, who started out as a set builder for Trem Carr's Monogram Pictures in Placerita Canyon. In the early 1930s, Hickson built a Western movie set for Carr on the present-day location of Disney's Golden Oak Ranch just east of Highway 14. Gene Autry was discovered in 1934 and starred in his second film "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" the next year on the Monogram lot. In 1936, Carr's lease on the property ran out and the studio had to be relocated. Hickson packed up all his Western

Continued on Page 2



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President's Message

Continued from page 1

set buildings and moved them one half mile down the road to the present-day location of Melody Ranch. By 1941, Hickson and Carr had mostly parted ways and the movie lot name was changed to Placeritos Ranch.

Many Westerns were filmed at the Placeritos Ranch by production companies such as Paramount, RKO, Republic, and Columbia. As of 1941, the ten-acre movie ranch featured a typical 1860's western street, a log cabin street and settlement, a Mexican street, an Indian compound, a country school house and playground, Mexican hacienda, relay post, barns and corrals, and a Calavera Trading Post "housing relics and curios pertinent to Old Pioneer Days commemorating first discovery of gold." Western stars who walked the streets of Monogram and Placeritos in its early days included Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter, Wild Bill Elliot, Noah Beery, Leo Carrillo, William Boyd, and even Autry himself. Hickson eventually bought up more property and expanded the studio to 110 acres.

Gene Autry and Melody Ranch

After the death of Hickson in 1952, Autry purchased the ranch and renamed it Melody Ranch, after a song and movie he had done in 1940. Melody Ranch in the 1950s was home to legendary Western television shows like "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp" and "Gunsmoke". The Western street at Melody was also the setting for an iconic showdown scene in the movie "High Noon". Over the years, Autry had amassed a large collection of Western artifacts, including Indian relics and rare guns (including a gun set which had belonged to the outlaw Billy the Kid). He had plans to build a Western museum in Placerita Canyon. The fire in 1962 destroyed those plans, but many years later, Autry was able to build his museum, The Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage, which debuted in 1988 in Griffith Park.

There were actually two blazes in the Santa Clarita Valley which were started on August 28, 1962. The first originated around noon just north of Castaic Junction in Hasley Canyon and headed southward. An hour later, Placerita Canyon was on fire spreading southeast over the San Gabriel Mountains into Sylmar.

Fire Destroys Melody Ranch

The financial losses at Melody Ranch were estimated to be around \$1 million. Autry was out of town on a business trip to Vancouver, B.C. at the time of the fire. The Los Angeles Times reported, "Gene and Ina Autry were sure of one thing Tuesday after flames destroyed most of their Melody Ranch and movie studio in Placerita Canyon. 'We're just so grateful,' said Mrs. Autry, 'that nobody was hurt.'" Several ranch hands

and 14 horses were able to escape the flames. Although loss of life was thankfully avoided, the same could not be said for damage to the property's buildings and sets. Continued Mrs. Autry, "There's no way of guessing how much is gone, but we know the Western street and a good deal else burned." Most tragically, the fire destroyed Autry's prized collection of antiques and Americana, including "collections of longhorns, steer-heads, guns and Indian lore. Also lost was a film wardrobe collection." Mrs. Autry further reported the loss of log cabin sets, a Spanish street, and a locomotive.

In the "Valley Times Today" newspaper, a reporter asked a local man for directions to Melody Ranch. The man replied, "Melody Ranch? Hell son, it ain't anymore." Pointing to dense smoke in the distance covering the sun, he continued, "That's where it used to be". When he reached the ruins of the ranch, the reporter caught up with Autry's horse trainer Jim Sprague and his wife Mabel. Sprague stated, "The whole main street is gone. All the museums. That fire came and in three minutes she was past us. The horses went nuts. They were running all over hell, kicking, fighting." Mrs. Sprague added, "I was trapped there between the house and barn. The fire just hit with a blast and turned me around. I couldn't get to the house. I never saw such wind". Mr. Sprague continued, "Wind and natural draft. The fire hit the first building and the whole roof just went whoof! And the whole building exploded". Sprague pointed out in the rubble where property belonging to actor Tom Mix had been kept. Other destroyed landmarks he noted included the location of Kitty's bar on "Gunsmoke", Doc Adam's steps, the Wyatt Earp building, the Tombstone Territory set, an old and unique printing press, and the wheel rim remains of the lot's original Concord stagecoaches.

Thankfully, some very important parts of Melody Ranch were spared from the fire, including Gene Autry's ranch house, a fireproof film vault containing all of Autry's movies and Annie Oakley films, and a fireproof building containing a valuable collection of old fire engines and antique cars. Autry's famous horse Champion was also a survivor. Sprague opened a corral door and said, "Here's Champion. Champion and all his buddies. There's little Champ. They're all safe." In summing up his feelings regarding the loss of the ranch, Sprague concluded, "I never felt so low in all my life as I do right now."

The Destruction Beyond Melody Ranch

Outside of Melody Ranch, three private homes were destroyed on Placerita Canyon Road, and five oil storage tanks were ignited. In total, 54 structures including movie sets were destroyed. Two miles north of Melody Ranch, nine

Continued on Page 3

President's Message

Continued from page 2

cabins owned by a private club at Saxonia Park were burned. Ashes from the fire drifted up to thirty miles away, and dense smoke darkened the skies over the San Fernando Valley. There was no loss of life reported.

By the morning of August 29, the fire had charred over 16,000 acres, with the Placerita fire burning within a 22-mile perimeter, and the Hasley Canyon fire within a 25-mile perimeter. In the Newhall Pass, near the intersection of Highways 99 and 6, the fire got within 10 feet of a dynamite storage dump with four magazines and a cap vault. Firefighters were ultimately able to save the Pass from a massive explosion. As the flames poured over the mountains into Sylmar, 770 patients had to be evacuated when Olive View Hospital and Sanitarium became engulfed in fire. The Valley Times described the fire, "When it reached the foothills, it turned from an aggressor into a monster, sending a wall of fiery smoke in front of it." Destroyed in the fire was a large infirmary and clinic building. All of the patients, including a large number of children with tuberculosis were safely evacuated to surrounding area hospitals. From Sylmar, the flames jumped over the Golden State Freeway (Highway 99 at that time) above the upper Van Norman Reservoir and headed towards some subdivisions and unpopulated areas of Granada Hills.

The Fires Contained

An army of 2000 firefighters were able to keep the Placerita and Hasley fires from merging with each other. At their closest point, the fires were only 3 1/2 miles apart. 17,200 acres of brush and forest had been burned. By August 30th, the fire had progressed into Towsley Canyon, one mile north of Oat Mountain. As to the origins of the Placerita fire, reports theorized three possibilities, spontaneous combustion from a ranch manure pile, from a rubbish heap, or by children. Possible arson was also suspected. The fires were mostly contained on August 31, except for some stubborn flames in the rugged hills of Towsley.

In the aftermath of the fire's devastation, employees at Melody Ranch expressed the extent of the irreplaceable losses. Said Ranch property master George MacKinnon, "What really hurts is that most of what burned here can never be replaced. The things that burned just don't exist anywhere else. Anybody that's ever watched western movies or western TV programs has seen sequences made here time and time again. Annie Oakley, Wyatt Earp, Hopalong Cassidy, Wild Bill Hickok, The Lone Ranger, Gunsmoke, Range Rider, Sheriff of Cochise, Death Valley Days and a lot of other popular TV shows were made out here as well as hundreds of western movies." Ranch manager John Brousseau sadly stated, "There won't be any more Dodge City's here."

Sources used for this article:

Monogram Ranch: Description and Filmography for 1939.
Compiled by Mary F. Brunner, Newhall Branch Librarian |
Edited by Lois Goddard and Catherine Greening Vol. III: Mining,
Industry, Agriculture | June 1940.

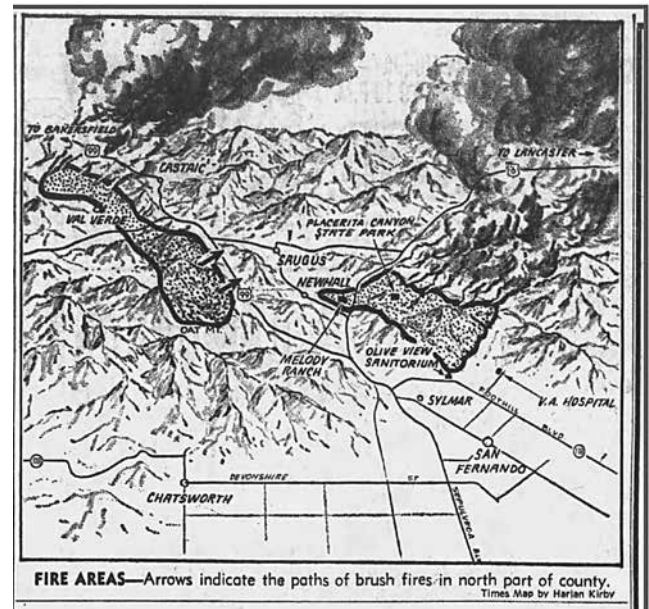
Los Angeles Times, August 29-31, 1962

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Ventura County Star-Free Press, August 29, 1962

Valley Times Today, San Fernando Valley, August 29-30, 1962

Santa Maria Times, August 29, 1962



The Annual Camulos Picnic of 1886

by Maria Christopher

The Del Valle annual picnic at Camulos was ALWAYS July 1, Don Ygnacio Del Valle's birthday. However, in 1886 things were different. According to a May 20, 1886, article in the Los Angeles Herald, under the headline, "Camulos. A Word Which Means Prosperity", the date was moved up. That year, "the picnic occurred earlier, and was given in honor of Mr. U. F. Del Valle, who has lately attained his majority."

Yes, even back then, turning 21 was a big thing, made even more significant by the fact that several of his siblings had not survived to reach that milestone. However, in reading the lengthy article in the Herald (about 34 inches of type), one might conclude there was more on the agenda for the weekend besides Ulpiano's birthday, either by what was said or not said. The event was also chronicled in Wallace Smith's, "This Land Was Ours".

The traveling party arrived in Newhall (by train) that Saturday from Los Angeles under the "guardianship" of Senator Reginaldo Del Valle, Ygnacio and Ysabel's oldest surviving son. Reginaldo, who then lived and had his offices in downtown Los Angeles, was in the last year of his tenure as a State Senator, after his initially being a representative in the State Assembly. However, a long political road lay ahead for Reginaldo, and the guest list may have also been planned to help build that future. By the time of the event, Ulpiano, the honoree, had graduated from Santa Clara college and was living with his brother in the city. However, he was headed for a career path change. It was intended that he would soon replace his half-brother, the poorly educated Juventino, as the ranch manager. (A 20-something Juventino and his new bride, Susanna, had moved with the Del Valle family from the Olvera Plaza to Camulos in 1861. Since then, he had taken the leading role in managing the ranch with Don Ygnacio, and was highly regarded in the agricultural community. He would continue to play a major role in successful Camulos Ranch operations until his death in 1919 but never shared ownership, because he was illegitimate).

Conveyances were awaiting the travelers. The 16 mile "trip to the rancho was made through fields of waving grain, under the shadow of grand mountains and across brawling brooks". The widow, Senora Ysabel, and the other members of the family warmly received them. The Herald article names about 38 persons who participated in the festivities over the next several days.



The highlight of the first evening was dinner under the vine-clad grape arbor at long tables groaning with food from the Rancho, and of course the famous Camulos brandy and wine. Afterward, they enjoyed music and dancing and retired to their evening accommodations both indoors, and outdoors on the wide verandas.

Sunday was devoted to an all-day picnic and "rodeo" a few miles up Piru canyon. In those days a rodeo meant the round-up and branding of young cattle. Ulpiano is described as taking the lead in the branding, and then the party returned to Camulos for another evening of music and dancing.

Throughout the article there were references to Reginaldo's "matrimonial prospects" and the attention paid to him by the many attractive young ladies. There was even a reference to the manner in which the "Senator enjoined that care be taken of a certain young lady on the return home." However, the young lady is never identified, and it would be 6 years until Reginaldo married a wealthy widow, Helen Caystile. The handsome Senator escaped Cupid's arrow that day.

On Monday morning, four of the participants, including the powerful Hon. Judge Eagan, departed. However, the rest of the party remained for another day of enjoying the ranch, entertainment by the "Camulos Minstrel Troupe", and another sumptuous dinner, where they drank to the health of their hosts in English and Spanish. They even included a toast to the Herald journal for covering the event.

However, nowhere in the article is there mention of the ongoing success of the novel "Ramona" or its author Helen Hunt Jackson, who had died the previous year without revealing the actual location of the fictitious Moreno Ranch. Perhaps this was not considered the proper forum for the issue of Native American land rights, given the origins of Rancho San Francisco and Camulos Ranch. However, the article ends with "As a footnote it may be remarked that the route for the S.P. branch as surveyed from Newhall through Camulos seems perfectly feasible and quite easy and inexpensive to build."

This was a portent of the next decade, as the arrival of the railroad, along with the advocacy of preservationist and entrepreneur Charles Lummis, and the San Francisco Chronicle journalist Edwards Roberts, resulted in Camulos becoming accepted as the "Home of Ramona"

William S. Hart's Ties to Westport, Connecticut

by Margi Bertram

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In 1905, while still working as a detective, William S. Hart learned a new Western production was underway: *The Squaw Man*. Hart was given a bit. However, he quickly became discouraged after the rehearsals started, as the playwright did not have any

knowledge of the West. According to Hart, "the chaps they had furnished for us all to wear were made out of old rugs and doormats ... the legs were fur all the way around like Eskimo's pants!" With Hart's first-hand experience on the frontier during his childhood in the Midwest, he was immediately placed in charge of the props and costumes for the production.

The Squaw Man opened in Manhattan in October, 1905, to widespread acclaim. Critics and reviews praised Hart's performance, and the production was such a hit, it ran continuously until May, 1907. For the first time in his career, Hart started making money from his work, and by 1906, he had saved enough to purchase a house for himself, his sister Mary Ellen, and their mother in Westport, Connecticut.

"I had nine hundred dollars in cash, and I made up my mind it was now, or never, for a home. John Norval Marchand and Walter Gallaway, two artist friends of mine, had bought homes at Westport, Connecticut. I did likewise. I paid eight hundred dollars cash on an eighteen-hundred-dollar place, then borrowed six hundred from the agent who sold the place to me (Joe Hyatt is the agent's name). I overhauled the house, made it livable, and we moved in. For the first time in my life I could sit under a tree on my own property."¹

The house, constructed in 1820, still stands today.

Underscoring Hart's continued connection to Westport, in 1944 he donated \$100,000 to the Connecticut Humane

Society for the construction of an animal shelter in the town. The land was purchased in 1944, but construction was delayed due to war shortages, and it was not dedicated until 1952.

The earliest known inhabitants of the Westport area date back 7,500 years - before the arrival of Europeans in the 17th century. In 1675 the Great Swamp Massacre was a serious blow to several indigenous groups in the area, from which they never fully recovered. In 1648 English colonists known as the Bankside Farmers had been given a land grant to area, and they called it Green's Farm. In 1835, the town incorporated, and the name changed to Westport. The 19th Century saw the town become the leading onion-growing center in the US, and an active shipping center in part as a way to get those onions to market. Several decades later, blight caused the failure of Westport's onion industry, leading to mills and factories replacing agriculture as the town's economic base.

Just before the turn of the century, artists and writers began coming to Westport, many buying farmhouses and converting them into offices and studios. Among them was Marchand in 1906, an artist who specialized in western scenes (a drawing by Marchand hangs today in Hart's bedroom in the Newhall mansion). William S. Hart's move to Westport in 1906 reinforced the town's image as a theater and art colony. By 1914, Westport was becoming "the place to be" in New England, "famed for its fine residences, its people and the goods that are manufactured in its midst."²

1. William S. Hart, *My Life East and West* (Houghton Mifflin Company 1929), p. 174

2. *The Westport-Herald's special tabloid, February 1914, "The Story of Westport, Connecticut," p. 4*



Then



Now

Death Instructions: The Ultimate Control Issue

by John Boston

"I'm not dead yet. I'm feeling better."

— Dialogue from the movie, *"Monty Python & The Holy Grail,"* where a peasant weakly protests being thrown onto the plague death wagon

Many years ago, I was editor of the local newspaper's eclectic entertainment weekly, *Son of Escape*. While it was filled with the obligatory notices of where to get a great cheeseburger or which movies (all) to avoid, it was wild and filled with mischief. One day, someone from our local mortuary accidentally faxed me embalming instructions.

On the bright side, the paperwork wasn't for me.

Immediately, I saw the mistake. Eternal Valley, our local mortuary, was a constant communicant with *The Mighty Signal*. Eternal Valley would send us a rare press release announcing a 2-for-1 sale, but, mostly, we'd get obituaries. They usually run along the lines of "ol' Bob worked at the plant for 40 years, watched TV for another 30, then went to Puppy Heaven." Alas, few noticed.

By accident, I received a two-page missive entitled: "Family Instructions." In the Death Business, that's a polite printed euphemism for "So whadya want us to do with the corpse?"

I think what happened was the good people at Eternal Valley just misdialed and sent it to "John Boston — Entertainment" instead of "Jane Doe, Grieving Widow." Happens all the time. The Family Instructions sheet was a blank form sporting all manner of interesting questions. Like: "Embalming? Yes or No. Advise ASAP"

I'm not going to print the name, but there was an actual dead person involved on this request. I raised my eyebrows maybe 3 inches. I pursed my lips. I looked around the Signal newsroom to see if anyone was looking. Then, I started to fill out the instructions.

It was a daunting checklist and asked such things like: "Would You Like to View the Body?" and, if so, would I like to see it on: "A) A Gurney; or, B) In A Selected Container."

There was a space for other instructions. I glanced around again, then wrote: "Yes. Place her face down butt naked on a chaise lounge with a mirror underneath. It's not you. It's us. We're gypsies and are highly superstitious."

The mortuary asked if I wanted the remains shaved. Pencil in mouth, I thoughtfully regarded the question, then printed: "Just her butt. And don't try anything funny — like crop circles."

There's a place where you can write in special facial hair instructions. So, I instructed:

"Give Auntie Grace Mable Marie the usual Elvis pompadour and don't let her go knocking on heaven's gate with a beard thicker than Alec Baldwin's after a four-night binge."

There are queries about whether you want the deceased to have nail polish. Well. Sure. "Splash on some of that gothic black and make the old general look like Ozzy Osbourne."

They asked if I'd like to have the dear lady's features "built or restored." Solemnly, I wrote: "Mable lost her features in Korea. Frankly, we can't remember what the hell she looked like. But, while you're in there, fiddling around, can you make her look like Brad Pitt?"

There are other questions about clothing (believe it or not, even about underwear) and whether we want the pacemaker back. "Yes. Please. We can rig it to mess with the neighbor's new satellite dish."

Of course, my favorite part of the fax was: "Additional Instructions."

Sort of leaves the casket door open, doesn't it? Certainly, I was going to need more than one sheet of paper.

"To start, please slick back Aunt Mable's hair and dye it black. Dress her in a tuxedo and opera cape and sharpen her bicuspid so that future generations of grave robbers mistake her for Dracula, which, sadly, was an ongoing occurrence in real life. All kidding aside, that woman was meaner than a sack of Sunni muftis, and it wouldn't hurt you to sort of pound a stake through her heart, just to cover your bets.

"If that runs into too much money, maybe you could just bury her naked with a male inflatable doll on top and a copy of the *Kama Sutra*, left open to page 614, 'Monkey Being Naughty With A Lotus Blossom and a Willing Keno Waitress Who Has A Fear of Committing.'

Continued on Page 7

John Boston Column

Continued from page 6

“Do you guys do thought balloons? I was thinking maybe you could get some white poster board and cut out a cloud with three dots underneath connecting to her noggin. Inside the thought balloon would be the caption: ‘Cripes. I shouldn’t have had that second helping of Deep-Fried Mixed Grill Surprise at the Senior Center.’”

“Lastly, if it’s not a chore, please position her hands so that both thumbs are sticking in her ears and she’s giving the Neener-Neener in perpetuity.

“That’s it pretty much for the body, although the family and I have been talking. At \$45,506 plus the City of Santa Clarita’s take for property tax for the casket, some of us were thinking it’d be cheaper just to buy a new Kia and plant her in that. With that probably not being an option, the relatives reached another decision. We’d prefer to just bury her in a Hefty lawn bag and take the mahogany coffin home and use it as a toy chest.”

I can’t tell you how sorely tempted I was to fax the instructions back. But morticians, being somewhat anal retentive, might have actually gone ahead and prepped the body to my exacting specifications. If that were to happen, I’d be forced to get a pizza and six-pack of beer and attend the funeral, in the spirit of performance art and what have you.

I still have one small regret. There was a question on the form asking about a request for cosmetics.

I filled out that final item: “Knowing the length of time the dearly departed is going to be cramped in there, may I humbly suggest you pack a good paperback and a tube of Chapstick?”

Local John Boston is the most prolific humorist/satirist in world history. He’s been named America’s best columnist several times. Do not only visit but PURCHASE his books and novels at:

https://www.amazon.com/John-Boston/e/B000APA0H8?ref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share

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What’s new at the Museum Gift Shop? by Cathy Martin

Well, truth be told. . . nothing at all. All the gift shows have been canceled.

Since, all of a sudden, I’ve got some extra down time, I’ve been looking into a few new things for the Museum Gift Shop.

SCV Puzzles for one. The problem is finding a manufacturer that can make them for a reasonable price. Hmm. I have prospect in Utah. Fingers crossed we can make it happen.

The next new item is SCV history souvenir playing cards. It’s a deck of cards with 52 historic facts about our valley. Each card would feature a different person, place or event. It sounds like a fun history lesson while you’re playing “go fish”. I’m waiting on a call back from that manufacturer, too.

And speaking of history lessons, did you know you can mail order our books?? Something to ponder when you’ve run out of reading material and want to expand your knowledge of SCV history. Look on scvhistory.com, for BOOKS FOR SALE, near the lower right side of the home page.

On a personal note: Besides digging through tons of old catalogs, I’ve been literally digging through the weeds and fallen leaves in my backyard. I’ve filled 3 huge recycle barrels of yard waste. Whoo Hoo (we have a really big backyard, with 3 big oak trees). The yard work plot thickens. . . I planted watermelon, tomatoes and basil. They are all growing nicely. I was on a roll when Miya our dog found a smallish rattlesnake while out on the patio. The yard work came to an abrupt stop! Now I’m making face masks, it’s a lot safer. I’ve only made 16 so far. Finding more 1/4” elastic will be the next big challenge. Wish me luck. . .

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*History in the making:
In lieu of a graduation ceremony, Valencia
High School's Class of 2020 was honored by
posters on a fence along Decoro Drive*