



The Heritage Junction Dispatch

A Publication of the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society

Volume 38, Issue 6

November - December 2012

Calendar

Monday, November 26

Board of Directors Meeting
6:30 PM Saugus Station

Monday, December 3

Deadline for the January - February
Dispatch

Saturday, Sunday December 8-9

Hart Holiday Boutique and Craft
Fair, 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, Hart Park

Monday, December 17

Board of Directors Meeting
6:30 PM Saugus Station

Check www.scvhhistory.org for
other upcoming events.

President's Message

by Alan Pollack



It was eerily similar to the calamity that befell the St. Francis Dam, but at a much greater cost of life. At 3:10 PM on May 31, 1889, a dam located 14 miles above the community of Johnstown, Pennsylvania burst, unleashing 4.8 billion gallons of water down a narrow, steep canyon which drowned the industrial steel town and resulted in 2,209 deaths, the worst death toll from a dam break in U.S. history. By comparison, the 12 billion gallons of water that coursed 55 miles through San Francisquito Canyon and the Santa Clara River Valley after the St. Francis Dam ruptured on March 12, 1928 killed an estimated 450-600 people, a

monumental loss of life which still pales in comparison to that of the Johnstown Flood. In fact, in terms of deaths on American soil, the Johnstown Flood is surpassed only by the 1900 Galveston hurricane (estimated 6,000-12,000 deaths), the 1906 San Francisco earthquake (estimated over 3,000 deaths), the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. (2,973 deaths), the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane (which probably killed at least 2,500 people in South Florida), and the attack on Pearl Harbor with 2,458 fatalities. The worst dam disaster in world history would be the August, 1975 chain reaction collapse of 62 dams in China's Henan Province (starting with the Banqiao Dam) over the course of 2 days, precipitated by once-in-2000-years heavy rains, which killed at least 26,000 people by flooding and an additional 145,000 people by subsequent disease and famine.

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Articles and inquiries
regarding *The Dispatch* may
be made to 254-1275

See above

President's Message

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Johnstown and the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club

There was intrigue involved in both disasters. St. Francis had the Owens Valley Water Wars, a series of attacks on the Los Angeles Aqueduct by angry Owens Valley locals, which prompted William Mulholland to build a number of dams closer to Los Angeles to avoid disruption to the city's water supply. Johnstown had the the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club. Johnstown sits about 65 miles east of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains. Established in 1794, the town was located on a flood-prone valley floor at the confluence of the Little Conemaugh and Stonycreek Rivers, which merged to form the Conemaugh River running through the town. The area in 1889 featured a population of 30,000, mostly Welsh and German immigrants. The main employer in town was the Cambria Iron and Steel Company, whose 5,000 employees produced metals that would become railroad tracks, barbed wire, and agricultural tools which were marketed mainly in the Western States. In fact, at this time, Johnstown was an up and coming industrial town with hard-working people looking to make a better life for their families. Fourteen miles upstream from the busy community, a different world existed, a quiet enclave built for the rich patrons of nearby Pittsburgh. For ten years a wealthy clique of Pittsburgh's finest had been escaping the drudgery of the big city and spending their leisure time at the exclusive South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club, situated on 2 mile long Lake Conemaugh behind the South Fork Dam. The Club included such luminaries as Pittsburgh steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in America. They purchased the long neglected South Fork Dam in 1879 with the intention of creating an aquatic paradise behind the dam, lined with exquisite cottages and a club house.

The South Fork Dam

But as with the St. Francis, the dam at Lake Conemaugh was seriously flawed. Originally intended to provide extra water in dry months for a new canal being built between Johnstown and Pittsburgh, work began on what initially was called the Western Reservoir in 1838. Due to Pennsylvania's deteriorating financial conditions at the time, work proceeded haltingly on the earth dam, which was not completed until 1852. Upon completion, the dam measured 930 feet across and 72 feet high. In comparison, the St. Francis, a concrete gravity dam, would measure 700 feet across, and 205 feet high. According to historians, there was nothing wrong with the initial construction of the dam, but the prelude to disaster began with the Pennsylvania Railroad working its way through the mountains between Johnstown and Pittsburgh while the dam was near completion. The railroad was to be finished a

mere six months after the dam and rendered the whole canal system in Western Pennsylvania immediately obsolete. Having no further use for the canals, the state sold the entire system, including the dam, to the Pennsylvania Railroad for \$7.5 million in 1857. Unfortunately, the railroad had no use for the dam and left it in a state of disrepair for the next 22 years. When purchased by the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club, the dam was in serious need of repairs.

The founders of the Club set about rebuilding the dam, but in spite of their wealth, they chose to spend as little as possible and cut corners any way they could. Costing the Club a mere \$17,000 in "repairs", the dam immediately had problems, sustaining heavy damage whenever there were heavy rains. In spite of this, the Club chose to fill the reservoir with more water so that it could be stocked with fish. By the time of the Club's first full season in 1881, the water in the reservoir had risen to within two feet of the crest of the dam. The citizens of Johnstown in subsequent years developed serious doubts about the dam's stability but chose not to question the powerful men who had rebuilt it. They frequently joked about the dam breaking, but never took the threat seriously. In November, 1880, an engineer sent by the Cambria Company to inspect the dam noted the lack of discharge pipes to remove water from the reservoir, and the "unsubstantial method of repair". He concluded that if the dam were to break during flood season "it is evident that considerable damage would ensue along the line of the Conemaugh". Worse still, there were other major mistakes made in the dam's reconstruction. To accommodate a road across the dam, the height had been lowered by up to three feet, lowering the capacity of the spillway to handle water overflow. A screen of iron rods had been placed across the spillway to prevent fish from going over, thus creating a potential for clogging with debris. Finally, the center of the dam sagged at a location where it should have been at its strongest. All told, these flaws increased the possibility of water spilling over the weakened center portion of the dam, with no way to lower the water level in an emergency. Interestingly, by contrast, one of Mulholland's major mistakes with the St. Francis was **raising** the height of the dam by 20 feet without widening the base.

The Johnstown Flood

The disaster at Johnstown began the night before with the onset of heavy rains. By the morning of May 31, 1889, river levels were rising rapidly, causing serious flooding within the town. It was already the worst flooding in Johnstown's history, with water levels rising as high as ten feet. Just upriver from Johnstown, at East Conemaugh, a telegram was received around noon from a dispatcher closer to the dam site stating ominously "SOUTH FORK DAM IS LIABLE TO BREAK:

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President's Message

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NOTIFY THE PEOPLE OF JOHNSTOWN TO PREPARE FOR THE WORST". Being used to numerous false alarms in the past, the people in Johnstown ignored the warning.

Meanwhile, up at the dam site, the level of the lake was rising rapidly. A dozen men worked frantically with picks and shovels to heighten the dam with a ridge of earth. Another dozen men tried unsuccessfully to cut a new spillway into the adjacent hillside. They also tried to remove debris building up in the iron rods that had been built over the spillway. By 11:00 AM, in spite of their efforts, the water was at the top of the dam and began eroding their repair work. Seeing the futility of their work, they decided to send an urgent warning to the communities below the dam. Multiple warnings sent by telegraph to Johnstown went unheeded, as the people left in the town were already hemmed in by the rising floodwaters from the rainstorm.

The center of the dam eroded and gave way at 3:10 PM. A wall of water, giant chunks of the dam, and other debris hurtled down the narrow canyon at 40 miles per hour (the St Francis flood at its worst flowed at 18 miles per hour). Heading down the canyon of the Little Conemaugh, the raging waters of the flood washed away anything in its path, including small towns, and railroad cars of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The St. Francis Dam disaster had heroes like Ed Locke, the night watchman who lost his life while saving many others at the Edison tent camp at Kemp. Johnstown had John Hess. As the engineer sat in the cab of his work train along the Little Conemaugh river, he could hear noise in the distance of the oncoming flood. David McCullough, in his 1987 book "*The Johnstown Flood*" describes what happened next: "Hess said 'the lake's broke', and with that he put on steam, tied down the whistle, and with their gravel cars clattering along in front, they went shrieking toward East Conemaugh...The Hess ride into Conemaugh would be talked about...for years to come, with Hess in his engine (Number 1124), blazing down the valley, the water practically on top of him, in an incredibly heroic dash to sound the alarm...no more than two minutes passed after they had pulled to a stop until the flood came... With their whistle still screaming [they] jumped from the cab and started for the hillside. The whistle of John Hess's engine had been going now for maybe five minutes at most. It was not on long, but it was the only warning anyone was to hear, and nearly everyone in East Conemaugh heard it and understood almost instantly what it meant."

A 36 foot wall of debris-laden water smashed into Johnstown around 4:07 PM. Witnesses described how the water "snapped off trees like pipe-stems" and "crushed houses like eggshells". The wave of water was said to be preceded by a violent wind which blew down small buildings. The destruction of

Johnstown took all of ten minutes. After roaring through the town, the flood waters smashed into a hill at the far end of Johnstown and furiously backwashed into the already devastated community, causing more destruction.

There was a stone bridge at the far end of the town which held up to the floodwaters. This turned out to be the worst nightmare yet on a horrific afternoon. All manner of flood debris collected against the intact bridge, including "boxcars, factory roofs, trees, telegraph poles, hideous masses of barbed wire, hundreds of houses...dead horses and cows, and hundreds of human beings, dead and alive..." The mountain of debris grew higher than the bridge itself. As nighttime descended on the scene, the mountain of debris somehow caught fire, resulting in scores of people burning to death before the eyes of horrified bystanders.

The Aftermath

Of the official death toll of 2,209, ninety nine whole families were wiped out completely. Hundreds of people were never found at all, and 663 of the recovered bodies could never be identified. In the aftermath of the disaster, attention turned to the wealthy members of the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club. As details of the shoddy reconstruction of their dam began to emerge, anger towards the Club greatly escalated. The Club was blamed for the disaster by coroners' juries and engineering experts. They were skewered by the newspapers. A Harrisburg newspaperman wrote "50,000 lives in Pennsylvania were jeopardized for eight years that a club of rich pleasure-seekers might fish and sail and revel in luxurious ease during the heated term". Several civil lawsuits were generated against the club and its members, but none were successful. None of the wealthy and powerful members of the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club ever paid a penny in penalties, nor were any held criminally liable for the worst dam disaster in American history.

In reading about the Johnstown Flood, one is struck by the many similarities to the story of the St. Francis Dam disaster. Both of the tragic events received tremendous newspaper coverage throughout the country. But there is one glaring difference. The site of the South Fork dam is now a National Memorial complete with a National Park Service visitor center manned by Rangers with museum, theater, and documentary film. At the St. Francis dam site there is...nothing but the ruins. While it is a national remembrance well deserved in Johnstown, perhaps the St. Francis deserves similar recognition. Can we in the Santa Clarita Valley make that happen?

Source material for this article: The Johnstown Flood, by David McCullough, 1987.

Alan Pollack

December at the Hart by Rachel Barnes



Cowboy jazz, holiday decorations, and the historic Chumash. Sounds like the premise for a Woody Allen movie, but it's far more entertaining: these seemingly unrelated concepts are part of the Calendar of Events for the Hart Museum in December.

Cowboys and Carols

December kicks off with a blast of trumpets when the Museum hosts the internationally-renowned cowboy jazz sensation, Cow Bop, for the annual *Cowboys and Carols* fundraising concert. Celebrate Bill Hart's 148th birthday on Saturday, December 8, 2012 by coming out to the Hart Mansion and enjoying an intimate, acoustic concert in Hart's beautiful and spacious Living Room. You can relax amongst his simple furnishings and amazing collection of art and Native American artifacts as Cow Bop dazzles with their "swingin' grooves, thrilling riffs, sweet and hot vocals, acoustic western sensibilities, and tons of fun." The Mansion itself will be twinkling as the stunning holiday decorations gleam, glitter, and sparkle throughout the enchanted evening, so be sure not to miss it. Tickets on sale – check the Hart Museum website at www.hartmuseum.org for time and price, and purchase your tickets online at www.friendsofhartpark.org.

Day at the Ranch: The Chumash

The fall semester may be winding down but there is still much educational fun to be found before the kids are out and the holidays really get underway. On Saturday, December 15,

bring your 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grader down to Hart Park to experience life in an historic Chumash village. A wide variety of activities, arts and crafts, and mini-workshops will introduce participants to the daily life of Chumash Native Americans including the many ways they relied on the surrounding natural resources to take care of their daily needs. Explore where they lived, how they gathered and prepared food, how they built their homes, and so much more! This is a great workshop for Santa Clarita Valley students who will be studying the historic Chumash in school, so you won't want to miss it. The program runs from 9:30 AM until 12:00 PM here in William S. Hart Park, and the cost is completely FREE. Be sure to check the Hart Museum website for details.

And if that is not enough, then be sure to come on up to the Hart Mansion for a free guided tour sometime during this holiday season. Bill Hart's retirement home is always a splendor, but through the month of December, it really comes aglow with all the gorgeous holiday decorations that will be twinkling and glittering amongst Hart's amazing collections of Western art, Native American artifacts, early Hollywood mementos, and personal furnishings. Holiday decorations are unveiled on Wednesday, November 28, 2012 and will be up through Sunday, January 6, 2013. We are open Wednesdays – Sundays, 10:00 AM – 12:30 PM (tours start every 30 minutes, with the last tour starting at 12:30 PM), and Saturdays – Sundays, 11:00 AM – 3:30 PM (tours start every 30 minutes, with the last tour starting at 3:30 PM).

Happy Holidays to one and all from the Hart!



Join the SCV Historical Society Today!

| | |
|-------------------------|----------|
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Memberships make great gifts for your historically-minded friends and family! To join or renew online, visit <http://www.scvhs.org>.

Sea Cadets Are Awesome! by Barbara Martinelli

On September 23rd twenty-eight members of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps converged on Heritage Junction.

While one group cleared the area behind the chapel so they could then dig a trench, the other group dug a dozen post-holes throughout the site.

The post holes are for waist-high signs that will provide descriptions of our buildings, locomotive, springpole, and oil-pipe. The trench is for eventual use as a stream, running from a spring at the top of Questers' Court (formerly Feedtrough Canyon.)

They proved worthy of their motto "Can Do" and we can't thank them enough. Job well done!



A blue heron and an egret at a pond on the south bank of the Santa Clara River, just west of McBean Parkway; May 5, 2012. The pond was completely dry two weeks later..

The SCV's Bad Boy: Robert Mitchum

by John Boston

One of my favorite stories about our local prison comes from a time when it had a different name. Today, the Peter Pitchess Prison in Castaic is a maximum security detention center housing some of the most heinous criminals in California. Up until the late 1960s, it was Los Angeles County's country club facility, a place where non-violent or white-collar criminals worked on their tans while doing light yard work.

During the Great Depression, a man of 65 was staying at a county old-person's home in the Antelope Valley. Healthy and robust for his years, he tired of the senior life style and ran away. Hiking by the 1,000-acre-plus Wayside Honor Rancho, he stopped by to ask for a job. The guard laughed at the senior and told him he'd have to get arrested before enjoying residence.

Disappointed, the elder hiked a few miles up the road and stopped at an old Castaic farm. In exchange for some hard work, he earned his dinner and a night in the barn from a poor widow. The old-timer asked if he could land a job with her. She said a meal was all she could spare and ordered him out the next morning.

The next morning came. He didn't leave. Instead, he ignored her and just started fixing things and doing chores. She called the Sheriff's department. They arrested him and dragged him before our local judge, Art Miller, who slammed the gavel and gave the gentleman a suspended sentence. The senior would have nothing of it. He said all he wanted in life was to be of use and work on a beautiful farm. He demanded life in prison - at Wayside.

Art Miller was a darn good man, one who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to protect the SCV and be a founding father of future local government. He chuckled and said he could hardly condemn anyone to life in prison for a tiny misdemeanor trespass. But, he winked and threw the book at the gentleman, giving him the stiffest sentence of 90 days. He wiggled his finger for the old-timer to approach the bench then whispered, "We'll see if you like it there," said Miller. "In three months, if you want to go back, you can appear before me and call me a small name or something. I'll find you in contempt of court and give you another three months." And so it went.

I wish I knew what became of the old fellow, whether he lived out his life working in the SCV sun, or was transferred.

I like to think he dropped in the middle of some chore, on a cool day, or passed gently in his sleep after a good day's work.

The most famous inmate ever to visit Wayside was the world-famous screen legend, Robert Mitchum.

Robert Charles Durman Mitchum was born on August 6, 1917 and died July 1, 1997. His stamp on the movie business was that he was the forerunner to our modern anti-hero. His father was a barroom brawler who died when Mitchum was 18, and the future actor would inherit his dad's warring ways.

He was kicked out of middle school for getting into a fistfight - with the principal. He was also kicked out of high school in Hell's Kitchen and spent the next few years riding box cars and doing odd job, including being a grave digger and a boxer. Interestingly, he credited his lifelong insomnia and being battered in the ring for giving him that haunted look.

According to the Lee Server biography, Mitchum came out to Long Beach in 1936, and wrote poetry and plays and did a little stage work. After the birth of his first child, Josh, he tried the straight-and-narrow, getting a job at Lockheed (with a lot of our dads).

The experiment at conformity reportedly gave Mitchum an emotional breakdown and he went into acting. That I can certainly appreciate.

After some bit parts as a villain in a few Hopalong Cassidy Westerns in 1942 and 1943 (one of which was reportedly shot at Melody Ranch), Mitchum's look - and a small part in "30 Seconds Over Tokyo" - part of which, by the way, was shot here in Pico Canyon with Spencer Tracy in 1944 - got Mitchum a 7-year contract with RKO.

Mitchum would soon hone his skill in many film noir projects, playing everything from a serial killer to a troubled war hero. But Mitchum had an almost pathological revulsion to authority and continued his merry and not-so-merry prank making. His stunts on the sets earned him the ire of studio execs.

Then there was his carousing. Mitchum was arrested in August of 1948 for marijuana possession and was sent off to our backyard prison of Wayside for a six-month stint.

He served just 60 days. It would later be proved that Mitchum had been set up, and in 1951 his record was expunged and a new plea of not guilty was inked into the books. "After an exhaustive investigation of the evidence

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John Boston

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and testimony presented at the trial, the court orders that the verdict of guilty be set aside and that a plea of not guilty be entered and that the information or complaint be dismissed," read the official transcript.

Mitchum would go on to make 132 films, including "Night of the Cat," considered one of the actor's finest performances, as a psychotic killer posing as a minister.

Film critic Roger Ebert once said of Mitchum: "He was the soul of film noire," but Mitchum wasn't a simpleton actor. Those who knew him recalled he had a photographic memory.

Hard to believe, this real-life tough guy, who had also his soft side, was also a successful singer. Not just any kind of singer, but a Calypso singer.

Yes.

Robert Mitchum not only recorded a couple of successful Calypso albums, the confirmed alcoholic later would break into Billboard's Top 10 in Country Music with the hit, "That Little Ol' Wine Drinker Me."

Mitchum would continue to make movies for more than a half-century. He turned down playing Popeye Doyle in the 1971 "French Connection," and Gene Hackman would get the Oscar for the role Mitchum turned down. Mitchum also turned down the lead in Sam Peckinpah's classic, "The Wild Bunch." That went to Mitchum's good friend, William Holden. Wait. It gets worse. He also turned down the lead role of the Oscar-winning 1970 movie, "Patton," while recommending George C. Scott.

In a small touch of local irony, his last film he made before he died was "James Dean: Race with Destiny." Dean, as you may know, had his last meal in the SCV at Tip's before dying in a fiery car crash in central California.

Mitchum, a long-time and vocal Republican, remembered his two-month stay in the Santa Clarita rather fondly, commenting that it allowed him to work on his sun tan while getting a little exercise in "the good, clean air of Castaic." President Dwight David Eisenhower (who used to secretly - and innocently - visit his old best friend from Kansas, Welcome May Taylor, when she lived in Happy Valley here) was not a fan of Mitchum's. Ike refused to allow any Mitchum's movies to be shown in the White House due to Mitchum's stay in Castaic.

I remember years later, seeing a photograph of Mitchum still hanging in the warden's office at Wayside. The picture was of Mitchum on the prison basketball team.

Interestingly, long after he served time for his small marijuana possession, his long-time secretary, Reva Frederick, would end up stealing millions from him. He decided not to prosecute. She suffered a huge stroke when her crime was discovered.

According to his biographer, Mitchum continued to smoke pot into old age.

With 119 major writing awards, John Boston has been noted as one of America's top humorists and political satirists. Look for his major monster boffo new multimedia international news, humor and entertainment website coming real darn soon now! It's sort of a national version of the the old Escape, on mega-steroids.

Recent Docents

Thank you to the following members who served as docents during September and October:

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Frank Adella | Catherine Hartnek |
| Phyllis Berman | Harold Hicks |
| Wendy Beynon | Anna Kroll |
| Laurie Cartwright | Theresa Marg |
| Linda Casebolt | Barbara Martinelli |
| Sioux Coghlan | RuthAnne Murthy |
| Evan Decker | Alan Pollack |
| Sarah Floyd | The Questers * |
| Francesca Gastil | Gordon Uppman |

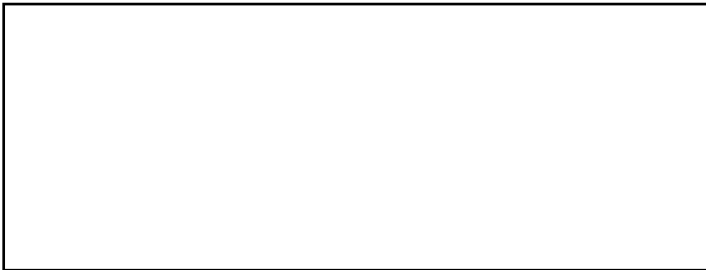
Also, thank you's to the following, who opened the doors so that the docents could do their jobs:

| | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Linda Casebolt | Barbara Martinelli |
| Duane Harte | Alan Pollack |
| Ed Marg | Scott Sivley |
| Cathy Martin | Sue Yurosek |

* Don't know who the Questers are?
See www.questers1944.org



Site of Pennsylvania's South Fork Dam
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