



# The Heritage Junction Dispatch

A Publication of the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society

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November-December 2020

## Calendar

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Heritage Junction is closed until further notice.

The Christmas Open House has been cancelled for this year.

### Tuesday, December 1

Deadline for the January-February Dispatch

Check [www.scvhistory.org](http://www.scvhistory.org) for other upcoming events when Heritage Junction reopens.

## President's Message

by Alan Pollack



Continuing the story of the naming of our canyons,

### RAMON PEREA AND JESUS HERNANDEZ

In the 1860s, Andres Pico and others explored the

canyons of the Santa Clarita Valley for the oil previously lauded by Benjamin Silliman, Jr. in the Ojai area. The discovery of oil in February, 1865, in the canyon that was to become Pico Canyon was described in an article in the *Los Angeles Evening Express* of December 29, 1876. As reported by *San Francisco Post* special correspondent Robert Creighton: "The Pico oil spring was discovered by an accident, it is said. A Mexican while hunting on the mountain

wounded a buck, which he tracked into a ravine or canyon, destined in all probability to become as famous in the future of Californian developments as Oil creek has been in the past of Pennsylvania. Close by the dying buck, he saw a dark, oily substance oozing from the mountain side, discoloring the water and emitting a disagreeable smell. He reported his discovery, and the use of petroleum being then generally known, steps were taken to utilize it. Sanford Lyon, an old resident of Los Angeles County, organized a company some twelve years ago to save the oil. The company consisted of Colonel R.S. Baker, General Beale, A. Pico, F.P. Foster, and S. Lyon, and these located the first Pico oil claim". The Mexican discoverer referred to in the article was Ramon Perea, a vaquero working for Andres Pico. He made the discovery with fellow

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## President's Message

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vaquero Jesus Hernandez. According to Vernetta Snyder Ripley in her 16-part history of the Newhall Pass [The San Fernando (Newhall) Pass and the Pioneer Traffic That Went Over It. *The Quarterly* of the Historical Society of Southern California, 1947-48]:

“Cognizant of the importance of their discovery, one remained on the ground to establish possession while his partner hurried off to Los Angeles to inform some of the most influential citizens — among them General Andres Pico, Dr. Vincent Gelcich, Colonel Baker and Messrs. Wiley, Leaming, Stevenson, Rice, Todd, Lyon and Andere — of this discovery. The Mexican, Ramon Parero [sic], it seemed, had filled a canteen with the oily scum on the water and stopped first at Lyon stage station at the foot of the San Fernando Pass on the north slope. After showing his find to Sanford Lyon, who said it was crude oil, Parero rode up the new turnpike road on the San Fernando grade and through the cut, to gallop his horse over the valley to the old San Fernando Mission where General Don Andres Pico lived. It happened that Dr. Vincent Gelcich who had married the young senorita, Petra Pico, a niece of the Picos, was staying there at the time. He had come to California from Pennsylvania as surgeon to the Fourth California Infantry. He had been familiar with those early Pennsylvania oil wells and recognized the black scum as similar to oil seepage in his home state. The men to whom Parero showed the oily contents of his canteen, decided to go out and stake claims measuring 1,500 x 600 feet apiece in conformity with the mining laws, and instruct the discoverers how to protect their claims. The first claim was named Cañada Pico (General Pico's holding, later owned by the Star Oil Working Company, the second was called Wiley, the third Moore, the fourth Rice (this is now owned by Dr. Gelcich), the fifth after a man called Leaming, the sixth for Gelcich, and the seventh for Todd. Towards the close of 1865 the district was incorporated, and several companies were formed.”

The mining claims noted above angered both Perea and Hernandez, as they had received no compensation for their discovery. Pico's son Romulo filed a claim near the mouth of the canyon, which became Pico Springs. The dispute between the Picos and their vaqueros led to the formation of the Los Angeles Asphaltum and Petroleum Mining District to sort out the claim controversy. But Hernandez remained angry at the Picos and threatened to file a claim on Pico

Springs for himself. Beale and Baker became involved, negotiating with the Picos that they would buy out Perea and Hernandez and then split the claim with the Picos. Beale and Baker, along with Pio Pico, Juan Forster, Francisco Forster, and Sanford Lyon then refiled the claim with the newly formed San Fernando Petroleum Mining District.

Andres Pico's colorful life ended on February 14, 1876 when he was found unconscious on a street in Los Angeles. He is buried at the Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles. Just seven months after Pico's death, Alexander Mentry struck oil at the first successful oil well in California history, a well appropriately named Pico No. 4.

### HENRY CLAY WILEY: WILEY CANYON

Henry Clay Wiley filed the first claim in what was to become Wiley Canyon on April 21, 1865. It was called the Wiley Lead and covered what was called Wiley's Spring. In the 1860s, Wiley was married to Anita Maria Pico, daughter of Andres Pico. Likely his family ties with the Picos had something to do with his oil claim. Wiley was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1829. He served in the commissary department of the US Army during the Mexican War. Later, he migrated to California in 1852 and first settled in San Diego, where he served as a constable of San Diego County for two years. According to his obituary in the *Los Angeles Herald* of October 26, 1898, he moved to Los Angeles in 1858. He served as superintendent of the San Fernando Mission from 1858 to 1864, and also as an Undersheriff of Los Angeles County from 1868 to 1872. In addition to his oil activities, Wiley was a real estate entrepreneur and owned a large piece of property in Downtown Los Angeles, on Broadway between First and Second Streets. Amongst his real estate endeavors was being a resident agent for the Indiana Colony, which became Pasadena. He was a charter member of the Southern California Pioneer Society and Los Angeles Society of Veterans of the Mexican War, as well as a member of the Historical Society of Southern California. After filing his claim for Wiley Canyon, Wiley along with William Jenkins and Sanford Lyon sunk the first oil well in Pico Canyon using the spring-pole method in January, 1869.

Our traditional local historical literature has Henry Clay Wiley establishing a stagecoach stop at the base of the San Fernando Pass in the early 1850s and setting up a windlass system to lower wagons over the treacherous pre-Beale's

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## President's Message

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Cut pass for a fee. As can be seen from the dates listed above, that is not possible, as Wiley did not arrive in Los Angeles until 1858. The research of Stan Walker reveals that Wiley stopped working for Andres Pico at the Mission in 1864 and signed a five-year lease for a ranch at the base of Elsmere Canyon from its owner Ygnacio Del Valle. That location had been the residence of Joseph Hart from 1854 to 1858, when it became a Butterfield Overland Mail stage stop. Wiley moved to Los Angeles in 1868 and would soon become an Undersheriff (or deputy) under new Sheriff J.F. Burns.

### **DARIUS TOWSLEY: TOWSLEY CANYON**

Darius Towsley was an oil wildcatter in the 1860s who laid claim to the canyon now called Towsley. He started extracting oil from the local canyons in 1864, using both the spring-pole method and drilling tunnels into the hills. Though he was unsuccessful in extracting large amounts of oil, some of his oil may have been shipped up to San Francisco for use in illumination. According to historian Jerry Reynolds, Towsley was a close friend of Henry Clay Wiley. Wiley also had bought claims in Towsley Canyon, and they may have worked together in extracting oil from the canyons. Towsley may also have been involved with the establishment of the San Fernando Petroleum Mining District in 1865. By the late 1860s, Towsley's interests in his canyon had been bought out by others, possibly an alliance including Beale and Baker. Towsley Canyon is now the home of Ed Davis Park and is administered by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

### **SANFORD LYON: LYON CANYON**

The Lyon brothers, Sanford and Cyrus, were twins born to Henry and Betsy Lyon in Machias, Maine, in 1831. Their ancestor, another Henry Lyon, had emigrated to the English colony of Connecticut in 1648. The brothers emigrated from Maine to Los Angeles during the Gold Rush in 1849. They first worked as clerks at Alexander and Mellus, a mercantile store partly owned by their first cousin, Francis Mellus. In 1865, Sanford teamed up with Edward F. Beale, Andres Pico, and others to form the first Star Oil Co., with the intention of building a refinery based on a process developed by Gelcich. Sanford purchased from the Philadelphia and California Petroleum Company what would become Lyons Station in 1868, somewhere in the vicinity of present-day Eternal Valley Cemetery. Lyons

Station was established as a multi-use complex, consisting of a depot, tavern, store, telegraph office, and post office. Cyrus remained in Los Angeles, having been a Captain in Horace Bell's volunteer mounted police unit called the Los Angeles Rangers in the 1850s. The 60 active members of the Rangers, under the command of Captain A.W. Hope, served as a relentless fighting unit, which effectively cleaned up the lawless streets of Los Angeles within two years. Cyrus Lyon was considered one of the most efficient of the Rangers.

Sanford Lyon made no oil claims to the canyon that bears his name just north of Towsley Canyon. Lyon Canyon was probably named after 1881, when Sanford obtained a land patent for the canyon. More recently, Lyon Canyon was used as the site of "Uncle Jesse's ranch" on the 1980s television show "The Dukes of Hazzard". In 2009, the City of Santa Clarita approved the Lyons Canyon Ranch housing project in the canyon, but to this date no construction has been started.

New information obtained from Stan Walker shows that within one year of his purchase of Lyons Station, Sanford ran into financial difficulties and sold the station to Adam Malezewski. He continued to work at the station until 1873, when he moved to Lyon Canyon. Malezewski committed suicide in 1876, but the former Lyons Station remained in his estate until it was sold to Henry Mayo Newhall by a sheriff's sale in 1880. The story of the Lyon brothers ended with the death of Sanford at age 51 in 1882, and of Cyrus 10 years later at age 61. Sanford is buried in the Pioneer section of Eternal Valley Cemetery in Newhall, while Cyrus resides at Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles.

Lyons Station has been recognized with a plaque at Eternal Valley as California Registered Historical Landmark No. 688.

### **JOSEPH RICE: RICE CANYON**

According to Stan Walker, little is known about Joseph Rice, who filed the first oil claim in what became known as Rice Canyon. There is a Joseph Rice listed as a 26-year old merchant in the July, 1860 census of the Tejon Township of Los Angeles County. Joseph Rice is also listed as a 33-year old hotel keeper in San Fernando in the Great Register of Los Angeles County in 1866. And there is a Joseph Rice listed as a 35-year old farmer in the Los Angeles Township census of 1870. Whether any of these are the Joseph Rice of Rice Canyon requires further research.

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## A Father's Camulos Legacy - Setting the Record Straight

by Maria Christopher

A few months ago, I got a call from long-time Rancho Camulos Museum volunteer, Robert Escamilla, asking if he could bring out one of his Santa Paula neighbors, Robin Rycroft, who, like him, was born when his family lived at Camulos Ranch in the 1930s. His neighbor's father, Charlie Rycroft, had worked on the Camulos ranch.

The somewhat familiar family surname, sent me to a favorite information source of local history buffs, "[Santaclaritahistory.com](http://Santaclaritahistory.com)". So, when Robin Rycroft arrived with Robert for his visit a week later, I handed him what I had discovered, the photo of Charlie Rycroft (see below), and this text that was online.

### "Charlie Rycroft, Camulos Ranch foreman."

"We tend to think of Rancho Camulos as a scenic and historic place, but it's also a 2,000-acre agribusiness with hired help to plant and bring in the crops, among other things. The ranch foreman in the 1920s-40s was Charlie Rycroft, who lived on the property . . . Shirley and Nathalie (nee Rubel) said (interview 11-26-2013) . . . that after their father died in 1943, there was friction between Charlie Rycroft and their mother's new suitor, resulting in Rycroft's departure."

The distinguished looking 80-year-old visitor smiled at the familiar persona in the photo, read slowly through the text, and sadly shook his head with a perplexed look. Over the next few hours as the three of us walked through the museum grounds, I learned the details of Charlie Rycroft's life; and Robin and Robert's detailed accounts of what it was like for working-class children growing up at Camulos Ranch in the 1930s and '40s.

This article will focus on Charlie Rycroft's story.

Charles Murray Rycroft was born in Lafayette, Indiana, on October 4, 1896. In his June 7, 1917, draft registration, MURRAY RYCRAFT described himself as tall, slender, blue eyed, light brown haired, single, and employed as a ranch worker for the Chase Rauch ranch in Corona, California.

He thus had several years of agricultural work experience when he started working for August Rubel shortly after the Rubel's had purchased Camulos in 1924. Charlie would serve as ranch "superintendent" for 20 years.

Perhaps he was the ranch manager who on March 13, 1928, awakened the Rubels, saying "Mr. Rubel, there's a lot of water in the river".

Local newspaper archives tell of Charlie leading the Camulos crew battling the wildfires of November, 1930, that threatened the agricultural lands and oil fields. Another article in the Piru newspaper describes a well-armed Charlie dispatching fruit thieves from the Camulos orchard in January, 1930.

The Rycroft family lived at the ranch manager's house, a short distance off the then sparsely traveled Highway 126.

Robin was born while his family lived there. Despite his young age, he has vivid memories of life at Camulos. He remembers being allowed to ride shotgun with the trusted tractor drivers. He has fond memories of accompanying his father in his truck as he made his daily rounds, going to the Camulos reservoir and checking that the critical crop irrigation system was working well. He remembers his father holding the daily work order briefings of the ranch foremen and crews, and the blare of the noon whistle for the lunch break.

Robin climbed the walnut picker equipment and interacted with the Rubel children. He has memories of his family accompanying the

Rubels when they visited their beach home on the Rubicon, including one memorable trip where Charlie rushed one of the daughters, who had seriously injured her hand while working on a Rubel family boat building project, to the emergency room.

Robin and Robert recalled August Rubel as a well-respected genius with ideas well ahead of his time, and Mary Rubel as a kind, stunningly beautiful, and always well-dressed, lady.

He recalled the Camulos foreman kibitzing in front of the barn, not understanding why this well-situated 40 something would choose to reenlist in the American Field Service (ambulance) corps, and hearing the rumor that August Rubel had purchased and equipped an ambulance that would accompany him to his assignment to Tunisia.

A pall came over the ranch when the news came that August had died April 28, 1943, when his vehicle ran over a land mine. But Charlie Rycroft carried on, implementing the plan that August Rubel had discussed with him before he left for war.



Charlie Rycroft

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## The Curse of the Black Mustard Plant

by Cathy Martin

**W**e all have seen the bright yellow flowering plants along the hillsides in Santa Clarita, and every other hillside in Southern California. You may have thought to yourself, how beautiful the hillside looks, painted a bright color of yellow. Well, not so fast. Remember in my title I called the plant a curse; well it is, and I'll explain.

Those powerfully bright-yellow weeds are not native to California, like you may have thought. Yes, they have seemingly been around forever but that doesn't make them a native. They have naturalized.

So how did they get here? The Black Mustard or Brassica Nigra is a native plant to Europe. Legend has it they arrived with the Franciscan Padres. The Padres scattered the seeds along the El Camino Real to mark the road that connected the missions. Mustard seeds have been found inside the adobe bricks from some of the earlier missions. Historians assume it was originally planted in their mission gardens as a spice.

According to the California Invasive Plant Council, the mustard plant produces chemicals allelopathic effects that prevent the germination of native plants. Additionally, fields of mustard transform native habitats into annual grasslands, which can increase the frequency of fires in our chaparral. And nobody wants an increase in fire danger!

So how do we get rid of them?

Those little buggers thrive in our climate, so getting completely rid of them is not going to happen. But we can do our part to keep them under control.

One way is to remove the plant (root and all) by hand **BEFORE** it's had a chance to flower. The other way to remove them is with tools. A sweaty brow and blisters are going to form. I call it grunt work laced with expletives. It's all about timing, you have to get the seeds before they're finished blooming. This is the only way to deplete the volume of seeds from germinating.

Bad news: Besides mustard's being highly flammable the seeds can last up to fifty years if they are buried deep in the soil.

Ugh, even more bad news: Burning the seeds **INCREASES** their resiliency! With every fire raging on our hillsides, the mustard plant will get a foothold and start to take over from the native plants that have just burnt. The native plants will likely never return.

The inspiration for this story came from two of our board members, Leon Worden and Guy Horanberg. They have spent much of the last four months toiling away at mustard weed abatement at Heritage Junction. My hope is our hillside will not be "yellow" next spring, and the wildlife and native plants will be very happy, just like I am. Thank you both for your hard work.



### Camulos

*Continued from page 4*

On Tuesday, March 7, 1945 at 7:55 AM, as Charlie Rycroft held his daily morning briefing of the ranch staff, next to the cork oak tree that still stands today, he suffered a massive heart attack and died.

Harry Forbes, Mary Rubel's brother in law was brought in as ranch manager. Ed Burger was not yet in the Camulos scene, according to Robin and Robert. The widow Rubel saw that the ranch manager's house that the Rycrofts lived in was moved down the road to their property, just west of Piru. Mrs. Rycroft remarried. The family initially maintained contact with the Rubel family, especially the children, but slowly drifted out of touch. Robin knew that Camulos Ranch was the "Home of Ramona". He was aware that a portion of the property that his father had help preserve, was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark in 2000.

Charlie Rycroft had been a faithful and hard-working manager of ranch operations during the 20 years when Camulos Ranch was a shining example of Ventura County's agricultural operations.

Robin asked us to set the record straight, that Charlie Rycroft was not dismissed, but died on the job. It has been an honor to do that.

## Betcha You Didn't Know This About Two-Gun Bill Hart

by John Boston

Newhall's most famous citizen is William S. Hart. He was the silent film star who created the modern model for the movie cowboy. I have tons of little tidbits about the SCV's legendary actor, but let's start with 7 tidbits not often shared by the mansion's plucky tour guides:

- 1) Darryl Zanuck bought the rights to William S. Hart's life's story. Zanuck hired producer Sol Siegel and screenwriter Cy Bartlett to write an epic screenplay about our Western superstar. Small problem: Zanuck bought the rights from Hart's son, Bill Jr., who didn't OWN the rights. The estate of his father would be embroiled in lawsuits for about a decade. No movie has ever been made about the amazing life of one of the most influential cowboy stars in movie history.
- IA) Years ago, my friend Camille Jauregui (Andy's granddaughter) and I came up with this practical joke to pull on the Newhall 4th of July committee. This was in the 20th century, before everyone had home computers. Forging documents was a laborious task. Cammy was, and is, movie star, knuckle-biting gorgeous, as are all the Jauregui women. We had dimly-lit mood photographs taken, her in a beautiful, shoulderless señorita Mexican dress, and me in my dress-period Western duds, complete with a giant O'Farrell \$1,000 hat. We wrote the committee that a production company was going to film a mini-series on the life of Bill Hart, and could they send the two stars to ride horses in the parade? We left a friend's address and special telephone in Beverly Hills for replies. The joke went quickly south and turned on Cammy and me. The parade committee was almost hyperventilating at us riding. A day later, another message: Would we, the two pretend movie stars, mind being Division Marshals and riding in a convertible while we waved? Two days later, another message: Would we mind being GRAND MARSHALS? This started as a minor prank and just got way out of control. We ended the charade with a letter that the bogus production company ran out of funding for the project, and Camille and I dodged a bullet...
- 2) Both Bill Hart Sr. and Bill Hart Jr. started their families late in life. Hart Sr. had Bill Jr. at 60, and Bill Jr. fathered a daughter when he was 59 and a son when he was 63.
- 3) Legendary icon and Signal editor Ruth Newhall shared a story with me long ago about an unusual golf three-some from the 1930s. Seems William S. Hart, comedian W.C. Fields (who lived across Market Street on 8th for a while), and one of the most famous entertainers of his day, Charlie Mack, used to go golfing together in Newhall. There wasn't any course in town then, but the trio would take a bottle of whiskey, a few clubs and a bag of golf balls. They would wander up and down the hills of Newhall, using distant tree stumps and fence posts for "holes." I used to play that very same game in the early 1960s with my best pal, Phil Lanier. We used to call it Hobo Golf.
- 4) Here's some trivia I'm betting the tour guides don't know. Before the George Babcock Smith ranch here in the early 1920s and teens, the county fire department had a huge fire look-out tower right where the mansion sits today. Fire watchers would literally live up in the epic wooden tower. They designed a special gap in the ladder to the tower. Seems the aromatic scent of the watcher's cooked meals would float out and attract bears, who would climb the ladder in hopes of an invitation.
- 5) On Dec. 16, 1941, Hart returned from having successful eye surgery. He got to his Newhall mansion, only to realize the town was under strict black-outs due to the start of World War II. An interesting coincidence - Hart's operation was called an iridectomy. Hart had burned his eyes under the fiercely hot studio lamps while filming a movie. The iridectomy was a procedure invented by New York doctor C.R. Agnew in the 1870s. The first patient to be undergo an iridectomy? Nicholas Hart, Bill's dad. Story goes that Nicholas was chiseling some rock, when a small particle of steel chipped off and went into his eye. After three unsuccessful operations and now being blind in one eye, Nicholas went to Dr. Agnew, who debuted the pioneering surgical technique. It restored Bill's dad's eyesight.

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## President's Message

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An agreement signed by Joseph Rice shows the consolidation of the Rice Asphaltum and Petroleum Mining Claim with the Grizzly Run Petroleum Claim (both located in the Los Angeles Asphaltum and Petroleum Mining District) and sets up the Consolidated Rice Petroleum Mining Company on June 2, 1865. Another document dated January 17, 1873, shows the sale and transfer of the ownership of claims in Rice Canyon from Joseph Rice to Vincent Gelcich for \$300 in gold coin.

*Sources used for this article.*

*Findagrave.com; Dr Vincent Gelcich, Andres Pico*

*Formative Years in the Far West; A History of Standard Oil Company of California and Predecessors Through 1919*

*Gerald T. White, 1962*

*Elesmerecanyon.com; Stan Walker*

*Scvhistory.com*

*Los Angeles Evening Express, December 29, 1876*

*Los Angeles Herald, October 26, 1898*

*Who was Darius Towsley? By Leon Worden, October 15, 1997*

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## John Boston Article

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- 6) In 1925, workers were also busy constructing a small rustic cabin (the little museum/bunkhouse today) at the base of the road to the castle for Walter King. Mr. King, by the way, was an accomplished saddle maker and silversmith, and cared for Hart's horses. Some locals chuckled over building a rustic cabin "with the bark still on." The little cabin only cost \$600 to make.
- 7) Hart was one of the most famous people on earth, and locals were stunned when he showed up here (Two-Gun didn't live here then) in September of 1922 for his premier of *The Return of Draw Egan*. Hart personally bowed and greeted every patron to the old Hap-a-Land Hall (the Courthouse Building on Market today). Later, in 1941, Hart would show up for the grand opening of the American Theater (behind the Newhall Library, where the American Legion is today). They were showing his epic Western, *Tumbleweeds*. Addressing the crowd, Hart noticed a group of Native Americans and asked what tribe they represented. Most of them were Sioux. Off the cuff and to their great delight, Hart spoke to them in their native tongue.

(SCV author John Boston also writes *The Time Ranger SCV History* column every Saturday in *The Mighty Signal*. His *Mr. SCV* column appears Fridays. He's soon launching *The John Boston Publishing Company*, which will feature several new SCV history books along with the sequel to his best seller, "Naked Came the Novelist." Visit <http://www.johnbostonchronicles.com/> in the coming weeks and months for details.

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**Dated Material: Please Do Not Delay**



*Below zero in Death Valley? Actually, the air temperature was 118° F, but the Sun was shining directly on the thermometer, so the needle had rotated clockwise well past the 130° mark!*

*July 3, 2012.*