



La Mesa Historical Society

LOOKOUT AVENUE

Volume 40, Issue 2

Spring 2015

President's Address

By Jim Newland
President, La Mesa Historical Society

I'll start off this issue's address with a great big thank you for all who came out to The Hills on March 11 to support the Historical Society. It was great to see many friends and supporters of our organization. We hope to engage in similar partnership events in the future. Thanks to our friends at The Hills for their generous offer. It is always great to support both the Society and our local businesses.

The winter ended quickly and once again slid by with even less "weather" than usual in our state. By the time you read this, Governor Brown will have made his announcement formalizing California's most severe drought since the calamitous and legendary mid-1860s drought, which ruined Southern California, and San Diego's turn-of-the-century (1897-1904) parching, which accelerated our own local Flume Company's demise.

The drought reminds us why our pioneering La Mesans worked so hard to secure a steady water supply for their young community a century ago. Hopefully we can all pitch in and help conserve our precious water resources until our supplies are replenished.

Speaking of great community efforts to rehydrate, keep checking our website for details of the next La Mesa Beer and Wine Festival, scheduled for Saturday, June 6, on the northwest corner of Allison Avenue and Date Street (site of the city's farmer's market). The Society has been asked to again partner with the event organizers, and the festival looks to be even bigger than this past December's inaugural event. Don't miss it.

In other news, the Antique Street Faire, one of our favorite events, has been postponed due to the rapidly progressing downtown village streetscape improvement project—which expects to meet its October 1 completion date. Also, the wonderful community-

based Flag Day Parade, scheduled for May 30, is in need of financial support. If you are interested in helping defray the cost of the event, you can donate through the city's website: www.cityoflamesa.com.

Don't miss our Annual Meeting and Rose Garden Celebration on Saturday, May 2, from 2 to 4 p.m. at the McKinney House. Enjoy refreshments, learn about La Mesans being honored, and help vote in new members of our Board of Directors. This year we will say goodbye to former President Aaron Landau, who is stepping off the Board but will still be an active volunteer. Thanks for all the efforts, Aaron!

Please do check out our website: <http://lamesahistoricalandsociety.com>. Also makes sure and "friend" us on Facebook if you are social media savvy.

Feel free to contact me directly to discuss any ideas you have for helping us continue our invaluable mission of preserving La Mesa's history. My email is admin@lamesahistory.sdcxmail.com.



Historic Photo Question

Above: Grossmont High's Red Robe Choir, 1953 (GHS Museum Collection). One of the prides of the Foothillers, the Red Robe Choir poses in front of the "Old Gym." Built with significant Works Progress Administration funding, do you know the year this Streamline Moderne-style educational landmark was completed? (Answer on p. 5)

Landmarked Homes of La Mesa

Roach-Porter House

The Roach-Porter House is located at 4990 Porter Hill Road, the street behind the Community Center on Memorial Drive. The house was designed as a country farmhouse. It is symmetrical with one and a half stories, is made of wood, and has large dormers that provide added living space on the upper floor. Its high foundation of cobblestone, concrete block, and latticed archways adds almost another full story. A spacious veranda with balustrades and turned posts wraps around three sides of the house.

The shingled hip roof, the veranda, and the high foundation hint of some French Colonial influence in the design. These features were found in some 19th-century homes built in Louisiana and some parts of Texas.

Wooden doors in the foundation open at ground level and were used as a wagon entrance to bring lemons into the basement storage area. The Roach-Porter House represents La Mesa's late-19th-century citrus ranching era.

In 1892, Henry Roach purchased 10 acres for \$1,300 in La Mesa Colony. John Stannard, a noted San Diego architect, might have designed the house. Roach was a Southern California transplant. Born in England, he and his family came to Michigan in 1852 when he was 10 years old. He served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and by 1876 he was living in Texas. A successful businessman, he came to the La Mesa area in 1892.

Roach's first wife, Susan, acquired the property in 1895. A severe drought began around 1897 and lasted until about 1905. During the drought, many of the lemon trees died. In 1904, the house and orchards were sold at auction to a man named Mr. George Chambers.

Meanwhile, from 1872 to 1902, Dr. Henry Porter was a missionary in northern China. He fled China with his family during the anti-foreigner and particularly anti-foreign-missionary Boxer Rebellion. The family included his wife, Elizabeth, and a son, James Tank Porter, who was born in China in 1883. Dr. Porter and his family rented the house in 1904 and purchased it in 1905. He named it Ping An Shan, meaning "Hill of Peace" in Chinese.

The Roach-Porter House is one of the most significant buildings in La Mesa due to its unique architecture and because it is one of the few remaining



Above: Named after two La Mesa pioneer families, the Roach-Porter House is one of the few structures remaining from La Mesa's late-19th-century citrus ranching era.

structures from the citrus ranching era. The Roach and Porter families were La Mesa pioneers.

The Porters contributed much to the cultural, civic, religious, and artistic life of La Mesa. The family has had a long and illustrious history in La Mesa. Donna Niemeier, an archivist, board member, and past president of the La Mesa Historical Society, wrote an extended history of the Porter family, which is available for reading at our archives building. The building, located on the Pine Street side of the McKinney House, is open every Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m.



Historic Photo Question

Left: Lady Motorists Atop Local Peak, ca. 1920 (Adams Collection). Pioneering lady tourists visit one of our local promontories in their motorcar. Can you identify this cylindrically shaped pinnacle named for a rare gastropod? (Answer on p. 5)

ArtiFACTS: Hair Receivers



Though rare today, the hair receiver was a common fixture on the dressing tables of women from Victorian times to the early decades of the 20th century. Its purpose was to save hair culled from the hairbrush and comb. The hair could then be stuffed into pincushions or pillows.

Because hair was not washed as often as it is today, oils were frequently used to add scent and shine to hair. The residual oil made the hair an ideal stuffing for pincushions because it lubricated the pins, making it easier for them to pierce material. Small pillows could be stuffed with hair, which was less prickly than pinfeathers.

But perhaps most importantly, hair receivers made the creation of ratts possible. A ratt (sometimes spelled rat) was a small ball of hair that was inserted into a hairstyle to add volume and fullness. The ratt was made by stuffing a sheer hairnet until it was about the size of a potato, and then sewing it shut.

Usually identified by the hole in the lid for inserting hair, hair receivers were made mainly from porcelain, but glass, metal, or celluloid also were used.

NEW! Ask the Historian

Have a question about La Mesa history?

If so, send it to us, and we will run a regular column featuring answers to YOUR questions. Email your questions to admin@lamesahistory.sdcoxmail.com

La Mesa Through the Years

La Mesa Liners was a weekly feature of the *La Mesa Scout* for many years. It was the society page and community announcements section of the newspaper, but it also featured tidbits of the unique and unusual.

"Liners" was always on page 5, which made it easy to find. Below are selections from this regular section from January 1919. The transcription is exactly as it was printed.

The senior class of El Cajon Valley Union High School will hold a dance at the club house Saturday evening, the 18th. They have good music and better eats, so you'd better come and have a good time.

While motoring along University Avenue Wednesday morning Mr. and Mrs. Allen accidentally ran into the ditch, but he was able to regain control of the machine and thereby averted serious consequences.

If you want to know any of the technical points about abalone fishing we refer you to Mr. Coombs. He is an expert in every detail except going into the water after them.

Schuyler Roosevelt of New York City, a cousin of the late Colonel Roosevelt, is spending the winter in San Diego. He and a party of friends were guests of Mr. and Mrs. W. W. Burch one day last week, and after being shown about the city by Mr. Burch expressed themselves as very much delighted with our little city and its spots of scenic beauty.

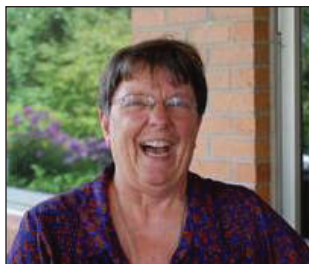
Fellow citizens, there is to be a meeting of the people of this community Tuesday evening at the club house for the purpose of reorganizing the chamber of commerce so that we can accomplish something in the way of community welfare the coming year. Let everybody be there and be prepared to give that meeting a BOOST. That should be the policy of every loyal citizen the coming year. BOOST all the time and then some more.

Story ideas, comments, or suggestions for this newsletter?

Share them with the editor, Ben Abel, at abelrober@gmail.com.

In the Spotlight

Sister LaVern Olberding: Nun But the Best



LaVern was born on a farm in northwest Iowa. She went to Catholic schools through college. She entered the candidacy phase of the Sisters of St. Francis Formation Program in Clinton, Iowa, in 1961. She professed her first vows in

1964 and final vows in 1966. She received a Bachelor of Arts in chemistry with a minor in mathematics.

LaVern taught science, math, and religion for 13 years in Catholic elementary and high schools in Iowa, Nebraska, California, and Kentucky. She then shifted gears and pursued a master's degree in religious education, with the aim of serving in a pastoral and religious counseling role.

LaVern was a religious education director in Louisville, Kentucky, and Manteca and El Cajon, California. She was then a campus minister for 10 years at the Interfaith Center at the University of Louisville. Her focuses were counseling and nonviolence training. During this same period, she cofounded and directed a coed young adult community for the archdiocese. It was molded after the Scriptural passage of Micah 6:8. Later, LaVern became the pastoral care coordinator for Dismas Charities,

where she worked with felons at numerous halfway houses.

LaVern returned to Iowa in 2001 for three years to work as the campus minister at her alma mater, Mount St. Clare College. Needing another financially sustaining job, she found one locally with a former youth group member from 30 years earlier. In 2004, LaVern moved back to the San Diego area, where she has continued to promote active nonviolence and peacemaking.

In 2012, LaVern cofounded the Franciscan Peace Connection (FPC) in La Mesa. The FPC (www.franciscanpeaceconnection.org) is an outreach ministry initiative of her Franciscan community based in Iowa, which has been focusing on active nonviolence and peacemaking for 20 years. The group lists a number of opportunities for workshops, study groups, and trainings on its website, www.clintoniowafranciscansisters.org.

I (Aaron Landau) have known LaVern for more than a year. I have worked with her on the United Nations International Day of Peace, which was held this past year on Sunday, September 21, 2014, in Aztec Park in La Mesa.

LaVern breaks the mold of any stereotype you might have about nuns. She refers to herself as a "fun nun."

I concur. She is gregarious and has a great sense of humor. Compassionate, caring, and ecumenical, she strives to make this world a better place. You could ask for "nun better" a person.

Upcoming Events

Annual Meeting and Rose Garden Celebration

Saturday, May 2, 2015, 2 to 4 p.m.

Location: McKinney House (Museum Lawn), 8369 University Ave., La Mesa (southeast corner of Pine Street)

The roses are being pruned, the 2015-16 slate of officers is ready, and cookies are being baked. Please mark your calendars now to join us for this special celebration!

La Mesa Summer Beer and Wine Festival

Saturday, June 6, 2015, 2 to 7 p.m.

Location: City Lot, northwest corner of Allison Avenue and Date Street

A percentage of proceeds will go to the La Mesa Historical Society. Beer and wine tasting tickets (\$25) available at www.craftbeerandwinefestival.com. Event features food trucks and live music! Vendor opportunities for booths.

In Memoriam

B. James ("Jim") Polak (1920–2015)

On January 30, 2015, long-time La Mesa Historical Society member and esteemed community member B. James "Jim" Polak died at age 94, a little over three weeks after his wife of 65 years, Margaret (or Peggy as she was known to her countless friends), passed away.

Jim was the son of Ben Polak, one of La Mesa's most popular and beloved mayors. Ben was mayor from 1936 to 1948. He singlehandedly saved La Mesa from bankruptcy during the Great Depression. He "invented" the Wacky-Tacky Fair, which raised enough money to keep the city solvent.

Jim was an Eagle Scout. He acquired a lifelong love of scouting's best ideals, as well as a love of the outdoors. During his lifetime, he climbed most of California's notable peaks. He graduated from Grossmont High School and went on to receive a degree in finance from what was then called San Diego State College. Jim served in the Navy during World War II in the Mediterranean theatre.

Upon his discharge in 1946, Jim returned home and joined his father and began his career in commercial property development in San Diego and East County. He was a lifelong member of Kiwanis International and served on numerous charitable boards. Jim and Peggy set up the Polak Family Fund, which supports the arts, culture, and educational programs.

Jim was a congenial, principled, and moral person who cherished his parents, wife, and daughter, Cynthia Baker, as well as five grandchildren, three great-grandchildren, and the community at large. Jim was a shining example worthy of emulation.

The information in this memorial, including much of the verbiage, is courtesy of the obituary published Sunday, February 15, 2015, by the San Diego Union-Tribune.

Historic Photo Answers:

Page 1: 1937

Page 2: Mt. Helix (named for the *Helix aspersa* snail)

Collection Connection

Donor	Donated Item(s)
John Adams	Copy of a 1904 family scrapbook, 4 photo envelopes with negatives, color prints with negatives, and postcard negatives
Keith Dindinger	Rotary Materials: History of San Diego Rotary by Joe Howard; poster of Junior Seau for 2001 golf tournament; Rotary Horse Show programs 1981–1996; La Mesa Rotary installation programs 1985–2000
Wade Douglas	1893 music book for reed organ
Lemon Grove Historical Society	City of La Mesa run maps
Richard Siegel	Information and artifacts related to the O'Quinn family and their restaurant. The O'Quinn Dining Room was located at 7990 La Mesa Boulevard near the Helix Movie Theater.

La Mesa Historical Society Board of Directors

President	Jim Newland
1st Vice-President	Wade Douglas
2nd Vice-President	George Fahouris
Secretary	Sharon Crockett
Treasurer	Rod Whitlow
Directors-at-Large	Ed Blackman
	Suda House
	Linda Rankin
	Pat Stromberg
	Kathy Tinsley
	Donna Niemeier
Past President	Aaron Landau

Board meetings are held the second Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m.



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(619) 466-0197
www.lamesahistoricalsociety.com

Change Service Requested

Cut along line and mail the section below with your check.

AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE LA MESA HISTORICAL SOCIETY Membership Application

The Society depends on membership dues, bequests, and fundraising activities to support the restoration and preservation of local history.

The La Mesa Historical Society operates the Rev. Henry A. McKinney House, a 1908 house/museum located at 8369 University Avenue (at the corner of Pine Street) in La Mesa. Open 1–4 p.m. every second and fourth Saturday of the month or by appointment. Group tours are available. Call (619) 466-0197 for further information. *Lookout Avenue* is the official quarterly publication of the La Mesa Historical Society. Our address is:

La Mesa Historical Society
P.O. Box 882
La Mesa, CA 91944

Lookout Avenue was the original name of La Mesa Boulevard from the 1890s until the City Council voted to change the name in 1940. Lookout Avenue was La Mesa's main street.

I would like to be a volunteer in the following areas:

- ☐ \$500 Benefactor
- ☐ \$250 Patron
- ☐ \$100 Sponsor/Organization
- ☐ \$50 Sustaining
- ☐ \$25 Family
- ☐ \$20 Individual
- ☐ \$10 Student

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State: _____

Phone: _____

I would like to be a volunteer in the following area(s):

- ☐ Docent/Education
- ☐ Grounds/Building
- ☐ Events
- ☐ Archives/House