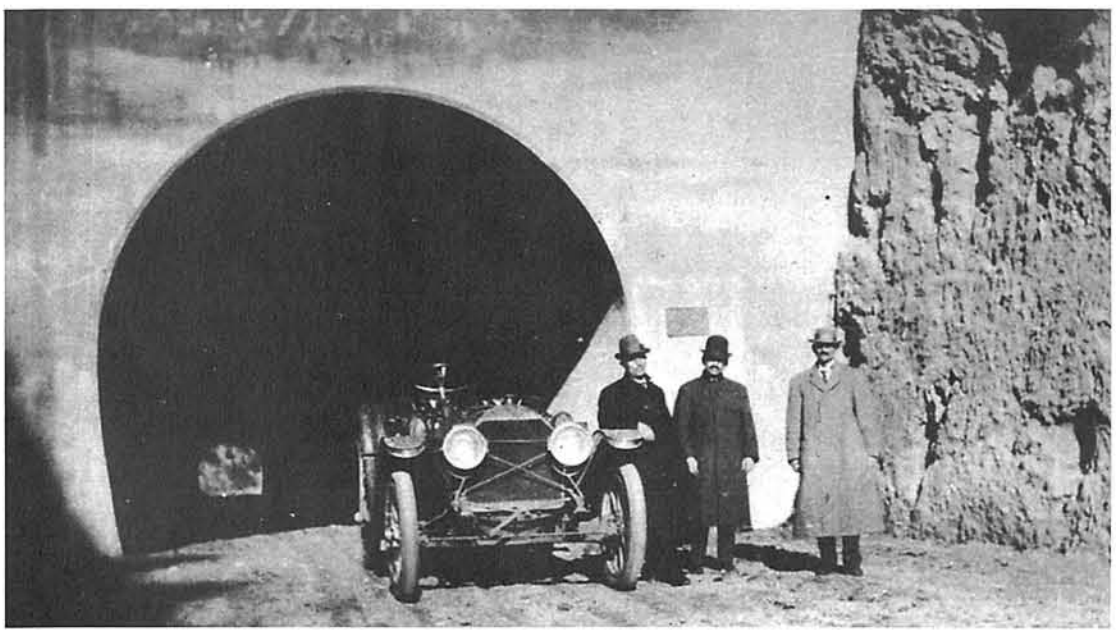
LOS ANGELES CORRAL
WESTERNERS
Headlining Brand
SUMMER 1997 LOS ANGELES CORRAL NUMBER 208



Newhall Tunnel just opened. F.C. Ripley, center, driver of 1910 Cadillac. Author's collection.

The Taming of San Fernando Pass

by John W. Robinson

On a warm day in August 1769, Captain Gaspar de Portolá and an intrepid band of Spanish padres and soldiers, trekking from San Diego to Monterey in the most famous expedition in California history, reached a great inland plain dotted with a few live oaks that they named *Valle de Santa Catalina de Bononia de los Encinos* - the San Fernando Valley. The way west and north seemed to be blocked by mountains. Friendly Indians they encountered pointed out a route to the north, over the mountains, that they sometimes used to trade with other native peoples. Father Juan Crespi, diarist for the expedition, made the following entry for August 8, 1769:

> *About half past six in the morning we left the place and travelled through the same valley, approaching the mountains. Following their course about half a league, we ascended by a sharp ridge to a high pass, the ascent and descent of which was painful, the descent being*

(*Continued on page 3*)

The Branding Iron
THE WESTERNERS
LOS ANGELES CORRAL
Published Quarterly in
Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter

Address for Exchanges & Material Submitted for Publication:

The Publications Editor, Robert Blew
12436 Landale Street, Studio City, CA 91604
The Branding Iron solicits articles of 2,500 words or less, dealing with every phase of the Old West. Contributions from members and friends welcomed.

Publication Design & Layout by Katherine Tolford

THE MONTHLY ROUNDUP

APRIL MEETING

Neil Graffy, former Sheriff of the Santa Barbara Corral and an active participant in the preservation of Santa Barbara history, gave the Corral a glimpse into the past of that city which is possibly the oldest inhabited site in California. Relics have been found that indicate inhabitation over 8,000 years ago.

Originally, travelers could only reach Santa Barbara by ship or a very difficult horseback ride. If one came by ship, he

Photograph by Frank Q. Newton

April meeting speaker Neil Graffy

faced a drenching when the landing boat accidentally overturned if he forgot to tip the crew. By 1861, the stage entered the city,

(Continued on page 18)

made on foot because of the steepness. Once down we entered a small valley in which there was a village of heathen.

The Portolá party had crossed from the San Fernando Valley to the Santa Clara River Valley (today's Santa Clarita) via San Fernando Pass, destined to become one of the major gateways into and out of Southern California.

It is hard for us today to visualize the difficulties faced by early travelers in crossing San Fernando Pass. The mountain ridge has been literally obliterated to make way for the Antelope Valley and Golden State Freeways, but before the advent of modern highway building, the pass posed a formidable barrier to travel between Los Angeles and points north.

San Fernando was not a pass in the usual sense of the word. It was an undulating mountain ridge, steep on both sides, that joined the western end of the San Gabriels with the Santa Susanna Mountains. There was no clear defile in the ridgetop, as characterizes most mountain passes. Travelers in the 1840s and '50s went up and over the crest of the ridge. Early journal writers often wrote of crossing "San Fernando Mountain," for in truth that is what they were doing.

The original Spanish and Mexican trail over the pass was later called *La Cuesta Vieja*, The Old Grade. According to nineteenth century maps, it wound up the hillsides well to the west of the later Los Angeles-Fort Tejón Road, and was described as steep and rocky on both sides. It was part of *El Camino Viejo*, The Old Road, that went from Los Angeles north over San Fernando and Tejón passes into the Central Valley of California.

In the early years, *La Cuesta Vieja* was traveled by Franciscan padres going from Mission San Fernando (established in 1797) to Rancho San Francisco, the mission's outlying stock ranch along the Santa Clara River. There was a rush of traffic after Francisco Lopez discovered gold in Placerita Canyon, six miles northwest of the pass, in 1842. Lieutenant Colonel John C. Frémont's California Battalion, 428 strong, crossed the pass in January 1847 enroute to *Campo de Cahuenga*, where Andrés Pico, *comandante* of the Californios, signed the Articles of Capitulation, ending the Mexican War in California. Since then, San Fernando Pass has often been called Frémont Pass.

Lieutenant Robert S. Williamson led a Pacific Railroad Survey party over San Fernando Pass in 1853. He wrote:

> *This pass is hardly worthy the name, for it consists of a steep ascent and descent over the range hills known at the locality as the Susannah Range. The ascent from the north is not so abrupt as the descent on the opposite side, which, in some places, becomes nearly vertical, and is not passable for wagons without the aid of ropes...After reaching the summit, it was a difficult operation to get the wagon down the hill, for it was so steep that it was almost impossible to descend on foot without passing to and fro in diagonal lines.*

Then Williamson made the prophetic observation that "If it ever becomes necessary to build a railroad at this place, the hills must be tunnelled or cut through."

Sometime after the American conquest, and certainly by the time of Williamson's crossing, a direct route over San Fernando Pass, rather than the winding *La Cuesta Vieja*, was used. Subsequent descriptions refer, as did Williamson, to the steep up and down grades that made wagon travel extremely difficult.

Traffic over San Fernando Pass continued to grow during the 1850s. The steep grades on both sides became littered with broken wagons. To ease the crossing, the enterprising Henry Clay Wiley, later Sheriff of Los Angeles County, installed a windlass on the crest in 1852 or 1853. For a fee, Wiley's windlass would haul wagons to the top and lower them down the other slide. To succor travelers over the pass, Wiley and Ignacio del Valle, part owner of Rancho San Francisco, opened a small restaurant-saloon below the north grade, the first such establishment in the area. It was known as Wiley's Station.

The improvement of the wagon road over the pass became a necessity after Fort Tejón

Phineas Banning

was founded in 1854. The army post in Grapevine Canyon, just north of today's Lebec, relied on Los Angeles for supplies. The city fathers tried to interest private enterprise in easing the bottleneck, but Los Angeles businessmen, although eager to transact business with the fort and the small community, also known as Fort Tejón, that sprang up next to it, were slow at contributing funds. "The barrier which thus seriously retarded the development of Los Angeles County, and indeed of a large part of the remainder of Southern California could have been eliminated at the cost of a few thousand dollars but nothing was done," wrote California historian Robert Glass Cleland.

Then Phineas Banning, Wilmington entrepreneur soon to be known as the "transportation king" of Southern California, entered the scene.

Phineas Banning, born in Delaware in 1830, stepped ashore in San Pedro in 1851. The twenty-one year old went to work for Douglas and Sanford in the highly competitive San Pedro-Los Angeles trade business and within a year had not only proved his worth to the company but had married Rebecca Sanford, the boss's daughter. In 1852 stageman George C. Alexander, with an eye for fast-rising talent, offered Banning a full partnership. The firm of Alexander and Banning prospered from the start.

By 1854 the company's animal and rolling stock consisted of five hundred mules, forty horses, several stages and over thirty heavy freight wagons. Banning not only managed the business but often drove the stages himself. His ambition was not only to dominate commerce between San Pedro and Los Angeles but to cover all of Southern California.

Few men in the annals of early Southern California possessed the rare combination of physical vigor, business acumen, vision and leadership of Phineas Banning. He was a big man in many ways: in physique, in sheer strength of will, in heart. Few who faced him were not duly impressed with his booming voice, his hearty laugh, and the bright red suspenders that became his trademark. He was determined to drive a stage over the harrowing grade of San Fernando Pass and open stage and freight service to Fort Tejón, Beale's Tejón Indian Reservation, and the newly discovered Kern River mines.

According to Major Horace Bell, in his colorful book *Reminiscences of a Ranger, or Early Times in Southern California*, Banning

> *could ride farther with less fatigue than any man I ever knew, not withstanding he was never a lightweight. He could also drive a stage, six-in-hand, faster and over rougher roads and over places where no roads existed than any driver who ever cracked whip or pulled the ribbons.*

Banning was told that it was impossible to drive a six-horse stage over the pass, but this only served to fire his determination to do just that. Bell wrote:

> *At the time, the trail going over San Fernando Pass was a rocky acclivity, difficult of ascent by even a pack mule and descending to the valley beyond with*

a descent of equal abruptness.....In December 1854 Phineas Banning sat on the box of his Concord stage, to which were harnessed a half dozen well fed, panting and foaming mustangs.

With nine passengers hanging on for dear life, Banning drove the six-horse stage right up the steep grade to the top. Here his passengers got out and peered down the precipitous north side. They declared that "it was an act of madness to attempt it" and refused to reenter the Concord. Banning then drove the stage down alone. Bell's description is graphic:

Now he cracks the whip, tightens his lines, whistles to his trembling mustangs, and urges them to the brink of the precipice, and in a moment they are going down! down! racketty clatter bang! Sometimes the horses ahead of the stage, and sometimes the stage ahead of the horses, all, however, going down! down with a crash!

Reaching bottom, Banning shouted back up to his amazed passengers, "Didn't I tell you so, a beautiful descent....."

Banning's heroic - or foolhardy, depending on ones viewpoint - feat was widely publicized in Los Angeles newspapers and facilitated fund collecting. Some thirty citizens contributed to the enterprise, led by Abel Stearns's $500 and Alexander and Banning's $100. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors gave $1,000 toward the project. The contract for grading and construction went to W.T.B. Sanford, Banning's father-in-law. Sanford sent a force of twenty men (one source says 50) under Gabriel Allen to do the work. Allen's work force dug, scraped out, and smoothed a twenty-foot deep gap in the mountain crest, but the grade leading to the gap was only slightly less steep than the old one. The grade was declared passable in January 1855, and the Los Angeles-Fort Tejón Road, as it became known, was ready for use.

Alexander and Banning stages were among the first to use the wagon road, delivering passengers and packages from Los Angeles to Fort Tejón, Edward F. Beale's Tejón Indian Reservation, and later to the Kern River mines. The *Southern Californian* of January 25, 1855, reported that "The pass over the San Fernando Mountain is now travelled by heavily loaded teams, and through which all the supplies for the Indian Reservation and the Military Post at the Tejón will in future be received."

It remained a difficult ascent and descent. Fred Delano, whose father operated a stage-station in San Francisquito Canyon in the late 1850s, described how loaded wagons made it over the top: "Teams were massed on a single wagon and it was dragged to the crest. Then a tree was cut down and fastened to the wagon for a draw, and it was brought down the north side. A ravine at the foot of the road was full of these discarded drag trees." A wagon passenger, writing in 1855, gave his vivid impression of the pass:

It was seven o'clock before we left the Mission [San Fernando] and after proceeding a few miles we reached the San Fernando Pass where the road has been cut through a deep defile in the mountains. Here we had to get out and walk for some miles and the scenery was the wildest I have ever seen since I have crossed the Alps. How our heavy wagon was to get over was a marvel to us. At one place was a ledge of rocks almost perpendicular about four feet high, down which it plunged as if it would turn over and crush the mules while we involuntarily held our breath as we looked on.

In the years 1857 and '58, traffic across the pass included heavily loaded wagons carrying borax from Searles Lake to Los Angeles. "It took four yokes of cattle and a windlass to bring my team over the pass into the San Fernando Valley," wrote teamster J. Kuhrts. Probably the strangest processions to ever cross the pass were the camel caravans that carried supplies from Los Angeles to Fort Tejón.

On October 8, 1858, the first west-bound stage of Butterfield's Overland Mail Company struggled over San Fernando Pass on its 2,700-mile journey from St. Louis to

Edward F. Beale

San Francisco. The cross-country mail and passenger service originated when John Butterfield of New York signed a six-year contract with the federal government to deliver the mails. Four times a week - twice westbound and twice eastbound - Butterfield stages crossed the pass from 1858 to 1861.

San Fernando Pass was the most serious obstacle in all California for the Butterfield stages. To make the barrier less foreboding, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors ordered that:

> *a sum not exceeding $3,000 be appropriated from the County Treasury to be applied to the repair of the road aforesaid...The amount to be expended will be highly beneficial to the traffic of our county and will remove a serious impediment to the transportation of goods, on one of the most public thorough-fares in the county.*

The contract for the repair of the road was again awarded to Gabriel "Gabe" Allen. Allen and his work gang set to work at once. The *Los Angeles Star* (July 31, 1858) reported: "San Fernando Hill. The operations on this road are progressing favorably - the roadway has been widened and the summit cut down, but the appropriation voted for the repairs is not sufficient to make a good road. Nothing yet has been done on the San Francisquito Cañon." Allen's work party cut the summit gap down from twenty to about thirty feet and knocked out the precipitous ledge of rock with its four-foot drop on the north slope that had been so dangerous for descending wagons. The road over the pass was improved somewhat, particularly with the elimination of the rock ledge, but the grades remained very steep on both sides. Allen recommended more work, but the County Supervisors refused to appropriate any more funds.

With Overland Mail stages, Fort Tejón freight wagons, prospectors heading for the Kern River and Owens Valley mines, occasional camel caravans, and a number of private travelers all making use of the Los Angeles-Fort Tejón Road, stage stations sprang up where the traveler could rest his weary bones and obtain meals, drink, and lodging.

Three miles south of San Fernando Pass was Lopez Station, founded by Jerónimo Lopez of the prolific Lopez family so prominent in early Southern California history. Lopez Station consisted of a sturdy adobe building that housed a restaurant and two lodging rooms, later a telegraph office. Outside were a barn and a feeding yard.

After leaving Lopez Station, the stages made the harrowing climb over the pass to Hart's Station in present-day Newhall. As previously mentioned, Henry Clay Wiley and Ignacio del Valle built the small road house in 1852. In 1855 they sold it to Sanford and Cyrus Lyon, twin brothers from Maine. The Lyon brothers built a large wood frame building that housed a store and a tavern, with lodging rooms upstairs. They apparently leased the station to a man named Hart (first name unknown) in 1857 or '58, for it was Hart's Station that the Butterfield stage used as a rest stop from 1858 to 1861. After

the Overland Mail Company abandoned their southern route, the Lyon brothers returned and ran the stage stop until its demise with the railroad's arrival in 1876.

After leaving Hart's (Lyon's), the stages and wagons followed the road northwest, forded the Santa Clara River, ascended San Francisquito Canyon to the southern edge of Antelope Valley, and crossed Tejón Pass into the Central Valley. Stage stops enroute were Moore's and King's in San Francisquito Canyon, Gordon's in Green Valley, Mud Springs and French John's on the edge of Antelope Valley, Reed's at the present site of Gorman, and Fort Tejón.

The outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861 saw the end of Overland Mail Company stages crossing San Fernando Pass. Butterfield switched to a central route for its cross country run and Southern California was bypassed altogether. On June 16, 1861, some one hundred dragoons from Fort Tejón rode over the pass enroute to Los Angeles, their new station. A few days later twenty-eight army camels plodded over San Fernando Pass for the last time, bound for Los Angeles and later Drum Barracks in Wilmington.

Hardly had the stages departed when a rush of miners hurried over the pass bound for the copper mines in Soledad Canyon, near present-day Acton. Gold and silver were also discovered, and the Soledad Mining District was organized in late 1861.

Almost all of the supplies and equipment for the Soledad mines were brought in over San Fernando Pass from Los Angeles. Despite all the grading and cutting that had been done in the 1850s, the pass remained a formidable obstacle for heavily loaded wagons. In the spring of 1861 two Los Angeles businessmen, Charles Brinley and James Vineyard, along with Andrés Pico of Mission San Fernando, petitioned the State Legislature for the right to build a turnpike, or toll road, over the pass. The legislature authorized them to do so on May 7, 1861, with the stipulation that the road be completed in one year. Brinley, Vineyard and Pico did some work to ease the grade when disaster struck.

Three solid weeks of rain caused what became known as "The Great Flood of '62." Roads were washed out, farmland submerged, and cattle drowned by the hundreds. The *Los Angeles Star* of January 25, 1862 reported that "The road from Tejón, we hear, has been washed away. The San Fernando Mountain cannot be crossed except by the old horse trail which winds around and crosses over the top of the mountain. The plain has been cut up into gulches and arroyos, and streams are rushing down every declivity." For a month land travel between Los Angeles and points north was almost impossible.

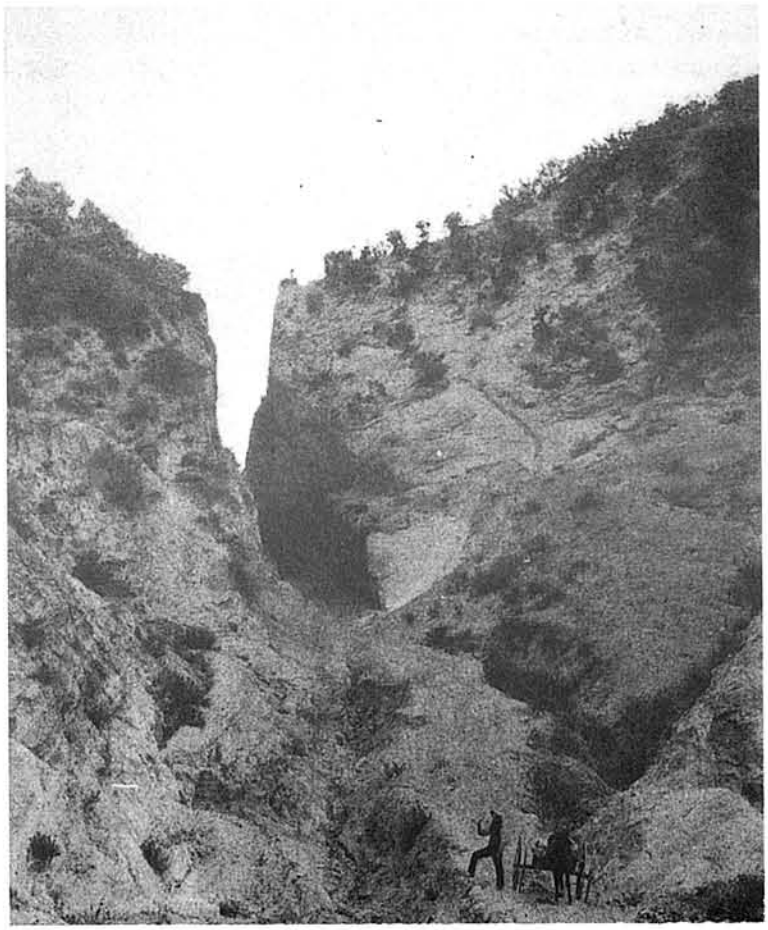
The road over San Fernando Pass would need to be rebuilt from scratch, and the three original franchise holders found the project beyond their means to complete.

To the rescue came Edward F. Beale, owner of Rancho La Liebre (and later El Tejón), sheep and cattleman, and investor in the Soledad Gold, Silver and Copper Mining Company as well as silver mines in the Slate Range near Death Valley. To allow access to his rancho and his mining ventures, Beale determined to once and for all remove the "bottleneck" that hampered all wagon travel north from Los Angeles. In the fall of 1862 Beale took over the franchise to build the road from the original holders, Brinley, Vineyard and Pico, and hired a crew of fifty to do extensive grading and cutting. The job took longer and was much more expensive than Beale originally thought. It involved a much deeper cut at the top of the divide. Twice Beale believed the roadway was completed, but both times, in April 1863 and the following December, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors rejected approval. The four hard-headed commissioners appointed by the Board to oversee Beale's work presented the latter with a diagram showing what the County would accept. They demanded a maximum grade of "one foot to every five," (twenty percent) and a deeper cut at the summit. The supervisors "sweetened the pot" by offering Beale a 20-year contract to collect tolls if he would

Toll House. Courtesy Jerry Reynolds.

complete the project to their liking. Once again Beale's work force dug into the slopes to lessen the road grade and sliced deeper into the sandstone of the ridgeline. His fifteen-foot wide cut at the top reached a depth of ninety feet. In February 1864, the four commissioners finally deemed the roadway "safe and passable" and the supervisors declared the job completed. It had cost Beale between $16,000 and $18,000 - far more than the $5,000 he had been given to complete the job by the County Supervisors.

The *Los Angeles Star* (March 5, 1864) praised the roadway as "of great importance to the county" and listed the toll fees set by the supervisors: $2.75 for a wagon of twelve animals down to $1.75 for a team of four, 25¢ for a man on a horse, 25¢ for each pack animal, 10¢ per head of cattle, 4¢ for sheep. Beale hired Oliver P. Robbins as toll collector and built a small adobe toll house at the bottom of the south grade. The twenty-year franchise netted Beale several hundred dollars per month.



Beale's cut ca. 1875. Courtesy Jerry Reynolds.

At last San Fernando Pass was tamed. Traffic over Beale's Cut, as it came to be known, picked up considerably. Heavy freight and ore wagons enroute to and from the mines of Soledad Canyon, the Slate Range, Coso, and Owens Valley crossed with regularity. Supply wagons and droves of cattle and sheep crossed the pass traveling between Los Angeles and Rancho El Tejón.

Hardly had Beale's Cut been opened to toll traffic than a petroleum rush began. Development of the Santa Susanna oil fields, centered around Pico Canyon some five miles northwest of the pass, began in 1865 and reached a fever pitch in the early 1870s. Refined oil and kerosene from the Pioneer Oil Refinery in present-day Newhall was poured into wooden barrels, loaded onto heavy wagons pulled by teams of twelve horses, and hauled over San Fernando Pass via Beale's turnpike. The toll station, operated by Tom Dunne after Oliver Robbins left, collected $2.75 for each wagon passing through.

After 1869, the wagon ruts over the pass were deepened by the passage of Remi Nadeau's heavy wagons toting silver bullion from the Cerro Gordo mines east of Owens Lake to the Los Angeles and San Pedro Railroad depot in Los Angeles. Nadeau, a French-Canadian wagon master, held the contract to deliver the bullion, in the form of heavy silver-lead ingots, to the depot for transport by rail to San Pedro, then by ship to San Francisco, where the silver-lead would be refined into pure silver.

Nadeau's wagon team usually traveled in pairs, fourteen mules pulling each wagon.

The most grueling part of the journey between Cerro Gordo and Los Angeles was in crossing San Fernando Pass. At Lyon's Station, just north of the pass, the mule teams were doubled for each wagon. Twenty-eight straining animals pulling a single heavily-loaded wagon started up the grade toward Beale's Cut. "Upward they lurched, the chock blocks dragging after each hind wheel, ready to hold the wagon when the mules lost momentum," wrote an observer. At the top the chock block brakes were tightened and the wagons skidded downwards, pushing the mules ahead, to the bottom of the grade. Then the mule teams would go back over the pass and repeat the process with the second wagon. After both wagons were across and the teams rehitched, they would continue to Lopez Station for a much-needed rest.

Beale's Cut continued to feel the trod of stages and heavy freight wagons until the Southern Pacific Railroad completed its through rail line from San Francisco to Los Angeles in September 1876. The 7000-foot tunnel under San Fernando Mountain, along with the surmounting of Tehachapi Pass, were the most difficult sections of the entire rail building effort. 330 industrious Chinese commenced boring the tunnel from both ends in March 1875. Vertical shafts were cut from above so the tunnel could be also dug outward from within. Using black Hercules blasting powder and plenty of manual pick and shovel work, a tunnel twenty-two feet high and sixteen and a half feet wide at the bottom was slowly carved through the bowels of the mountain. In August 1876, after a year and a half of backbreaking labor, the San Fernando Tunnel was completed. The golden spike ceremony was celebrated at Langs Station, in Soledad Canyon several miles north of the pass, on September 5, 1876. At last, Los Angeles was joined by rail with northern California.

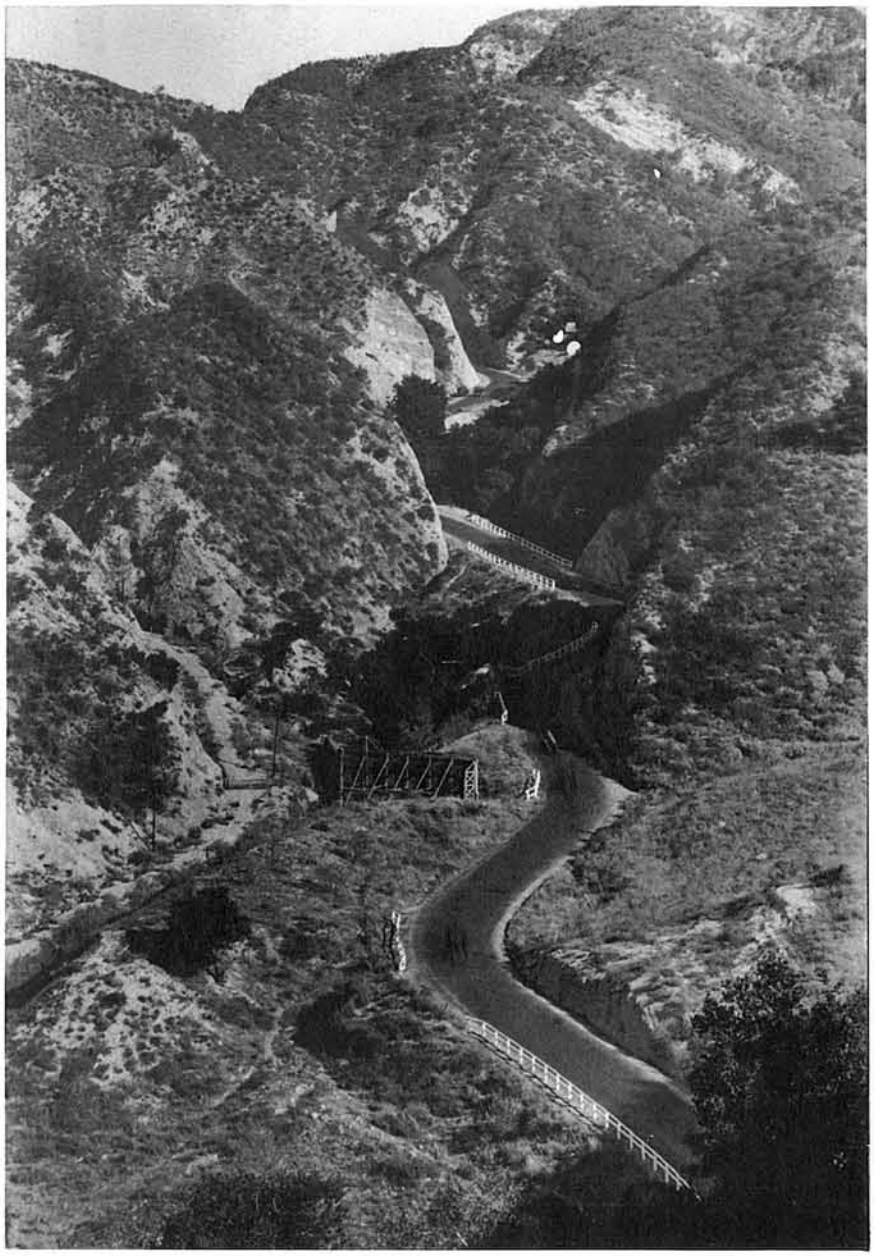
With the birth of the communities of San Fernando and Newhall, along with the development of agriculture on both sides of the pass, Beale's Cut began to recapture some of the traffic it lost to the railroad in 1876. Horseback and wagon travelers continued to pay the toll at Tom Dunne's toll house until 1883, when Beale's twenty-year franchise ran out. Then it became a free public road maintained by Los Angeles County. Yearly, and sometimes several times a year, maintenance work was done by County road crews to fill rain-washed gullies and smooth the grade, which remained at twenty percent. The Newhall Grade, as it became known, continued to be a slow, tedious climb and descent for wagons.

The first motor vehicle known to have traversed the Newhall Grade was a 1902 Autocar, purchased by a San Joaquin Valley rancher who hired race car driver Ralph Hamlin to drive it from Los Angeles to the valley. Hamlin ran into a serious problem trying to negotiate the steep grade. The Autocar stalled out, Hamlin discovered, because the gasoline tank, at the rear of the vehicle, was too low on an uphill grade to feed fuel to the carburetor. Hamlin solved the dilemma by backing the car to the top. When the summit was finally reached, the race driver turned the car around and slipped and slid down the north grade, with his hand on the brake to keep the vehicle from racing out of control.

The number of drivers using the Newhall Grade multiplied in the next few years. They drove it at their own risk and there were accidents - usually the result of engines stalling or brakes failing - but fortunately there were no fatalities in the early years. For a while an enterprising individual stationed a team of horses on the grade and for a fee would pull a stalled vehicle to the top.

In 1904 Los Angeles County road crews set to work to smooth the grade and oil its surface. Two years later they paved it with a thin coat of asphalt.

With the arrival of the Age of the Automobile, Beale's Cut fast became an intolerable bottleneck for travel between Los Angeles and points north. In 1908 the Los Angeles County Road Department began work on a new automobile road that, like the railroad, would pass through instead of over the mountain barrier. County engineers plot-



Road to Newhall Tunnel ca. 1920. Author's collection.

ted out a tunnel straight through the hill just west of the old cut, and road crews went to work carving, blasting, and removing rock debris from both ends. Much of the needed financing for the project came in July 1908, when Los Angeles County voters approved a $3,000,000 bond issue to build a better county road system. Newhall Tunnel, as it was named, was completed and the road paved by September 1910.

Stillness fell on the old cut at the top of the ridge; a half century of travel through its narrow sandstone portals abruptly came to an end. San Fernando Pass, as it was known to thousands of horseback, stage, wagon, and horseless carriage travelers, was now history.

The Newhall Tunnel funneled traffic through San Fernando Mountain for twenty-

Truck waiting exit of another to enter Newhall Tunnel. Author's collection.

eight years. Use increased dramatically with the opening of the Tejón-Castaic Ridge Road in 1915, soon to become famous as the "Ridge Route." The decade after World War I witnessed another phenomenal increase in the number of automobiles traveling California highways. By 1928 it was readily apparent that San Fernando Mountain, even with its tunnel, was once again a serious bottleneck to north-south travel. The best solution, highway engineers believed, was to cut away the mountain.

Financed by matching federal and state highway funds, the first massive excavation - from Weldon Canyon north to Castaic Junction - was commenced in 1928. In less than two years, state highway crews hacked out a broad passage that became a vital link of U.S. Highway 99, opened to traffic in October 1933.

The second big excavation was made directly through San Fernando Mountain and was known as the "Tunnel Cut", as it went through and obliterated the narrow Newhall Tunnel. Completed in 1938, again with matching federal and state funds, it became part of U.S. Highway 6, then State Highway 14, and finally Sierra Highway as it is known today.

The Federal Highway Act of 1956 that authorized the network of interstate freeways led to the widening of U.S. 99 to eight-lanes and its incorporation into the great north-south artery of Interstate 5 in 1972.

The most massive excavation of all, a cut that obliterated most of what remained of San Fernando Mountain, was made for the Antelope Valley Freeway, the new State Highway 14, in the years 1963-1965.

The driver speeding north or south on Interstate 5, the Golden State Freeway, or Highway 14, the Antelope Valley Freeway, is probably unaware that he is crossing what was once a formidable barrier to travel. He is over the pass in minutes. But lest he become too complacent, he should heed the message of Mother Nature, whose powers were revealed on two occasions. In both the Sylmar Quake of 1971 and the Northridge Temblor of 1994, the freeway interchange collapsed. For several weeks, until repair crews could remove the debris and repair the roadways, San Fernando Pass was once again a barrier as in the days of old.

Beale's cut today. Author's collection.

SUGGESTED READING

Bell, Horace, *Reminiscences of a Range or Early Times in Southern California.*

Bolton, Eugene, *Fray Juan Crespi, Missionary Explorer on the Pacific Coast, 1769-1774.*

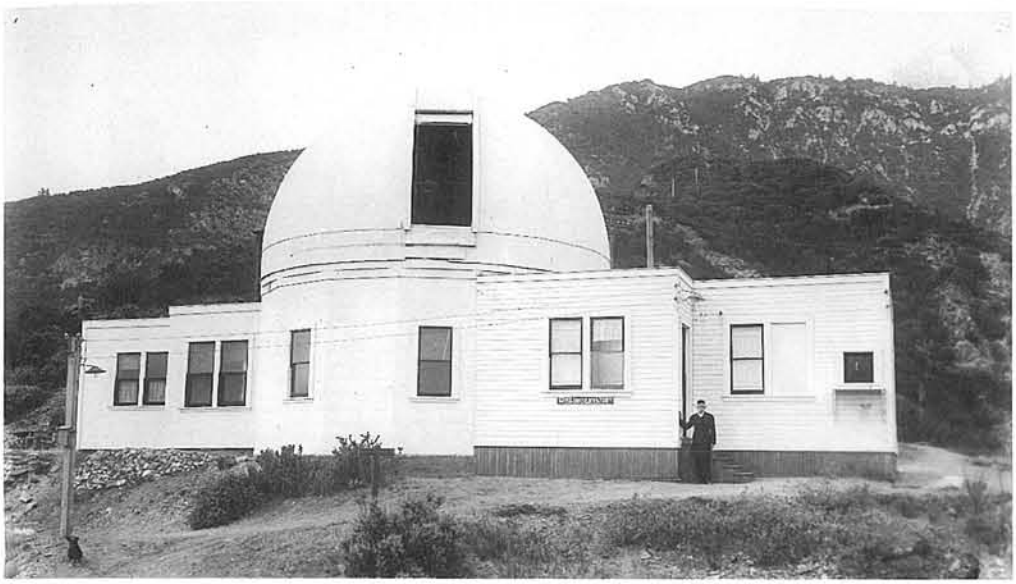
Krythe, Maymie, *Port Admiral: Phineas Banning, 1830-1885.*

Latta, Frank F., *El Camino Viejo A Los Angeles.*

Nadeau, Remi, *City-Makers.*

Reynolds, Jerry *Santa Clarita: Valley of the Golden Dream.*

Ripley, Vernette Snyder, "The San Fernando Pass and the Pioneer Traffic That Went Over It," *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly,* March, June, September-December 1947; March, June 1948.



Lowe Observatory located on Echo Mountain. Prof. Larkin standing at doorway. Author's collection.

Professor Thaddeus S.C. Lowe and His Observatory

by Paul H. Rippens

Millions of Americans have long had a fascination with our solar system. One of the early Americans who became infatuated with the heavens was Professor Thaddeus S.C. Lowe. Lowe, who is best remembered for his Civil War exploits, created the world's first military air force. He sold his "Balloon Corps" idea to President Abraham Lincoln, and made a number of successful balloon flights over northern Virginia, observing Confederate lines for the Union Army.

Thaddeus Sobieskie Coulincourt Lowe was born on August 20, 1832, in Coos County, New Hampshire, within clear sight of the White Mountains. His parents, Clovis and Alpha Lowe, were both natives of the state and descendants of Pilgrims who migrated from England in the middle of the 17th century. When he was 10, Lowe's family made a very difficult decision. Because the family had grown to five children and the financial burden proved to be too much, his parents decided to "bound out" Thaddeus to a neighboring farmer. This proved to be very difficult for Lowe as the farmer and his wife were stern disciplinarians who treated him as a servant.

Lowe's own memoirs tell how he "would lie in a field or sit astride a picket fence, gazing for hours at the great white clouds hanging like banners or floating slowly across the skies." These observations would one day help him in his ballooning and aerial navigation. Lowe stated that "from living in high altitudes, I had observed that there are often very different air currents in the valleys from those which exist in the upper atmosphere." What Lowe was observing were the jet streams that moved the clouds across the skies.

Following Lowe's success in the Civil War, he continued his experimentations and developed a process to make gas from water. He also developed refrigeration systems for ships before moving to Pasadena, California. This move, at age 55, was to be his retire-

ment days but would start Professor Lowe on yet another new adventure.

Upon his arrival in Pasadena in 1887, Lowe had the money necessary to live comfortably and to follow his interests in astronomy. He built a 24,000 square foot residence at 995 South Orange Grove Avenue. The top floor of the tower on one side of the home was nearly 75 feet high, and held a six-inch reflecting telescope. This allowed Lowe to continue his quest for more information on the stars and furthered his interest in establishing much larger astronomical observatories.

Shortly after his move to Pasadena, Professor Lowe met a young energetic civil engineer, David J. Macpherson. Macpherson, a native of Canada and a graduate of Cornell University, had the idea of establishing a railway to the summit of Mount Wilson and was looking for financial support in this venture. He had the knowledge of how to construct the railway, and Professor Lowe had the money. Together they developed the Mount Lowe Railway that whisked people from Los Angeles and Pasadena into the mountains of the Sierra Madre. The railway was touted as "The World's Greatest Mountain Enterprise." People could ride the electric trolley cars from Altadena into Rubio Canyon then board another car for the breathtaking ride up the Great Cable Incline, 3000 feet long, gaining an altitude of over 1,300 feet. At the end of the incline they were treated to a magnificent hotel atop Echo Mountain overlooking the San Gabriel Valley. Later, they could ride yet another trolley car three and one-half miles further into the mountains to spend a day or night at Ye Alpine Tavern.

On April 6, 1892, Lowe accompanied President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard University and a group of distinguished gentlemen from Pasadena and Los Angeles to Mount Wilson. The party included Walter Raymond, proprietor of the Raymond Hotel; Dr. A.E. Winship of Boston, editor of the *Journal of Education* and the *Daily Traveler*; W. S. Severance of Los Angeles; Judge Benjamin Eaton of South Pasadena; Judge H.W. Magee; Superintendent Will S. Monroe of the Pasadena public schools; and photographer W.H. Hill. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on April 9, 1892 that:

> *The trip was not for pleasure only but had to do with a matter of no less importance than the establishment of a photographic telescope on Mt. Harvard, one of the most prominent peaks of the Sierra Madres. The trip was planned by Mr. Raymond, in order to afford President Eliot opportunity to inspect the ground in person.*

While on Mt. Wilson, the group visited the site of the first observatory on the mountain established in 1889. The observatory lasted only eighteen months after which the 13-inch telescope was removed. Professor Lowe planned to establish a grand hotel on the site when he completed his railway to Mt. Wilson, a plan that never materialized.

Although Professor Lowe had made quite a name for himself through his various exploits, he never gave up his love of astronomy. He had known of Dr. Lewis Swift of Rochester, New York, a noted astronomer who had been the recipient of many distinguished honors, including three gold medals by the Imperial Academy of Science at Vienna for comet discoveries in 1877, 1878, and 1879. A wealthy citizen of Rochester had presented Swift with a magnificent sixteen-inch Alvan Clark refracting telescope and a fine observatory to house it. Here Swift carried on his work from 1886 to 1894. Unfortunately, Rochester grew, and it was not long before the observatory was surrounded by homes and many city lights, hindering Dr. Swift in his favorite activity of hunting comets.

Professor Lowe heard of the difficulty and invited Dr. Swift to come to California. He offered to move Swift's whole observatory and rebuild it on Echo Mountain at an elevation of four thousand feet with a great sweeping view of the heavens from the North Star to the southern horizon. Dr. Swift accepted Professor Lowe's offer, and Lowe set about constructing a new observatory on Echo Mountain in 1893. Swift's telescope, a

16-inch Brashear Telespectroscope Polariscope, along with Micrometers, Driving Clock, and other accessories, manufactured in 1882 by Alvan Clark & Sons, of Cambridge, Massachusetts was transported to Echo Mountain and first used in 1894.

Swift continued his work at Echo Mountain until August 11, 1900 when, at the age of 80, his eyesight began to fail. He was replaced by Professor Edgar Lucien Larkin who would carry on Dr. Swift's work for the next 24 years. Swift's last days in the observatory he loved so much were very sad. As Professor Larkin led him down the path from the observatory for the last time, the old man broke into tears. He left all his books behind for they were of no use to someone who was blind. Dr. Swift returned to his old home in Marathon, New York, where he died on January 5, 1913, at the age of 92.

Professor Larkin unpacked his belongings, which had been shipped from Illinois. As he toiled he looked out the small window and observed a visitor making his way towards the building. The visitor was Thaddeus Lowe who had returned to Echo Mountain to meet Larkin. They became friends during their several hour visit, while Lowe discussed his dream of yet another observatory higher in the mountains.

Like Swift, Larkin was a self-made and largely self-educated man. In 1879 he built a private observatory at New Windsor, Illinois, equipped with a 6-inch Clark Refractor. This telescope was transferred in 1888 to Knox College at Galesburg, Illinois, where Larkin was in charge of the observatory until 1895.

At Echo Mountain, he devoted much of his time to public nights for the thousands of visitors who came on the scenic railway. After Professor Lowe lost his railway due to financial difficulties, the Pacific Electric Railway Co. purchased the line and hotels in 1902 and continued to operate them.

In 1904, a well-known astronomer, W. H. Pickering, spent several months at the Echo Mountain Observatory using the 16-inch telescope to continue his studies of the moon and Jupiter's satellites.

Professor Larkin was sometimes assisted by Charles S. Lawrence, a photographer hired by the Pacific Electric Company. Lawrence took an active part in the public demonstrations held at the observatory, and after Larkin's death in 1924, he became the director of the Echo Mountain Observatory.

Following Professor Larkin's death, his son Ralph desired to carry out his father's wishes that his ashes be scattered over the summit of what is now known as Mt. Larkin, located near Inspiration Point. Ralph called upon Charles Lawrence to assist him in this task and upon reaching the top of the mountain, Larkin's son could not carry out the deed. He turned to Lawrence and said "Charles, I can't do it. Will you do it for me?" Obligingly, Lawrence took the box of ashes and scattered them around the top of the small peak. "Thus ended, to my sorrow, our many pleasant years of close association and mutual devotion," Lawrence later stated.

Fire became a constant enemy of the Mt. Lowe Railway. A fire on February 5, 1900, destroyed the magnificent Echo Mountain House. On December 9, 1905, a severe windstorm and fire devastated the mountain top, destroying every building except the observatory. The flames came so close that the 16-inch mirror was removed from the telescope and lowered into a water reservoir for safety. But the end of the observatory came not from fire but from a windstorm in 1928. Lawrence was inside the observatory when winds of hurricane velocity literally blew the building apart. He was not injured in this frightening experience but the observatory, like the rest of the buildings on Echo Mountain, was gone forever.

Although Lowe's observatory did not survive, the 16-inch refractor has. In 1941, the University of Santa Clara, California bought it from the Southern Pacific Railway Company, and it remains in use today in a small observatory on the Santa Clara campus.

Professor Lowe never was able to continue his venture and realize what would have been another great accomplishment. It was his intention to continue his railway

Prof. Larkin standing at the 16 inch telescope inside the Lowe Observatory. Author's collection.

from the site of Ye Alpine Tavern to the summit of Mount Lowe, where another hotel was to be built. Plans had been made to move the existing observatory from Echo Mountain to the peak of Mount Lowe. The Professor had even more ambitious ideas, for he then planned to construct a great cable aerial tramway from the summit of Mt. Lowe high over the deep canyons to the summit of San Gabriel Peak. Lowe called this six thousand foot mountain "Observatory Peak" and he planned to build the largest observatory in the world and a sanctuary where men of science might live, expense free, to carry on their investigations without annoyance from the outside world.

Today little remains of Professor Lowe's railway and observatory, only foundations and rusting metal. The Professor's idea of making Echo Mountain and Observatory Peak the astronomical center of the world never materialized but the work continues at Mount Wilson and other observatories throughout the world. Perhaps Professor Lowe was ahead of his time, or perhaps the work started by him was meant to be continued by others. His ideas led to rich discoveries in many fields, but few remember him for his efforts to further the field of astronomy.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Block , Eugene. *Above the Civil War.*

The Griffith Observer (March, 1940).

Hoehling, Mary. *Thaddeus Lowe- America's One-Man Air Corps.*

Robinson, John W. *The San Gabriels* (Chapter 13).

Seims, Charles - *Mount Lowe - The Railway in the Clouds.*

(*Monthly Roundup continued from page 2*)
and one Captain Thompson opened its first hotel.

In 1872, Charles Nordhoff, in an article in *Harper's Review*, referred to the community as one of the most beautiful in the world. Because of the influx of health seekers and other tourists, more hotels were necessary. The Shaw House, one of the earliest, was doomed because it charged 50 cents for a cup of coffee. The first real hotel, the Arlington, was passé by the turn of the century because newer and better hotels were being built.

Milo Potter, who had operated the Westminster Hotel in Van Nuys, arrived in Santa Barbara and decided to open a new hotel. The site of the new hotel near some sulphur baths was probably the oldest inhabited site in California and many Indian artifacts were found. Ground was broken on January 19, 1902, and one year later the six story, $500,000 building was opened for business. Although the hotel was officially opened exactly one year after ground breaking, a dinner for the directors had already been held there a month previous.

The facility contained 495 rooms each with its own telephone. Southern Pacific soon opened a railroad station just behind the hotel for the guests' convenience. In addition to Persian rugs and other niceties, the hotel offered its guests, many of who were movie stars, billiard rooms, a bowling alley, a polo ground and a quarter mile race track, which also required stables for the guests' mounts.

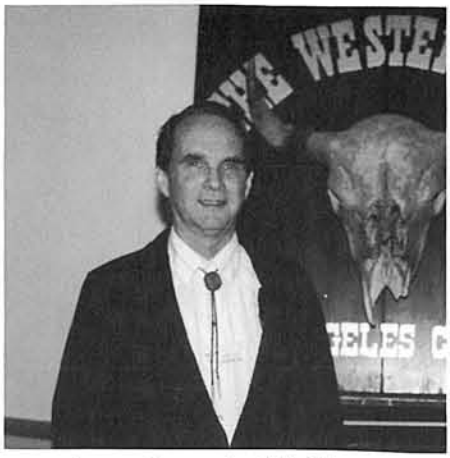
The hotel had its own private water system and power plant. At its height, it employed 500 in a community of 6,500. All of this was needed to provide for the 60 feet of refrigerators, three private dining rooms, and a grand ballroom that would seat 700. The grand ballroom occupied 9,600 square feet and was where Paul Whitman started playing for five dollars a night.

The exterior was as elegant as the interior. The grounds were extensively landscaped, including a geranium lined walkway one mile long. Full grown trees were brought in and planted to give shade and a mature look. In addition to the gardens, the hotel had its own zoo.

As time passed, the Potter began to encounter troubles. One of the major problems the hotel faced was the rise of the automobile. Many of the newer hotels had automobile entrances which the Potter did not. Because of operational problems, the Potter was sold in 1919.

In 1921 a fire broke out in the building and 60-80 mile per hour winds created by the fire itself fed the fire. By 5 P.M. only the east wall of the main building remained, and soon only the laundry tower remained. Soon even it was gone and nothing was left of what had been one of the world's most elegant hotels.

Many slides contributed to the portrayal of a life style that few even can imagine today.



Photograph by Frank Q. Newton

June meeting speaker Willis Osborne

JUNE MEETING

Associate Willis Osborne, retired from 44 years of teaching and past Sheriff of the San Dimas Corral, presented the Corral with an illustrated lecture on the Old Ridge Route. This is not Route 99 or I-5 which many are acquainted with but the original road between 1915 and the opening of 99 in the 1930s.

Today, one may whiz from Los Angeles to Bakersfield, but in 1915 when the Old Ridge Route was opened between Castaic and the Grapevine its aim was to enable drivers to make the trip in two days. On his first trip over 99 in 1938, Willis's parents told him of the old road further east between Castaic and Tejón. The road was designated the Ridge Route because it was built along the ridge in order to avoid expensive cuts and save money.

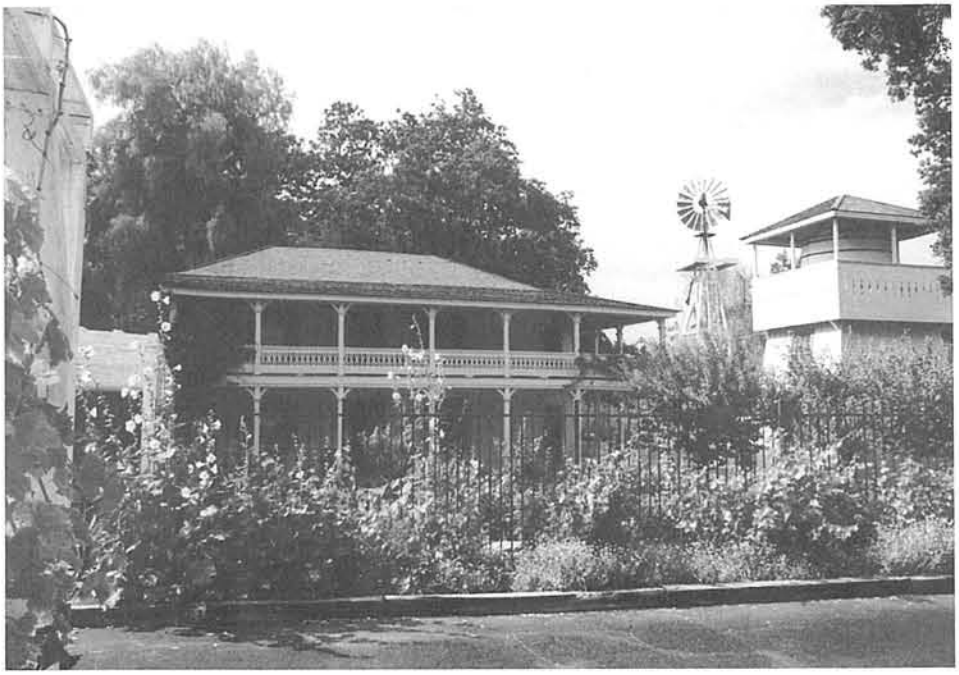
In 1910, the State Legislature authorized $18,000,000 in bonds to build roads throughout the state. In 1912 the surveyors arrived, and in 1914 building began. Using picks and shovels, mule driven graders and steam shovels, the workers pushed the road through , and in October 1915 it was opened to traffic.

Before 1915, traffic between Los Angeles and Bakersfield went by way of Tehachapi. Then traffic entered the road at Castaic and went to Tejón where it joined the Grapevine. Many referred to the entire route as the Grapevine, but that term really only applies to the section from Tejón down the mountain to the flats. To help the drivers, the Automobile Club of Southern California erected route signs overnight on the new road.

Driving the road was an experience. It had 652 narrow curves and made 110 complete circles. Some of the grades were so steep that cars with gravity feed fuel tanks had to back up to insure a fuel supply. The Newhall Tunnel was so narrow that trucks could pass through it only by driving down the middle of the road. The speed limit was 15 miles per hour, and the Sheriffs Department stationed five motorcycle patrol officers on the 29 miles to enforce the limit.

At first there were no facilities on the road. Soon the Ridge Route Garage, which was one of only two AAA approved, opened. This was soon followed by tourist cabins and other lodgings. The most famous was Kelly's, which was half way; later it became known as the Half Way Inn. Many other lodgings, gas stations and restaurants soon opened to help the drivers on their way.

Anyone looking for adventure and wishing to re-live the past may still travel the old road. The speaker led a tour of the route just last fall. The old route is mostly passable to passenger cars, but a four wheel drive vehicle is a better option.



Photograph by Frank Q. Newton

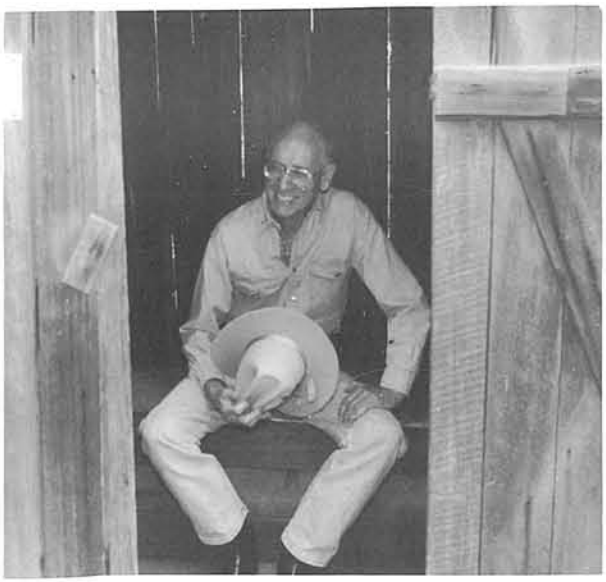
Leonis Home, site of 1997 Fandago

FANDANGO

On May 17, 1997, the Corral held its annual Fandango, inviting spouses and significant others to join in the festivities. The Leonis Adobe in Calabasas provided the setting for an afternoon of touring the restored Plummer Home, the Leonis Adobe and the farm grounds. Miguel Leonis (1824-1889) was a controversial and powerful landowner who carved out an 1100-acre ranch in the west San Fernando Valley, worth $300,000 at the time of his death. Today the Leonis Adobe is entered on the National Register of Historic Places and is listed by the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles.

Corral members and their guests found the two buildings contain furniture and decorations from the 19th century, so stepping into the Plummer House and the Leonis Adobe is like taking a walk back in time. The grounds are used as a working farm and serve as a popular field trip for school children, who get a close-up introduction to cows, chickens, peacocks, sheep and goats.

Dinner was provided by the Sagebrush Cantina adjacent to the Leonis Adobe. The weather was perfect. Two Andy Dagosta paintings were raffled off. In a brief ceremony, the Los Angeles Corral became a member of the Conference of California Historical Societies.



Andy Dagosta enjoying peace and quiet at Leonis House.

Chuck Tichenor presenting Sheriff Abe Hoffman with membership certificate in Conference of California Historical Societies.

Photographs by Frank Q. Newton

Members enjoying dinner at Leonis House.

Corral Chips

RAYMUND WOOD and his wife have traveled across Canada by train, bus and ferry from Toronto to Victoria. Among other activities, they had the opportunity to watch the ceremony of turning Hong Kong over to China from a former British colony.

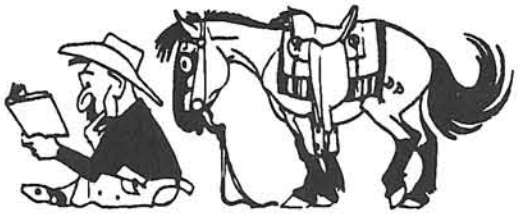
JOHN ROBINSON is not only active in celebrating the California Sesquicentennial but has branched out to help Alaska celebrate its centennial of the Klondike Gold Rush by hiking the Chilkoot Trail from Dyea over the Chilkoot Pass to Lake Bennett. Fortunately, he took a chartered bus from the lake to Dawson City and the Klondike gold fields.

The Westerners were well represented at the San Fernando Mission bicentennial celebration. **GLORIA RICCI LOTHROP, DOYCE B. NUNIS, JR., DAVID HORNBECK, NORMAN NEUERBURG** and **MSGR. FRANCIS J. WEBER** all made presentations at the conference. Far too many members were in attendance to list. As always the members continue to support historical activities.

In the next column is a continuation of photographs of our charter members. Our thanks to Glen Dawson for these and other photographs of early Corral members and activities.

Homer H. Boelter

John B. Goodman III



DOWN THE WESTERN BOOK TRAIL . . .

After the prime necessities of life, nothing is more precious to us than books.

--Pierre Simon Fournier

920 O'FARRELL STREET: *A Jewish Girlhood in Old San Francisco*, by Harriet Lane Levy. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1996. 198 pp. Illustrations.

920 O'Farrell Street discusses the life of a Jewish girl growing up in San Francisco. Harriet Levy describes her relationships with her parents, sisters, friends, the ways of the schools and education and the importance of the Jewish faith in her life, whether it was celebrating a holiday or going to Synagogue. She expresses what life was like on her street, her different neighbors and their routines. For instance, when Harriet smelled the odor of frying oil, she automatically knew that the Lessings were having a poker party, or that every spring, Alice Toklas went to Sherman's Rose. Levy also takes the time to describe each room of her house, what its use was and how each one made her feel. For example, the parlor was so rarely used because it was for only very special occasions that Harriet would sneak in there and look around in complete awe because of its elegance and beauty. Harriet Levy expresses her feelings whether they were love, hate, fear or excitement about everything in her life. She takes the time to share with the reader everything that she found important in her life: her childhood, going to Berkeley, moving away and finally coming home and seeing the Cadillac Motor Company had taken over her home at 920 O'Farrell Street.

Harriet Levy writes with such feeling and so much detail that it is hard not to find yourself believing that you are in the story with her, experiencing what she experiences and feeling what she is feeling.

I could easily relate to her feelings about school and her anxiety and excitement at graduating and being the valedictorian of her class. She being one of the few women to attend and graduate from the University of California at Berkeley gave me great admiration and hope that I can achieve such great accomplishments. Being Jewish and reading about her customs also made this book enjoyable to me. It was very interesting to me to read and find out that as much as a hundred years ago, many of the customs and ways of celebrating the Jewish holidays were the same as they are today. The addition of photographs in this book was also quite interesting. This way the reader is able to picture all the characters, what they looked liked, how they dressed, and where they lived. It is just one more way for the readers to find themselves in the story with Harriet.

I recommend reading this book to anyone, adults or teenagers. It is a very interesting and an easy-read story about life in San Francisco in the 1890s. Because of the writing abilities of Harriet Levy, you are able to get wrapped up in the character and actually feel what she's feeling, and you want and think the same things as she. Reading this book will give people a wonderful experience and make you look a little closer at your family and friends and your feelings about everything in life.

Deborah L. Staub
Student, Taft High School

FATAL CONFRONTATION: *Historical Studies of American Indians, Environment and Historians*, by Wilbur R. Jacobs. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. 207 pp. Illustrations, Selected Bibliography, Index, Cloth, $45. Order from University of New Mexico Press, 1720 Lomas Blvd., Albuquerque, NM 87131-1591

(505) 277-0853.

Dr. Jacobs has previously addressed the Los Angeles Corral on the subject of Francis Parkman (Historian as Hero). Further thoughts on Parkman are intertwined throughout this book. *Fatal Confrontation* is a compilation of ten essays written by Jacobs between 1954 and 1992 plus an Afterword which amounts to a biographical sketch about Jacobs himself and the development of his thought processes and the forces in his life which have shaped them. All of the material is well documented and written in readable style.

Do not expect these writings to be the usual "white men conquering the savage land" view of history. On the contrary, Dr. Jacobs revels in what he refers to as revisionist history. That is to say, a defining of history told on many different levels with all its complexities, and viewed from the standpoint of native peoples, the environment, time and place, and all types of settlers. In other words, this is not another Eurocentric view of the great westward expansion. It may be "revisionist," but it seems an honest and balanced approach to this reviewer.

Two giant figures in the recording of American history appear throughout this work: Francis Parkman and Frederick Jackson Turner. Jacobs displays a genuine fondness for Parkman because he believes that Parkman's romantic view of the frontier expansion was, by design or perhaps inadvertently, an environmental view. Despite the era of his writing, Parkman was perhaps more sympathetic to other factors than just the Euro-American push to the west. Turner, on the other hand, presents more of a problem for Jacobs. He admires Turner's great mind and his research methods, but has trouble with his view of the West through white men's eyes; obviously, Jacobs views Turner as a flawed hero.

Jacobs does not view the coming of white settlers to the American west as a necessarily productive event. He often takes a harsh view of them as despoilers of the land and killers of the native peoples who had a prior right to their domain. Jacobs decries the Euro-Americans for their destruction of the primitive landscape of America. This reviewer believes, however, that he strains credibility in attempting to ascribe current environmental thought to the aboriginal people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, it was probably their primitiveness and spirituality which preserved the environment, more than any great conscious thought on their part.

All in all, an interesting set of essays and an interesting view of the American West. I recommend it for serious students of the subject.

Jerry Selmer

GEORGE MONTAGUE WHEELER: *The Man and the Myth,* by Doris Ostrander Dawdy. Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1993. 123 pp. Maps, Appendices, Notes, Bibliography, Index. Cloth, $24.95. Order from Ohio University Press, Scott Quadrangle, Athens, OH 45701.

This is a study of the life, times and western geographical surveys of US Army Corps of Engineers officer George Montague Wheeler. Its main stress is the field surveys he made from 1869 to 1879 and the preparations of reports on them from 1879 to 1889. The book is based on Wheeler's reports, the scattered and incomplete documentation for them and other sources.

The book is disappointing in many respects. There is no catalog or map of the surveys Wheeler conducted or of what the US Army ordered Wheeler to do. The book lacks appreciation of the US Army regulations and customs, which strongly influenced what Wheeler did and how he did it. It also lacks understanding of how vast the areas of the West Wheeler covered were, and how limited the communications and transportation were within them. Without complete understanding of these and other historical factors it is not possible to write definitively on Wheeler and his work.

Konrad F. Schreier, Jr.