

# TEMECULA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER



Wolf Store

May 2021  
Volume 21 Issue 5

*It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Temecula Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.*

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[www.temeculahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.temeculahistoricalsociety.org)



*The office at Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs circa 1914.*

# Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs Resort

By Steve Williamson

For the first half of the twentieth century, Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs Resort was the economic powerhouse of Murrieta and by far its largest employer. Just about every long-time resident of Murrieta has fond memories of working at the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort.

Three generations of Guenther family members owned, operated, and grew the resort. The Guenther's prospered as a result of their efforts to develop the property. But they were also civic-minded and generous toward the citizens of Murrieta. It is a testament to the Guenther family that, after more than a hundred years, the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort is still there, is still intact, and is still serving the community.

In 1884, Juan Murrieta sold 14,000 acres of land in the Temecula Valley to the Temecula Land & Water Company. The water company was eager to capitalize on the land boom that had been created by the railroad, which had begun service through the valley just three years earlier. The water company surveyed a township around the railroad depot and named the town Murrieta in honor of the man who had sold them the land for development. The town grew in population and in popularity.

Hot water was piped into town from a thermal pool just three miles east of town. A hotel, bathhouse, and steam laundry service was also established at

*(Continued on next page)*

# Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs Resort

that natural hot spring location. It was very popular with the citizens of San Diego.

Disaster struck in 1891, when torrential rains washed out the railroad track through the Temecula Canyon for a second time and Santa Fe vowed not to rebuild that section of track, thus cutting off transportation service between San Diego and the Temecula Valley. The hotel, bathhouse, and laundry service went out of business and land values plummeted.

Eleven years later, in 1902, Frederick "Fritz" Guenther, a German immigrant and owner of a saloon in Los Angeles, was shown the remnants of the hotel and bathhouse in Murrieta. He was reminded of the European health spas he had seen back in Germany. His enthusiasm for building and development was piqued. He purchased the 294 acres of land which included the mineral hot springs for \$10,000.

Two months later, Fritz offered C. Edgar Smith an opportunity to match Fritz's \$10,000 investment in exchange for a half interest in the property. With development funds at his disposal, Fritz went right to work. He cleaned up the mud bathhouse, demolished the dilapidated hotel, and built a row of "tent" cabins to serve as guest accommodations.

In April of 1903, Fritz appears to have had a change of heart regarding his partner. He appealed to his sons to empty their savings accounts for the money he needed to buy out his partner. For years, Hugo and Rudy joked about having become "reluctant partners" with their father. Nevertheless, the entire Guenther family jumped into action to make the resort a success.

That summer, Fritz built an administration building, which included a kitchen and dining hall. A basement would later be developed into a cocktail lounge. After dinner each evening, the Guenther family entertained their guests with music. Fritz played the zither. Rudy played violin. Everyone sang and danced.

By November of 1903, Fritz had begun construction on a row of wood-framed Victorian cottages. This became known as "Cottage Row." The following summer, construction began on the Monterey Hotel. The popularity of the resort was growing fast. The pace of development was surpassing Fritz's ability to fund growth with current cash flow. Rather than take out a bank loan and incur costs, Fritz chose to incorporate the business. On August 10, 1904 Fritz submitted the incorporation paperwork. As officers and directors, Fritz listed himself, his two sons, John Wenner of Murrieta, and John Mitchell of Los Angeles. The initial stock offering would be \$150,000. Fritz valued his own assets at \$80,000. This provided \$70,000 in development capital, while Fritz retained a 53% controlling interest.

Growth and development continued. A new bathhouse was built and the original bathhouse expanded. In March of 1908, the resort introduced the California Hotel with "steam heat throughout, modern plumbing, and all the comforts and conveniences of a high-class hostelry."

In 1912, Fritz contracted Bright's disease (a kidney

disease). He refused treatment until it was too late. Fritz Guenther died on October 27, 1912 at the age of 63. The following year, Hugo and Rudy built Memorial Hall in honor of their father. One year later, the family introduced an indoor, Olympic-sized swimming pool they called "The Great Plunge."

In 1925, Hugo and Rudy had the Victorian cottages moved to a new location to make room for another hotel. This would be a lavish, Spanish-style hotel for guests with more "discriminating tastes." They called the new hotel the "Annex Hotel."

In their new location near Memorial Hall, the Victorian cottages began being used as employee housing. "Cottage Row" began being referred to as "Whiskey Row."

In 1933, the resort opened a miniature golf course. This would be the last major construction project undertaken by the Guenthers. All construction was suspended for the next two decades as the country struggled through the Great Depression and World War II. The resort survived by keeping its overhead and maintenance costs to a minimum.

During the post-war years, the country experienced a tremendous growth in prosperity. To be sure, the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort saw an increase in occupancy as well. However, the introduction of modern jet transportation opened a host of new travel options available to the public. Also, Palm Springs was fast becoming the chosen playground of the Hollywood crowd. Government regulation, labor disputes, and escalating maintenance costs put more strain on revenue and resources.

By the end of the 1960s, the Guenthers had come to the conclusion that it was time to sell the resort. In 1970, they accepted an all-cash offer of \$2 million from San Diego-based developer Irvin J. Kahn. During the next three years, Kahn poured another \$45 million into improvements to the property. When Kahn died in 1973, the resort fell under the control of Kahn's Chicago-based attorney Morris Shenker. Shenker had ties to the Chicago underworld and eventually filed for bankruptcy protection owing the IRS \$55 million in unpaid taxes.

For the next 20 years, the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort saw a steady stream of shady characters and organizations with bizarre claims that the hot mineral water could restore health and even cure cancer.

Finally, in 1995, the Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa purchased the property for \$7 million. It was their plan to turn the former resort into a private bible college. For the next 25 years, the property was closed to the public. It is said that the church has invested \$20 million over the past two decades in renovations and improvements.

As of today, the resort is once again on the market for sale. And as we have seen, when the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort is for sale, anything can happen....

He Passed this way . . .

## Rhine Helzer, Advocate for Temecula History

TVHS member Rhine Helzer passed away at his Temecula home on Saturday, April 24th, surrounded by family after a prolonged battle with cancer. Rhine spent many years of advocacy for the Vail Ranch and Temecula history. He and his wife Sandy have been two of the most steadfast supporters of the Vail Headquarters restoration project from the beginning. Rhine served as Vice President and Sandy served as Treasurer of the Vail Ranch Restoration Association for over twenty years. During the many years before the property was renovated, the Helzers watched over the property and kept the trees watered. Rhine also served on the Plaques Committee of the Temecula Valley Historical Society and affixed several of the plaques in Old Town.



*O. T. Hackett, the stagecoach driver, and Ramona Wolf, were at the Vail Ranch on Sunday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, to greet and share stories with a VIP tour from the Horsewomen of the Temecula Wine Country and Eq-Wine Riders that included rides in the stagecoach and a visit to the blacksmith shop. It was a beautiful warm day —Well, actually is was HOT...89 degrees!*

# President's Message

May, 2021



Dear Members things are moving forward with the Society. At Vail Ranch HQ the crew has the stage coach running now, joining the train for fun rides for the whole family. Come see us on Sunday afternoons or during special events.

Also, our ribbon cutting at Vail Ranch HQ, previously scheduled for March 20, 2020 (it was our 20th year too - could it be that was too much for the universe?) is back on the calendar. Save the date - July 16th - more details to follow.

We are also talking about meeting in person, possibly outside for our June meeting. We are working on the details, and if we can't swing it in June, the time is coming. Keep abreast on our website and Facebook page.

Speaking of our Facebook page, have you checked it out? There is lots of fun content, along with info on upcoming events. You can even catch past events! If you missed Steve Williamson's April presentation on Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs, you can watch it there. I had no idea generations of families worked at Murrieta Hot Springs Resort or that every local knew someone who worked there or worked there themselves at some point.

Finally, as noted in the newsletter, we lost one of our integral members with Rhine Helzer's passing. We are so grateful for his contributions to identifying, preserving and promoting the history of the Temecula Valley.

— *Shari*

\* \* \*

**Vail HQ Open and Active**  
**Lots of Eats**

## EVENTS CALENDAR

- Tuesday, May 4** — Every Tuesday 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. Farmer's Market at Vail HQ. Come get fresh veggies, tamales, empanadas, and artisan craft items.
- Sunday, May 9** — 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Vail HQ open Sunday Funday, with activities and vendors.
- Saturday, May 15** — Thistle & Sage 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Event, vendors and activities.
- Sunday, May 23** — 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday Funday, Event with activities and vendors.
- Monday, May 24** — 6 p.m. TVHS invites all to watch Zoom presentation by Steve Lech "Postcards From Mecca" Check TVHS Website for the link.
- Friday, May 28** — 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Starlight Bazaar With vendors and activities.

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**History Center Open Every Sunday**

**Noon to 5 p.m.**

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## Membership News

### WELCOME NEW MEMBER:

*Bryant Rich*  
*Valeri Sexton*

### THANK YOU FOR RENEWING:

*Kent & Penelope Bernard*  
*Janice Bricker*  
*Suzanne Dechert*  
*Martin Dinsenbacher*  
*Tom & Michele Elling*  
*Arnie & Nancy Frick*  
*Jerry & Darlene Gilbert*  
*Julie Gilbert*  
*John & Bonnie Martland*  
*Nancy Mize*  
*Gerry & Andrea Nicholas*  
*Barbara Phillips*  
*Ken & Bonnie Reed,*  
*Alexis & Johnathan Duvic*  
*Mary Lou Reid*  
*Barbara Tobin*  
*Steve Williamson*

## Vail Headquarters Re-opens with Much Activity

April has been a busy month at The Ranch Headquarters with a full complement of businesses open and the Center events very well attended. TVHS has been very active at the Antique store with the Tues. morning Farmers Market and the Sunday Fundays, as well as additional special events scheduled throughout the month. Our ever-popular train rides have experienced record breaking attendance. We have added our stagecoach rides to the mix, and it has been very popular as well.

As the Covid restrictions lift, we are seeing much more community participation at the Ranch, and it has been very rewarding to see the Historical site being utilized by the community.

As the Chairman for the Events and Education committee, I feel that we are really reaching our community, and they are responding positively to the historical aspects of the Ranch, as well as its importance to Temecula Valley's early history. It is not an easy job, however. It takes manpower to run our part of the Ranch Headquarters activities, and we do need additional volunteers to keep things running smoothly.

Therefore, I am requesting our membership to consider donating a couple of hours a month to help out. There are many tasks, and most are very simple. We are currently using High Schoolers (for Community Service Hours) as well as adults to sanitize the train and stagecoach rides. By Covid restrictions, it must be done after every run of the vehicle. We also need volunteers to help set up and put away merchandise at the Antique Store, set out signage, prepare donations for sale, and clean and dust the store.

And our History Center needs docents for Sunday afternoons. You do not have to be a learned historian to participate. A self-guided tour of the Ranch Headquarters, just reading the many plaques placed around the site will give even the newest Society members a good understanding of the daily lives of Temeculans and the importance of the Vails and ranching in this Valley. Toni, a longtime volunteer at the History Center, can teach the basics to anyone who wishes to volunteer. Learning some of the history of Temecula and the Vail Ranch will be rewarding to volunteers as well as the interaction they have with visitors.

Interested members please contact: Bonnie Reed at (760)484-6019 or Email: [grannyofive@gmail.com](mailto:grannyofive@gmail.com).

\* \* \*

**Visit the TVHS Antique Store at Vail HQ**

## Perilous Days of Pioneers

*(Editor's Note: This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the Lake Elsinore Valley Press, October 15, 1915 and is based on an interview with Samuel Warren (O.T.) Hackett late in his life. Mr. Hackett was so reliable that he attained a reputation for always being On Time, hence the adopted initials of O.T. Hackett. He was a regular in Temecula, staying overnight by renting a room at the Wolf Store. He is remembered with an appropriately appointed room in today's restored Wolf Store.)*

At the recent grape day exercises at Escondido the registry of old residents of San Diego County showed that S. W. Hackett, whose home is at 1534 First Street is the oldest resident of the county who has continually been resident in this city. He has been a citizen of San Diego since 1859 and during the intervening has followed various occupations, having at one time been the owner of the stage and mail route between this city and Temecula, member of the city council and superintendent of streets, which latter position he resigned the office of councilman or alderman as it was called at the time. He is on the eve of four score years, says the San Diego Examiner.

In all these years Hackett says he has not voted outside the limits of San Diego. There are other old-timers here whose date of coming was about contemporaneous with that of Hackett, but they left the place and for a number of years resided in other parts of the county or country.

Hackett was asked if he remembered the storm during which a great part of the line of the Santa Fe in Temecula canyon was washed out.

It is this destroyed line which has since remained out of existence and which the people of this city have asked the state railroad commission to order the Santa Fe company to rebuild, an order which has just been made by the commission.

In answering the question Hackett said: "I should say that I do remember it because I was right in it. I was running the stage and carrying the mail at the time between this city and Temecula. The rain commenced to fall in Temecula on Saturday, February 3, 1884, just about as I was leaving Temecula for this city. The washout took place on the following day, February 4. The rain was like a deluge and swept everything before it. That was the first time the track was washed out. The second washout occurred, I think, in 1890.

"I started to return to Temecula on Monday. The rivers were all swollen, I was compelled, with the help of another man, to draw my stage across the railroad bridge over San Diego near Old Town and then swim my horses over the river. The section man refused to give me permission to cross on the bridge, but no trains came along while I was crossing.

"All the rivers were full of running water and although I left San Diego on Monday morning I did not get my mail into the post office at Temecula until just midnight on the following Sunday."

# 100 Years Ago in Temecula

Selected items from Lake Elsinore Valley Press, Temecula Gossip Column – May 1921

**Issue of May 20, 1921**

## **Neighborhood Happenings**

**By Miss Libbie Nienke**

Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Haynes of San Jacinto were at their Temecula home over Sunday. Mr. Haynes is to retire from Santa Fe service the first of June after which Temecula will again be their home. Mr. Haynes has been with the Santa Fe Company for over twenty-seven years.

Miss Ethel Burnham attended the Fallbrook High School Dance on Friday evening.

The Misses Ethelyn Walters, Serena Cantarini, Ethel Burnham and Elizabeth Nienke enjoyed an all day horseback ride in the hills back of Temecula one day last week. They stopped for a few minutes in the afternoon to visit Mrs. Walker on her mountain ranch.

Mr. Ole Larson has leased his Pool Room and Barber Shop for a year to Mr. Ritz of Hemet. Mr. and Mrs. Ritz and two little sons have moved into the Barton cottage recently vacated by Ashley Higgins and wife. We are glad to report that Ole Larson is to remain in Temecula.

Twelve cars of cattle from Hillside, Arizona, were brought into Temecula one night last week for R. H. Benton, Jr. of Julian. The drought has caused great suffering among cattle in sections of Arizona and other states and to aid the cattle raisers in getting the cattle to pasture the Santa Fe has offered special shipping rates.

E.J. Lewis, a former employee of the Santa Fe, was in Temecula Sunday shaking hands with old friends. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis are now living in Imperial Valley where Mr. Lewis is a Deputy Sheriff.

Many Temecula people attended the Elsinore Theatre Saturday evening, May 7th, where the picture "The Golden Hope" was shown. As the picture was taken in Temecula several months ago it was of great interest to people of this vicinity. Many Temecula men took part in the riding scenes.

Born – Mr. and Mrs. Verne Spivey at the Corona Maternity Home, an eight pound son, Franklin Leon.

Mr. George Burnham and party spent Thursday evening in Escondido. Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Burnham who leave this week for a three months business trip thru the Southern and Atlantic States spent the weekend at the George Burnham home.

There has been quite a scare of smallpox in the community the past week due to the report of their being a few cases on the Pala Indian Reservation. There is but one slight case in Temecula and it is being well taken care of by the county authorities. The school year being so nearly over and in order to take all possible precautions it was thought best to close the school.

Two large truck loads of lumber left the Temecula Lumber yards this last week for the Pala Mission Hall which is being built by the people of the Pala Mission. Father Purtill is at the head of the work. Mr. Grey is doing the trucking.

A fair crowd attended the local picture show last Tuesday evening. Carmel Meyers in "Gilded Dreams" was shown.

A Boy Scout Troop has been organized in Temecula through the efforts of Mr. A.B. Barnett and others. Jack Roripaugh is Scout Master with Verne Spivey and Donald Peace as assistants. Regular meetings will soon be held each week. It is a wonderful opportunity for the boys of this section.

Mr. and Mrs. John Cantarini of Riverside spent the weekend at the William Friedemann home. Saturday evening they attended the American Legion dance at Elsinore.

Ole Larson is putting a new coat of paint on the restaurant and post office buildings.

The Temecula baseball nine defeated the Riverside team at the Murrieta Hot Springs Sunday by a score of 8 to 5. It was Riverside's game until the fifth inning when Temecula rallied. Mr. Vetsey Cantarini pitched a splendid game. The Temecula team will play Elsinore next Sunday.

**Issue of May 27, 1921**

## **Neighborhood Happenings**

**By Miss Libbie Nienke**

Our teachers, the Misses Marguerita Domenigoni and Lula Fleshman, will return for next year's school work. The school has made wonderful progress under their management and it is pleasant to know that they will be with us again. Miss Domenigoni left for her home in Winchester on Tuesday and Miss Fleshman for her home in Fallbrook.

Mr. and Mrs. George Burnham entertained Sunday with an elaborate chicken dinner celebrating Mrs. Burnham's birthday. The heavy rain kept many of the out of town guests from the happy affair. Those present were Mrs. Anna Burnham of Elsinore, Mr. Roland Bay of Los Angeles, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Burnham, Mr. Dan Cantarini, Miss Grace Greenfield, Miss Elizabeth Nienke, Mabel Nienke, Miss Ethel Burnham, Mr. and Mrs. George Burnham.

The heavy rain kept our Boy Scout troop from meeting this week. Many of the boys will qualify at the next meeting.

Mr. and Mrs. A.B. Barnett, Mr. and Mrs. V.B. Sands, Mr. and Mrs. Will Friedemann attended Eastern Star Chapter last week Tuesday.

Mrs. W.T. Barton is in Los Angeles at the home of Miss Genevieve Pope who is critically ill.

Mr. Hunsucker, the well digger, is putting down a well for A.F. Nienke on his town lot. Mrs. Verne Spivey and infant son returned from Corona Sunday.

Mr. and Mrs. Friedemann attended the Murrieta Ball Team Benefit Dance last Saturday evening.

Mr. Lynn Smith has been on the sick list but is better at this writing.