



Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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March 2017

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

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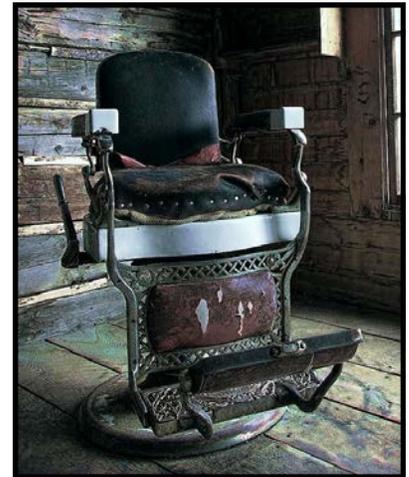


A Few Characters from Murrieta's Past By David Johnson

Murrieta, California, my hometown, where seventy to seventy-five years ago all the men wore bib overalls, most women were slightly overweight and all the children went barefoot. I would like to tell you a little more about my hometown and a few of the town's more colorful citizens.

Today, Murrieta is a modern, bustling city, which according to the 2013 census had a population in excess of 108,000. Seventy to seventy-five years ago, the area was a small farming and ranching community. Today it is a sea of houses, industrial parks and service oriented businesses.

The distance between Murrieta and Temecula, to the south, was seven miles. Today the distance between Murrieta and Temecula is still that seven miles, however, back then you knew when you were leaving Temecula and when you were entering Murrieta. Those seven miles were in wide open country with nothing but farmland, pastureland and an occasional farmhouse and barn dotting the landscape. Now, the communities have merged together like two rivers forming one large metropolitan area.



An old barber shop chair
(Source: internet)

In the mid-1930s, the population of Murrieta was probably no more than five or six hundred people, most of whom sprang forth from one of the approximately twelve or so original families. A couple of names and incidents come to mind that I would like to share with you.

Picture, if you will, a small town with one main street and perhaps five or six intersecting side streets. Only the main street and two of the cross streets were paved. The rest were dirt and gravel.

I am sure some of you readers came from a small town in California, the Midwest, or elsewhere.

And, I am sure some of these stories will bring your hometown to mind.

The business district of Murrieta consisted of Burnham's general store which sat mid-town on the main street directly across from Eilers' Café. The Methodist Church was three blocks north and a small convenience store occupied a lot across the street from the church. This convenience store was always referred to as "The Little Store". It was operated by Lucy and Curley Dunham. Curley was so nicknamed, not for the presence of, but for the lack of hair. No one, not even Curley, could recall when the nickname started.

Although the Methodist Church was the church of choice, there were two other houses of worship in Murrieta: a non-denominational church at the south end of town and a small Baptist church comfortably nestled in a Eucalyptus grove two blocks west of Burnham's store.

On Sundays, my family attended the Methodist church along with other town folks and families from surrounding farms. They gathered, not only to re-enforce their faith, but to connect with neighbors. Conversations ranged from family activities, favorite recipes, to the price of wheat, etc. In addition, there was always a spirited exchange of political and economic views.

One of the main social events for the townspeople was a monthly potluck. The dinner was held at the Methodist church on the last

Saturday of each month. Recipes, handed down for generations, were brought out, prepared and presented. The ladies of the town would fuss for days over their dishes, in an attempt to outdo each other. What comes to mind, are those signature dishes that always showed up. My mother busily prepared "her" angel food cake with chocolate Dream Whip frosting. Emma came with her tamale pie, Mrs. Eilers with her fried chicken and, of course, there was always the standard lime Jell-O mixed with cottage cheese and pineapple. There were always, always, two or three variations of that Jell-O that showed up at every potluck. After all these years, whenever I see lime Jell-O with cottage cheese and pineapple in the same bowl I am instantly transported back in time to one of those church potlucks.

There were no public services in Murrieta. As such, trash collection was provided by Frank Fezler. Frank's equipment consisted of two mules, Dolly and Pearl, and a flat bed, iron-wheeled farm wagon. There was no charge for Frank's service. Everything he collected was taken to his storage yard on the north edge of town. There, Frank would separate the salvageable from the rubbish. Salvageables were neatly piled by category, i.e., rubber, glass, iron, tin, etc., the rest was dumped in a nearby ravine and left to the ravages of time and Mother Nature. I often heard my dad joke that one of Frank's more notable characteristics was the absence of per-

sonal hygiene. Although offensive, he mused, it did keep the flies off the mules.

Then, there was Doc Hockawok, the town dentist. Doc was an American Indian who spoke very little and bathed even less. Doc lived in a dilapidated house trailer south of town. His wheel-less trailer sat atop four small granite rocks, each crowned by an upside down washtub. The purpose of this foundation's design was to keep unwanted critters from entering the interior of the living area. It was alleged that Doc attended dental school, however, that is questionable.

Remember now, this is seventy to seventy-five years ago and there were not as many regulations in place as now, especially in small towns where many things were done a bit differently anyway. For instance, Doc practiced dentistry under a large pepper tree next to his trailer. Patients sat in an old barber's chair Doc had pilfered from Frank's storage lot.

Doc really didn't fix teeth - he just pulled them. My dad told me that Doc's standard fee for an uncomplicated extraction was two half pints of whisky: one for the patient and one for Doc. Doc only did two procedures a day: one around 10:00 a.m. and the second around three in the afternoon. Between patients, Doc could always be seen napping while leaning against one of the pillars that supported the front porch of Eilers' Café. The vision of Doc leaning against those pillars could well have

Earnest Lakeman bought the property from Mrs. Rachel Burnett in 1903. By 1910, he opened a small roadside stand. In 1919, he modernized his stand which had become the Lakeman Lunch Room. The portico was built by local carpenter, Jack Hamilton. Lakeman sold the property to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Eilers who opened a café in January 1925. The Eilers sold the property to Ray Bezanson in 1950. It became known as Ray's Murrieta Café.

Photo by Jeffery Harmon



served as the original model for the cigar store Indian. Ol' Doc died in about 1948, leaving his worldly belongings contained in that rundown trailer. As I recall, my mother and aunt volunteered to clean the mess up. It was a task that required them to wear dampened bandanas over their noses and mouths to keep their breakfast in place.

Another incident that comes to mind involved two of Murrieta's senior residents and most colorful characters, Stein Sheld and Toad Freeman. Stein was a tall man whose back had been broken in a mining accident when he was young. As such, he stood very erect, kind of like he had a board strapped to his backside. To walk, he would throw his legs forward with each step. He wore a domed Stetson hat that made him look seven feet tall and he drove an open Model T Ford. Stein was a man of few words, confining his conversation to nodding his head and a few audible grunts.

Toad was still emerging from the 1890s. He was a self-proclaimed miner and he dressed like a gambler in an old western movie. Toad always wore a

black suit with his pants tucked inside his high topped cowboy boots and with the boot loops dangling from each side like ears on a cocker spaniel. His outfit was crowned by a black cowboy hat. Toad's transportation was a small, double-treed surrey pulled by a beautiful and spirited red quarter horse named Bonny.

One sunny autumn afternoon while Stein was enjoying a glass of beer in Eilers' Café, Bonny delivered Toad and his wagon to the front of the café. Toad stepped off the wagon and casually draped Bonny's reins over the railing in front of the café as he had done numerous times in the past. He then went inside where he joined Stein. Stein was first to leave and set about starting his Model T.

Some of you may recall that there was a time when automobiles were not computerized. You didn't just get in the car, turn the key and start the motor. There was a strict protocol for starting these Model Ts. First, Stein adjusted the choke, spark and throttle, then went forward and gave the crank a good jerk. The old Ford came to life with a loud backfire.

Needless to say, Bonny was not prepared for the noise which caused her to shy away from the vehicle. As she reared back, the buggy wheel became entangled between the railing and the pillar that supported the front porch.

As the excited horse continued to pull, most of the buggy separated from its frame work and Bonny took off for home - dragging buggy parts behind. Toad gave chase to no avail.

The following day he found Bonny calmly nibbling on wild oats about a mile from his house, none the worse for wear from her experience the previous day.

Up until this incident I had never heard much of anything in the way of conversation or laughter from Stein. However, on this occasion, his ample stomach bounced and muffled laughter issued from between the tightly closed lips that covered his toothless mouth.

And that's about it from old Murrieta, my hometown, where seventy to seventy-five years ago all the men wore bib overalls, most all the women were a little overweight and all the children went barefoot.

Murrieta Valley Historical Society
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Next Monthly Board Meeting:

Monday, March 6, 2017 at 5:30 p.m. at
Honeycutt Farms Family Restaurant
40477 Murrieta Hot Springs Road, D2
(In the Alta Murrieta Shopping Center)
All members welcome to attend



MURRIETA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY HOSTS:
**MURRIETA HOT SPRINGS
& TONY GUENTHER**



MONDAY, MARCH 13TH | 6 PM
HUNT HOUSE, 41810 JUNIPER ST MURRIETA

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Membership Application

Individual

Annual \$25.00
Lifetime \$150.00

Family

Annual \$35.00
Lifetime \$250.00

Senior/Student

Annual \$15.00

Business

Annual \$200.00

Sponsorship

Annual \$300.00

Membership dues are for
one year and will be up for
renewal the month you
joined.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____

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Membership: \$ _____

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