La Mesa Historical Society
LOOKOUT AVENUE

Volume 12, Number 1 May, 1990



Photo by Cathee Thompson

The Nan Couts House, with its grounds, 80-year-old ficus tree, walkways, and stone-faced concrete block retaining walls, sits atop its knoll overlooking La Mesa Boulevard as it has since circa 1909.

The Nan Couts House...Going...Going?

Despite last ditch efforts of individuals, the La Mesa Historical Society, and the La Mesa Historic Preservation Commission, the eventual fate of the historic Nan Couts House is uncertain.

On January 3, 1990, Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church applied for a demolition permit for the Nan Couts House at 7915 La Mesa Boulevard. This structure, built circa 1909, was the home of community leader Nan Couts from 1928 to 1968 and is one of the most significant in the city. (A report on the history of the Nan Couts House appears elsewhere in this issue.) The church had closed escrow on the property some months previously and planned to build a day care center on the site. Their plans included demolition of the historic house, removal of the landscaping and historic block wall, and lowering the site some twelve feet. At least one neighbor was surprised by these plans because she had been told by the former owner that the church was going to remodel the house to use it as a day care center.

Late last fall, rumors had reached the La Mesa Historic Preservation Commission that

Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church intended to purchase the Nan Couts House. Concerned by the possible loss of this historic house, the commissioners decided to place the matter on their January agenda in the hope of finding some way to preserve the historic structure.

Meanwhile, unknown to the commission members, representatives of the church held one or more informal discussions with the city planning department staff. After these discussions, church representatives apparently felt there would be no obstacles to the demolition of the house. Although zoning of the site would require a conditional use permit to use it as a day care center, this did not seem to be an obstacle either.

When the church applied for the demolition permit on January 3, 1990,the matter was referred to the La Mesa Historic Preservation Commission, since the house is listed in the La Mesa Historic Resources Inventory. At the commission meeting on January 9th, the commissioners had only three choices:

(1) Do nothing, because La Mesa's historic preservation ordinance allows property owners to do anything they want to, including demolition, with their unlandmarked historic properties.

(2) Begin a landmarking process for the house even though the process could not be completed without the owner's consent. This would allow a few weeks delay and could make it possible to find someone to move the house or to convince the church not to demolish it.

(3) Ask the city council to change the ordinance.

The commission chose to start the landmarking process and request action by the city council. At this same meeting, the attorney for the church stated that the house was not historic, and that this was another case of the "George Washington slept there" syndrome.

The City Council considered the request by the commission on January 12 and February 13, but took no action. One city councilman scolded the commission for not bringing the problems with the ordinance to the council sooner. (Actually, the commission had requested a workshop with the city council some months earlier, but the workshop was never held.) At the close of the hearing, one city council member was appointed to work with the commission to draw up proposed future changes to the ordinance.

On February 14, 1990, the La Mesa Historic Preservation Commission voted to recommend landmarking the Nan Couts House. No representative of the church was present at this hearing. Since owner consent for landmarking had not been obtained, the demolition permit could have been issued at the close of this meeting. Fortunately this did not happen, due to intensive work by commissioner Beth Blackman. She had attended a conference on the use of CEQA (the California Environmental Quality Act) in historic preservation and had learned that it was a violation to issue a demolition permit when a project had been "chopped" - in this case the request to issue a demolition permit first and then the project and conditional use permit (a discretionary act) later. When the facts were presented to the La Mesa City Attorney, he placed a hold on the issuance of the demolition permit.

This hold enabled some publicity to reach the local newspapers and at least two citizens became interested in moving the house.

On April 17, 1990, the church appealed the decision to withhold the demolition permit and asked the city council to reverse the decision. Under heavy questioning by city council members, a representative of the church was unable to state what difference it would make to the project if demolition of the house waited until the rest of the project was approved. The city council continued the matter until May 8th, when it approved an agreement which had been worked out in the interim between the city staff and the church. Under this agreement, the city will issue the demolition permit, but it will not become effective until July 10. Unless someone can be found to move and preserve the Nan Couts House, this historic structure will be lost to the La Mesa community forever.

If you are interested in saving this house, or if you know someone who may be able to, please call the La Mesa Historical Society, Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Dave Witt, City of La Mesa.

The La Mesa Historical Society operates the Rev. Henry A. McKinney House, a 1908 house museum located at 8369 University Avenue (corner of Pine Street), La Mesa. Hours are 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. Saturdays or by appointment. For information call 466-0197.



LOOKOUT AVENUE is the official publication of the La Mesa Historical Society, P.O. Box 882, La Mesa, California, 92044.

Contributing to this issue were: Donna Regan, Karna Webster, Patricia and Konrad Andersen, Doug Neill, Nancy Neffson, Cathee Thompson, and Dennis Tuttle.

I am just a house.

I have watched over generations; sheltered, warmed and welcomed. I have provided warmth from the chill of winter and a haven from the heat of the summer sun.

I have seen generations come and go: the joy of new life and the sorrow of a loved one's passing.

My windows have been eyes beholding a new day, my doorways opening onto adventure.

But I am just a house.

Within these walls have echoed the cries of babies, the laughter of children, the sage advice of parents, the boasts of grandparents and all the sounds of love.

But I am just a house.

Those I once protected have passed on and the children who played here have grown and there is only silence.

Yes, I am old, my floorboards creak and my hinges are rusty, but still I stand against the elements.

But I am just a house and there is no one here, within my walls, to give back the caring and make me whole again.

And they want to tear me down and level my hillside and pave my gardens and uproot my trees and make me look just like so many things that "progress" touches. My land is too valuable to let stand the tree that God has nurtured nigh a hundred years.

And those that came and went here and felt the love within these walls weep for me and what I was and still could be, but can't stop this thing called progress, because...

I am just a house.

Written by Cathee Thompson, Nan Couts' granddaughter, April, 1990.

1990 ICE CREAM SOCIAL JUNE 10

This year's Ice Cream Social will be held Sunday, June 10, from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. Visitors will be entertained by the music of Jim Diehl's Jim Dandies Band, the lively Parasol Strutters, and the Four Sweatermen Barbershop Quartet. The food will include barbecued chicken, salads, baked beans, and, of course, ice cream with toppings. There will also be a plant sale, bake sale, and Quilters' sale.

Your help is needed. Please call if you can assist in any of the following areas:

PLANT SALE - Look around your yard for volunteer seedlings, start cuttings, and divide clumps. The donation of pots is also needed. I will pick up anything that you wish to donate, or you can bring it the morning of the Social. Call Ed Blackman, 460-4405.

BAKE SALE - We can use pies, cakes, cookies, breads, jams and jellies, candies. Beatrice Acers, 466-5812.

FOOD - People to help serve are needed. Loah Carter, 287-1718.

SET-UP - Setting up tarps, tables, chairs on Sunday morning; some on Saturday. Pat Kettler, 463-0197.

HOSTS/HOSTESSES - In the McKinney House. Donna Regan, 460-3726.

CLEAN UP - After 3:00 p.m. Donna Regan, 460-3726.



ROLAND WRIGHT MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTION

The La Mesa Historical Society gratefully acknowledges a contribution in memory of Roland Wright from his widow, Angelyn.

McKINNEY HOUSE RESTORATION

In conjunction with the installation of a security system in the new workroom and the archives building as part of the building project, a security system was also installed in the McKinney House. Providing such protection from potential break-ins and fires has been a goal of the Society for several years. Now all three building are protected by 24-hour central monitoring which will summon the police or fire department.

Other restoration work has been completed with generous volunteer assistance: rescreening the back porch, replacing worn and broken window sash cord and rehanging double-hung windows, and work on doors, locks, plumbing, and electrical fixtures.

The Curatorial/Restoration Committee is now receiving bids for the repainting of the south (rear) exterior of the McKinney House and some additional repainting as needed.

LMHS MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORIES PUBLISHED

The new LMHS membership directories were recently mailed out. For their assistance on this project, we wish to thank the following members: Konrad and Patricia Andersen, RF Microsystems, for text design and layout and the use of their computer and laser printer; David Andersen, for assistance in the mailing; Dennis Tuttle, for cover design; Mabel Perrapato and Donna Regan, for organizing the membership list; and Bill and Beverly Decker, Plaza Press, for printing the directories at a discount.

ICE CREAM SOCIAL DRAWING

For this year's first prize, the LMHS Quilters have made a "Grandmother's Fan" quilt, in a lovely and unusual variation of the pattern done with a soft rose background. The top was pieced by Quilters Nadine Washburn and Gay Tulp and then handquilted by the whole group.

The second prize is a baby quilt, also made by the Quilters. The third prize, donated by Pat Kettler, is a $20.00 gift certificate from Buffums. Lunch for two at Chaumiere has been donated by Chaumiere restaurant at Buffums, Grossmont Center, for the fourth prize.

SPECIAL THANKS

Bernis Wall - for transcribing taped oral interviews, most recently one of Nan Couts.

Dennis Tuttle - for posters, cover layouts, and other graphic work.

Greg Trigeiro, Doug Neill, Donna Regan, and Tim Campbell - for salvaging sample panels of blue and tan vitrolite (a structural glass) from the 1940's facade of Van's Cleaners, 8338 La Mesa Boulevard, before it was demolished.

May Ann Ehlers - for her calligraphy on flyers and certificates.

Myrtle Conyers - for indexing the 1924 La Mesa City Directory, making it accessible to research.

Brenda and Doug Neill - for planting and caring for the trumpet vine on the trellis in front of the new workroom.

Bob and Darlene Simpson, La Mesa Blueprint - for their contribution of $300 in credit and for all the assistance they have given us in the past.

Patricia and Konrad Andersen - for their assistance with the newsletter.

Beth Blackman - for her initiative and persistence in discovering CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) requirements in the efforts to save the Nan Couts House.

Karna Webster, Donna Regan, and Kathy Flanigan - for researching and preparing the Nan Couts House landmark designation report.

John Beaton, Postal Annex + - for offering a discount on 8 1/2 x 11 photocopies to LMHS and its members.

Pat Kettler - for preparing LMHS meeting and event flyers.

Elizabeth Yeatts - for lending and identifying artifacts for use in LMHS exhibits.

LMHS QUILTERS - Beatrice Acers, Ethel Allen, Julie Bras, Bettie Burns, Barbara Copeland, Eleanor Doerr, Eleanor Meyer, Jean Ohmstede, Marie Parkhurst, Margaret Pearson, Jerry Schatz, June Skalecky, Marie Taylor, Gay Tulp, LaVelle Vaughn, Nadine Washburn, and Irma Wiley - the talented and hardworking women who gather together in the new workroom each Wednesday morning from 9:00 - 12:00 noon to make baby quilts, quilt pieced tops for the public for a fee, and create small sales items, and who have become one of the principal sources of income for the Society.

Thanks to all those whose regular dedication and continued efforts make it possible for the Society to function.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

The La Mesa Historical Society extends a warm welcome to members who have recently joined:

Mr. & Mrs. Konrad Andersen
Sophia C. Banks
Mr. & Mrs. James Blasy
Marilyn Gray
Mr. & Mrs. David Kraemer
Mr. & Mrs. Edward Landi
Mr.& Mrs. Michael Mullert
Richard Nye
Mr. & Mrs. Stephen Petruzzo
Mr. & Mrs. Gerald Plotkin
William Pogue
Betty Jane Reynolds
Mr. & Mrs. Al Skelecky
Mrs. June Skelecky
Mr. & Mrs. Kurt Vozely
Mrs. Helen E. Wilson

Welcome and thanks to those La Mesa Boulevard businesses which were given gift memberships for assisting the Society during the Oktoberfest or with the Christmas Drawing:

D'Ville Architects
Fashion Exchange
Good Taste
La Mesa Electronics
Sir Speedy Printing Center

IN MEMORIAM

The La Mesa Historical Society extends its deepest sympathy to the families of:

James Murry Hart
Mrs. Blanche M. Peterson
Roland Wright

PHOTOCOPY DISCOUNTS FOR LMHS MEMBERS

Postal Annex + , 8030 La Mesa Boulevard, in the La Mesa Springs Shopping Center, is offering to LMHS members 8 1/2 x 11 self-serve photocopies at 3 cents each (regular price 5 cents). Please bring this notice or your membership card with you.



The Thelma Vandetta Palermo Building (workroom) with the converted garage, now the archives building, seen at rear. LMHS property is between the two fences.

LMHS Building Project Completed

The dedication of the new workroom and the remodeled archives building on Sunday, October 1, 1989, marked the culmination of the La Mesa Historical Society's two-year Building Project.

In honor of her generous contributions to the Society and to the Building Fund in particular, the new workroom was officially named the Thelma Vandetta Palermo Building. A carved wooden sign with the name was hung from the trellis in front of the building.

The workroom is a simple, graceful structure with paired French doors across the front shaded by a redwood trellis. Thoughtfully designed by Dennis Tuttle to match the existing McKinney garage and to correspond to the McKinney House, it is set into the ell-shaped portion of the lot at the back of the property. Inside is a light, airy space with creamy walls and natural woodwork.

Also honored at the dedication were those who had contributed to make this project a success. The members of the Building Committee were recognized: Lloyd Donahoo, Beatrice Acers, Pat Kettler, Donna Regan, Nadine Washburn, Dennis Tuttle, and James Hart. Architects Dennis Tuttle and Jim Hart had drawn the plans for the project; Beatrice Acers, Quilters Chairman, had been tireless in making contacts and seeking contributions; and Donna Regan and Pat Kettler had worked with the general contractor and others. The City of La Mesa was thanked for its contribution to preserving La Mesa's history. A plaque listing all those who had donated $100 or more to the project was placed in the new workroom. Twining around the workroom's trellis was the newly-planted trumpet vine, a memorial to Joyce McKinney, who had died in 1988.

The Building Project began in February of 1987 with the formation of a Building Committee to find a solution to an ever-increasing problem. The Society had purchased the 1908 Rev. Henry A. McKinney House in 1975 for use as a house museum and headquarters. The house has been restored and furnished to interpret life in La Mesa from 1908 to 1920, as exemplified by the McKinney family. The Society also collects photographs, artifacts, and records of local significance and

conducts educational programs. As the years went by, space in the house which should have been devoted to exhibits had been lost to storage, as well as to work space for a variety of activities.

The Building Committee identified three goals:

I. Further develop and improve the McKinney House as a museum by expanding exhibit space to provide a more educational and interesting experience for the visitor.

II. Provide needed work space for the Society's programs and for the fundraising activities which support them, such as the work of the Quilters, a major source of income. Activities would include Directors' and committee meetings, work on collections, exhibits, and publications, and research.

III. Create a safe storage area for the Society's collections, which include photographs from the 1880's to the present, La Mesa Scout newspapers from 1916 to 1985, furnishings, costumes, and maps.

To meet these goals, two combined building projects were developed:

Project I. Construction of a workroom and storage accessory structure. Originally conceived as an 18 x 22 foot building, the workroom was redesigned to be 18 x 26 feet, which allowed the inclusion of a sink with cupboards, a restroom, and a closet.

Project II. Conversion of the garage to storage for archival/artifact collections.

The McKinney garage, built in 1938, was an 18 x 20 foot structure with an unfinished interior. The conversion included reroofing, replacing the sliding garage doors with a single four-foot-wide door, and installing insulation, dry wall, a heating/air conditioning unit for climate control, and security and fire protection systems.

The two architects prepared the necessary plans. Jim Hart drew the plans for the garage conversion, and Dennis Tuttle for the workroom. The total cost for the project was estimated to be $27,000.

The fundraising campaign, which began in August, included mailings to members and community groups and personal contacts with individuals and organizations. In December, 1987, the La Mesa City Council approved the Society's request for a grant of $7,500 toward the project, specifically for the preservation of historical records and artifacts.

Through the months, donations continued to be made. Changes to the workroom and additional costs made it necessary to increase the budget to $34,000.

Actual construction began in the spring of 1989 and was completed in August. The general contractor selected was the husband and wife team of Frank and Gerri Morrin, R/G Construction.

The Building Project is now a reality due to the participation of many people in the Society and in the La Mesa community. We wish to thank all those who contributed:

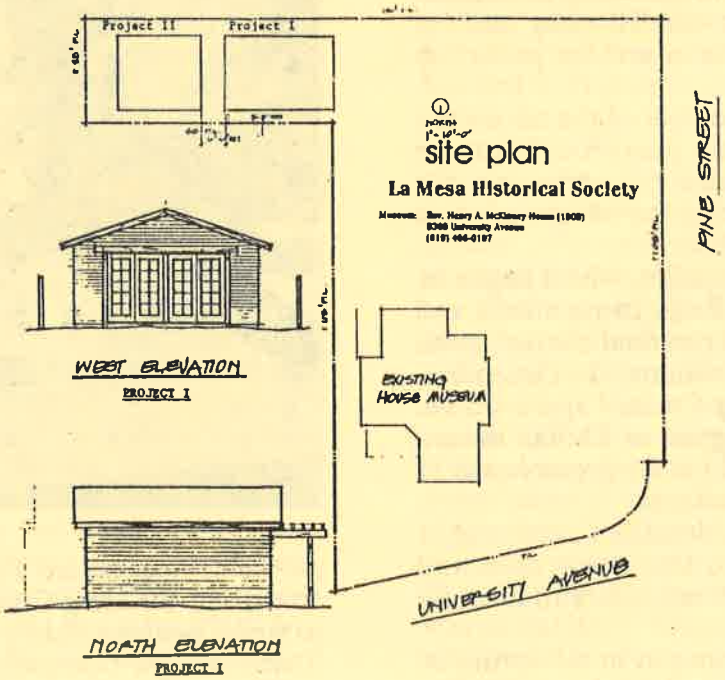
Beatrice Acers
Alpha Iota Chapter 621,
Epsilon Sigma Alpha Sorority
American Legion Auxiliary, Unit 282
Konrad & Patricia Andersen
Jesse & Marian Bailey
Margaret Barksdale
Kurt & Julie Bohnsack
Charles & Julie Bras
Beth S. Brown
Harold & Mildred Bryan
Ralph & Bettie Burns
City of La Mesa
D. K. Clague
Coast Savings & Loan
Roger & Jo Coffey
The Conner Family



Photo by Lynne Adams

At the dedication are Thelma Palermo, center front, and Building Committee members (left to right) Beatrice Acers, Donna Regan, Dennis Tuttle, Lloyd Donahoo, and Pat Kettler. A model of the project is in front.

Alice Crittenden
Lucile DeWaide
Eleanor Doerr
William Dostal
Elmer & Violet Drew
Drew Ford
Sue Dunn
Elizabeth's Attic
Evelyn Estabrook
Roland & Evelyn Fegan
Kathy Flanigan
Majel Filby
Thomas Fox
Dorothy Gibson, memorial gift from Beatrice Acers
Videlle Gray
Grossmont Center
Grossmont Escrow Company
Grossmont Garden Club
James Murry Hart
Heartland Savings & Loan
Evert Hodges
Dorothy Hoelter
Mary-Em Howard
Ray & Lornelle Jeffers
Helen Jones
Walter & Ann Jones
Mary Kelley
Vern & Pat Kettler
Nina Kiefhaber
J. Andrew & Hazel Lloyd Kitzman
Ruth Kramer
La Mesa Community Welfare Association
La Mesa Optimist Club
La Mesa Village Merchants Association
Brice & Carol Lockwood
Kathleen Massa
Joyce & Ruth McKinney
Kenneth McKinney
Robert McKinney & Florence McKinney Drury, in memory of Joyce McKinney
Anna Mineo
Montezuma Land Company
Doug W. & Brenda S. Neill
Thelma Vandetta Palermo
Ruth Papendieck
Don & Marie Parkhurst
Margaret Pearson
Mabel Perrapato
Blanche Peterson
Robert Peter & Geraldine Rapp
Bernice M. Regan
Donna Regan
Bob & Mary Jane Rundell
Eric & Ellen Sanders
Andrew & Mary Smith
Soroptimist International of La Mesa
Steven Sund & Renee Vallely
Ruth Swanson
Thomas & Susan Taylor
Richard & Virginia Thompson
Tipple & Associates
Dennis & Sandia Tuttle
Anita Underwood
Marjorie Varney
Virgil & Shirley Walker
Clayton & Bernis Wall
Nadine Washburn
Cecile West
Rolla & Jean Williams
Barney & Janean Young, in memory of Eva Quicksall



CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE

The Christmas Open House was held Saturday, December 9th from 1:00-4:00 p.m.. The house was decorated for the holidays in turn-of-the-century fashion with pine greenery and bright-colored berries. The Christmas tree in the front room was festooned with popcorn and paper chains, gilded walnuts and wishbones, and period paper cut-outs. Gingerbread and hot spiced cider were prepared by Loah Carter, assisted by Hallie Holmes. Serving the refreshments were hostesses Miriam Plotkin, Brenda Neill, Vel Landi, Coralie Blasy, and Jo Pearson. Jo Coffey and Betty Teague were busy welcoming people at the door. Evelyn Estabrook played Christmas carols on the McKinney organ in the parlor. Beatrice Acers sold drawing tickets and sales items.

For this year's Open House the Quilters sold baked goods as well as their traditional offerings of baby quilts and handmade items. Held in the new workroom, the sale brought in a profit of $282.60.

1989 CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE

Receipts	
Drawing tickets sold	$ 980.00
Quilters sales (incl. bake sale)	282.60
Sale of brochures in banks	10.00
Sales of postcards & brochures	6.75
Donations	4.25
	$ 1283.60
Expenses	
Clock for drawing	$ 120.00
Flyer	17.60
Postage for flyer	28.81
Christmas tree	10.00
Refreshments	12.17
Paper supplies	17.07
	$ 205.65
Net profit	$ 1077.95

WE NEED SHEETS

White cotton or cotton/polyester sheets are needed for a variety of uses: to protect McKinney House textiles and furnishings when the house is not open, to cover stored furniture, and to store period textiles. If you have any extra new or used sheets you would like to give us, please call Donna Regan at 460-3726.

CHRISTMAS DRAWING

Members sold a total of 980 tickets for the 1989 Christmas Drawing, resulting in a net profit of $860 after expenses. The winners were: (First) Wendy Vaughn - 1880's American-made mantle clock; (Second) Beth Blackman - Christmas basket donated by Good Taste gift shop, 8326 La Mesa Boulevard; (Third) Mary Dolloff - velvet jewelry bag made and donated by Earlene Lourenco; (Fourth) Virginia Gebhardt - $12.00 gift certificate donated by Sanfilippo's Pizza, 8141 La Mesa Boulevard.

We wish to thank Wells Fargo Bank on Palm Avenue, Great American Savings at Grossmont Center, and Union Bank on Spring Street for once again allowing us to sell tickets in their lobbies. Members selling tickets in banks included Jo Coffey, Lucile DeWaide, Mary-Em Howard, Donna Regan, Pat Kettler, Beatrice Acers, Beverly Decker, May Ann Ehlers, and Jo Pearson. Many other members took tickets to sell individually.

Special thanks go to Bill and Beverly Decker of Plaza Press for donating the printing of the tickets and to Don Mathis for repairing and reconditioning the first prize clock.



BLANCHE M. PETERSON MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The La Mesa Historical Society gratefully acknowledges contributions in memory of Blanche M. Peterson from:

Charles Andreason
Neal Andreason
Roger & Donna Andreason
Marian Gilbert
Philip & Marilyn Lorenzen
Fred Schumacker

CALENDAR FEATURES LA MESA PHOTOS

A selection of early La Mesa photographs is featured in First La Mesa Bank's 1990 calendar, "A Pictorial History of La Mesa." Drawn from LMHS collections, the photos date from the 1890's to the 1940's. The calendar will be a memento to keep when the year is over. The Society has a limited number of copies available for members. If you would like one, please call Pat Kettler, 463-0197.

Mt. Helix Nature Theatre Designated Historic Site

On January 31, 1990, the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre was designated a County Historic Site by the County Board of Supervisors. Making the presentation to the Board was Sean Carroll, whose concern for the site had turned a school project into a crusade to preserve the Nature Theatre for the community.

Included in the designation were the 3.2 acre county park with its amphitheater and cross and the rock walls along the Mt. Helix Drive right-of-way. The Nature Theatre is one of the most significant sites in the entire county. Built by Mary Yawkey White and Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey as a memorial for their mother, Mary Carpenter Yawkey, the Nature Theatre was dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1925, and has been the site of annual Easter Sunrise Services since then. It is the work of noted San Diego architect Richard Requa and San Francisco landscape architect Emerson Knight.

In September of 1988, Sean Carroll, then 12 years old and a seventh-grade student at Emerald Junior High School in El Cajon, became concerned when he read in newspaper articles that some people planned to file a lawsuit to have the cross on top of Mt. Helix removed. Soon after this, he learned from his teacher about the San Diego/Tijuana International History Fair to be held in March and decided to research the Nature Theatre as his project entry. The annual History Fair, sponsored by San Diego State University and the Autonomous University of Baja California, offers awards for junior and senior high school research papers and exhibits dealing with topics of local history.



Ed Fletcher, Jr. (left) and Sean Carroll.

Sean met with local historians, including LMHS member Karna Webster, who encouraged him to seek county historic site designation for the Nature Theatre. In 1986 the county had passed an ordinance creating a Historic Sites Board and amending zoning ordinances to enable the county to zone historic places for protection.

Sean spent the next two months doing research at historical societies, archives, and libraries, and gathering information from people in the community. "What I began to see was that everyone I talked to had a piece of the puzzle, but that none had put it together," said Sean. The highlight of his search was his meeting with Ed. Fletcher, Jr., who had supervised the construction of the amphitheater. At Fletcher's urging, Sean spent half a day at the County Recorder's Office, looking for the 1929 deed donating the property to the county. He discovered that the deed contained restrictions on making any changes to the site. Sean's final report (the text of which appears elsewhere in this issue) included copies of all of the newspaper articles, photographs, documents, and other materials he had found.

On February 8, 1989, Sean presented his report to the County Historic Sites Board, which approved site designation at its next meeting on March 8. The designation application then had to go to the Planning Commission before being sent to the Board of Supervisors for the final decision. Historic Sites Board members were impressed with the quality of Sean's work, as have been all who have read his report. "He did all the historical research that an adult professional historian would do," said Sites Board staff member Ron May. "Actually, his presentation puts to shame many of the professional nominations we've had to deal with."

At the History Fair in March, Sean won grand prize for junior high research paper. The

La Mesa Historical Society, one of several organizations offering special awards in the Fair, gave Sean its award for best junior research paper on a topic of La Mesa area history.

County site designation is not the end of Sean Carroll's quest. He is now planning to nominate the Nature Theatre both as a California Registered Historical Landmark and for the National Register of Historic Places.

LMHS CHAMPAGNE BRUNCH

At the LMHS Champagne Brunch held Sunday, March 25, in the La Mesa Woman's Club, approximately 60 members enjoyed a delicious meal which included French toast, eggs, baked ham, fresh fruit, and champagne punch. The brief business meeting concluded with the selection of two members of the nominating committee for the 1990-1991 Board of Directors. The entertainment was provided by the La Mesa Middle School Girls' Chorus, directed by John Law. A lot of thought and care went into the presentation of this musical program, which was received with much appreciation by the audience. The Quilters had baby quilts and other items for sale, and an exhibit of historic photographs was on display. Assisting in this event were Mabel Perrapato, Donna Regan, Beatrice Acers, Chuck Levy, Jo and Roger Coffey, June Skalecky, and Beverly Decker.

McKINNEY HOUSE INTERPRETATION COMMITTEE NOW MEETING

"Basic Interpretation of Historic Sites," an independent study program from the American Association for State and Local History, is the basis for a committee now meeting to improve the interpretation of our own historic site, the McKinney House. The AASLH program shows how to define the importance of a site, to decide what the visitor should understand - for example, what the visitor should learn about the McKinneys, early La Mesa, and life at the time - and how best to communicate this understanding. Among topics covered are selecting themes and goals, writing a storyline for a basic tour, training interpreters or docents, school group tours, and exhibits and printed materials.

If you would like to join this group or find out more, call Donna Regan, 460-3726.

McKINNEY HOUSE TOURS

Visitors to the McKinney House in recent months have included Girl Scout Troop 6299 and a group form the College Avenue center of the Alzheimer's Association. Serving as docents for group tours have been Betty Teague, Donna Regan, Sandia Tuttle, and Brenda Neill.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE LA MESA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Society depends upon membership dues, contributions, bequests, and fund-raising activities to support restoration and preservation of local history.

Memberships and donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Membership categories:

_____	Benefactor	$250.00
_____	Life (Single)	125.00
_____	Patron	40.00
_____	Sponsor / Organization	25.00
_____	Family (2 adults)	15.00
_____	Individual	10.00
_____	Student (under 18 yrs)	1.00

Please complete and return this form to:
La Mesa Historical Society
P.O. Box 882, La Mesa, CA 92044

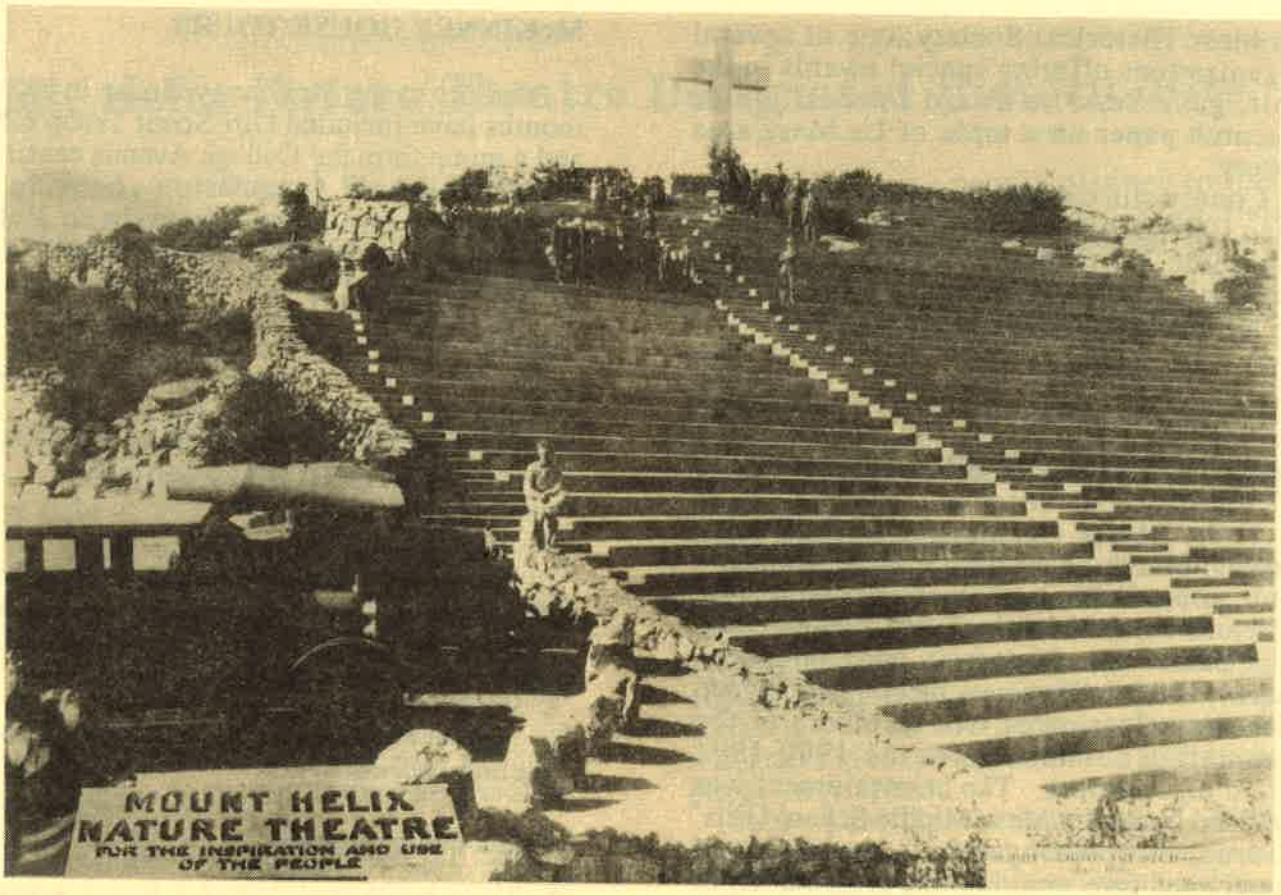
_____
Name

_____
Address

_____
City State Zip

Telephone: _____

_____ I am interested in being involved in the society's work. Please call me.



Mt. Helix Nature Theatre, c. 1927.

Mt. Helix Nature Theatre - A Gift To Us All

(Cherish It Or Change It?)

Sean Carroll

When I was little, I used to think that a gift involved only two people - one that gave and one that got. Now that I am twelve, I have learned that some givers touch the lives of millions of people - over many generations, including those yet unborn! Mt. Helix Nature Theatre is such a gift, and I want to share what I have learned about this special place in my neighborhood.

As I researched this unique gift, I have grown to appreciate the importance of its history. When I read that a few individuals want to alter or remove the cross, it made me sad and angry. It also caused me to research what I could do to preserve the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre for future generations, as intended by Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey and Mary Yawkey White in their deed to the County. I want to CHERISH, not change, their gift, and propose that the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre, as it stands today, be nominated as a Historic Landmark, not only for the County, but for our state and nation.

I believe the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre deserves to have this recognition because:

1. It is claimed to be the only theatre in the world built primarily for one annual service, held each Easter at sunrise.

2. It is significant as the site of the oldest Easter Sunrise Service in San Diego and the second oldest continuous Easter Sunrise Service in the United States.

3. As can be documented by Ed Fletcher, Jr., the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C) built the stone wall on Mt. Helix from 1933-1942, better known as folk architecture. No mortar was used. Hand tools and pride created the quality rock wall that still enhances the Mt. Helix community. Throughout the area, the C.C.C. made culverts and cobblestone ditches that followed the contour of the road. All was built from rubble rock donated from the property of Ed and Mary Fletcher.

4. It is an important example of the work of two prominent and respected men - architect Richard Requa, and landscape architect

Emerson Knight, from San Francisco.

5. A booklet called County of San Diego Landmarks, published in 1987, lists "Mt. Helix Cross and Nature Theater" (on page 31) as being an official Historic Landmark in the City of La Mesa. The Mt. Helix Nature Theatre is neither in the City of La Mesa nor has yet been declared an historic landmark.

6. Although the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre was built in memory of one person, Mary Carpenter Yawkey, it was presented as a gift to the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors "for the inspiration and use of (ALL) the people" of San Diego County on July 29, 1929 - nearly 60 years ago.

Now go back in time with me even further, and discover how the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre, as we know it today, came to be.

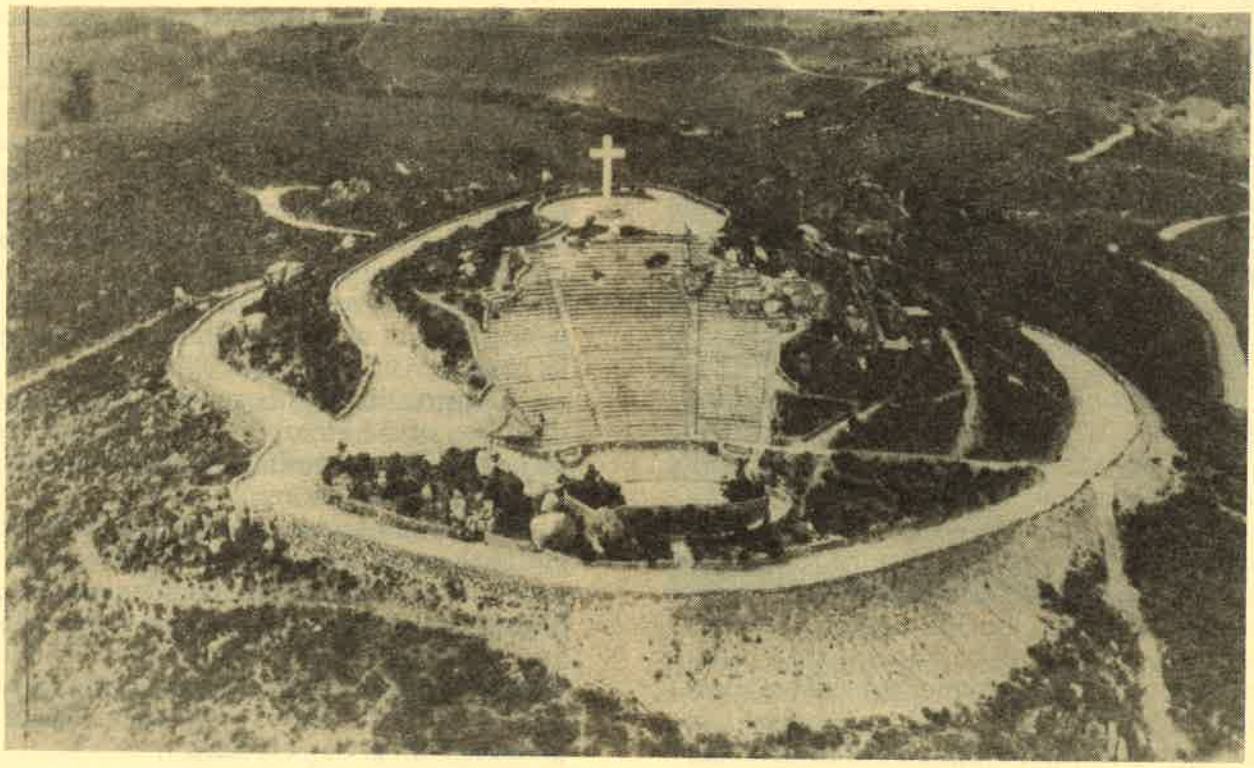
In 1888, pioneer Ed Fletcher arrived from Massachusetts at the age of fifteen with $6.10 in his pocket. He promptly deposited $5.00 in the bank, and found a job which paid $5.00 a week.[1] It was this kind of thriftiness which led him to his later success as a businessman, as well as an ambitious state senator.

In 1896, Fletcher married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Batchelder. He wrote in his memoirs, "Your mother and I bought Grossmont in 1902...it was there on that boulder that your mother and I took our first big gamble in real estate."[2] This purchase, made by Fletcher and a good friend, William B. Gross, for $11,500, included several hundred acres and pointed Fletcher in the direction of land and water development, which soon included his acquisition of Mt. Helix.

When the custom of Easter sunrise services, sponsored by the San Diego Ad Club and held at the top of Mt. Nebo in La Mesa from 1914-1916 became too crowded, Fletcher suggested that the services be moved to Mt. Helix the following year. Fewer than 300 made the climb to reach a twenty-foot rough wooden cross for the first Easter service held on Mt. Helix in 1917, because on Thursday, April 5th, three days before Easter, the United States declared war against Germany and people's thoughts were "Over There" instead of over here.

In 1918, over 8,000 people climbed the footpath up Mt. Helix and sat in the natural bowl on boulders and on the ground for Easter service. Hundreds of lights powered by a mobile plant that had been put on top of a truck illuminated the cross. It was at this service that Ed Fletcher pledged that his mountain could be used for future Easter sunrise services. The following year, he started building a road to replace the treacherous footpath.

During this time, the Fletchers became very close friends with Frederick and Mary Yawkey White. They traveled all over the West and went to Europe together. Mr. Fletcher wrote in his memoirs that, "The family friendship was mutual and to no outside couple did your Mother and I become more greatly attached."[3]



Mt. Helix and the Nature Theatre, late 1920's.





Portraits of Frederick M. White and his wife, Mary Yawkey White, circa 1920, as they appeared in Ed Fletcher's Memoirs.

Mrs. White's mother was Mary Carpenter Yawkey, who loved the peace and natural beauty of Mt. Helix. Even when she was very old, she would slowly climb to the top to see the view from 1,380 feet, and spend time in prayer. After she died in 1923, Mrs. White asked her good friend, Ed Fletcher, if he would sell the summit of Mt. Helix to her so that she could build a memorial with her brother, Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey, for their mother. (Ed Fletcher had already been offered $25,000 by a local businessman, but turned it down.) Because he could see how much it meant to Mrs. White, Ed Fletcher wrote in his memoirs that, "After discussing it with your Mother, we decided to donate the property to San Diego County for this purpose."[4] In June of 1923, and in March of 1924, Fletcher deeded two parcels to her - a total of nearly seven acres.

Mrs. White and her brother, Cyrus Yawkey of Wausau, Wisconsin, immediately began making plans to build a memorial to their mother. They decided that they wanted a natural, open-air amphitheater to share with others, for all time, the 360-degree view she treasured. The brother and sister team commissioned a very prominent local architect - Richard Requa - to build the memorial. In referring to Mt. Helix, Requa stated that "the contour of its summit and the disposition of its vistas, all seem to have been arranged by the Creator for the perfect realization of such a concept," and that "to cooperate in its realization has indeed been my greatest opportunity".[5]

Cyrus and Mary also commissioned a well-known landscape architect, Emerson Knight, who stated that "the theater offers as its primary object, a fit setting for Easter Sunrise Services where architecture is reverently blended with great natural beauty," and whose cross, " rising 35 feet above the summit... exemplifies massive strength and aloneness...a creedless message of sacrificial love." He was careful to choose plantings "to soften the general effect without robbing the summit of its characteristic ruggedness".[6]

Construction was begun in 1924, under the direction of Ed Fletcher, Jr. Soon, men with picks and horses, pulling scrapers, cleared the site. It was a busy scene.

While researching the background of Mt. Helix, I saw Ed Fletcher Jr.'s picture in the paper, taken at the granite boulder memorial to his parents. I did not know that the first-born son of the man who made the Mt. Helix Theatre possible lived in our community! I was so excited! Shortly thereafter, I had the pleasure of interviewing him.

When I arrived at Ed Fletcher, Jr.'s home

in Fletcher Hills, I had goosebumps the size of Mt. Helix boulders, but he made me feel so welcomed! He is the second of ten children of Col. Ed and Mary Fletcher, and will be 89 in February. Talking to him was like going back in time - being with him made all the facts I had researched come alive for me!

Mr. Fletcher told me that he directed the construction of the original road up the mountain and assisted Richard Requa and Emerson Knight in their plan to use as much of the natural setting and material as possible. Nevertheless, carloads of cement and hundreds of tons of crushed rock, sand, steel, and lumber had to be brought to the top of the mountain. The cross alone was made up of over fifty-five tons of steel and concrete, and six powerful floodlights were installed within the walls encircling the summit. Even the stage area was permanently wired to provide lighting effects for the production of plays. The amphitheater was built facing toward the rising sun and the seating area was purposely designed with some boulders left popping up through the cement to keep the natural look. Down below, a stage was built large enough to hold several hundred people.

Work progressed under the careful eye of Ed Fletcher, Jr., who later became its custodian (for sixteen years!). It is estimated that the Nature Theatre cost somewhere between $87,000 and $100,000 before it was sufficiently completed for dedication on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1925. More than 7,000 attended the services and watched as a beautiful bronze plaque was attached to a large boulder, dedicating the Nature Theatre to the memory of Mary Carpenter Yawkey from Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey and Mary Yawkey White. People marveled that even though the theater could seat more than 5,000, the natural acoustic properties were so nearly perfect that almost a whisper could be heard from the stage to the uppermost parts of the seating arrangement.

When Mrs. White died in April of 1928, Frederick, her husband, deeded the Nature Theatre to Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey, her brother. The amphitheater was finished in 1929. On July 29th of that year, Frederick White, acting for Cyrus C. Yawkey and as trustee for the will of Mary Yawkey White, presented the Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors with the deed to the property along with a $30,000 trust fund to provide for upkeep and improvements. (This fund now has over $50,000 left.)[7]

At the dedication, Mr. White stated that, "the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre was built by Mary Yawkey White and Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey as a memorial to their mother...so that the people of San Diego County would have a permanent place to hold their Sunrise Easter services".[8] The deed specifically states that these services "shall be open to the peoples of all creeds, religions, and nations," that it may be used for drama, music, pageants, oratorios, and "all things which tend to elevate and refine mankind," and that "the monument and structures now erected...shall be the only monuments and/or structures permitted..." If these provisions are not carefully protected, we might lose the gift that we have![9]

Over the years, people have attended sunrise services, weddings, musicals, graduations, plays, or have simply walked to the top, like Mary Carpenter Yawkey, to be inspired and enjoy the view. Many in our community remember when they took part in the coast-to-coast hookup in 1936 when the National Broadcasting Company agreed to put the sunrise services on the air for thirty minutes with the assistance of radio station KFSD. This had been arranged by Ed Fletcher, Jr.'s father. Others in our community, like the La Mesa Rotary Club, continue to take an active role.



Nature Theatre steps, late 1920's.

Some of their members became involved in 1947. They have been officially responsible for successfully planning and carrying out the Easter sunrise services since 1954.

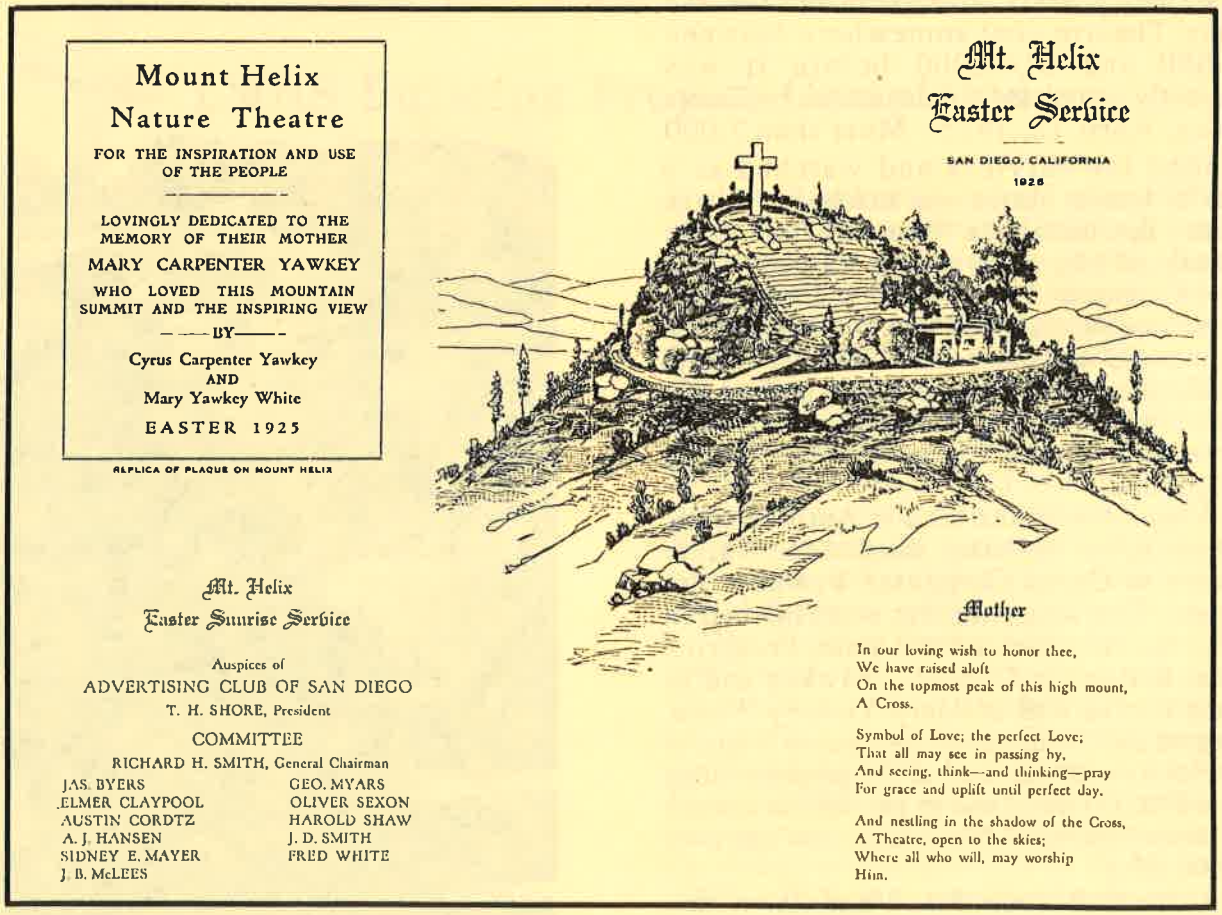
There is a tremendous amount of support for the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre in our community, despite the fact that some of the bronze plaques have long since been removed. I think those who are now opposed to the cross are probably unaware of the facts. A trust fund exists and NO tax money is spent for its upkeep.

Many may not even know about that historic day in 1929, and who was responsible, but thousands appreciate the view, and the cross's symbol of hope, not just on Easter, but every day of the year. It is now my hope that by making the Mt. Helix Nature Theatre an Historic Landmark, more people will come to understand and cherish this gift of inspiration in our community - that keeps on giving - and people like Ed Fletcher, Jr., who worked hard to make it possible.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ed Fletcher, Memoirs of Ed Fletcher (San Diego: Pioneer Printers, 1952), p.19.
2. Ibid., p. 748.
3. Ibid., p. 395.
4. Ibid., p. 412.
5. Richard Requa. "My Greatest Opportunity." A Book of Memories for the Ages. Publicity Department of the Balboa Park Auditorium Assn., 1925.
6. Emerson Knight, "The Mount Helix Nature Theatre." A Book of Memories for the Ages, 1925.
7. Telephone conversation with Alex Martinez, Assistant Director of San Diego County Parks and Recreation, January 12, 1989.
8. San Diego Union, July 30, 1929, "Mt. Helix Theatre Given to County."
9. Deed conveying Mt. Helix Nature Theatre and Parking Space to the County of San Diego. Deed Book 1671, pages 80-89, June 14, 1929.

Sean Carroll prepared this report for presentation to the San Diego County Historic Sites Board on February 8, 1989, and also submitted it to the San Diego/Tijuana International History Fair held in March, 1989. The complete report includes copies of all the supporting documentation: articles, letters, and photographs. Sean has given a copy of his report to the La Mesa Historical Society.



Easter Sunrise Service program, 1926.



Photo by Doug Neill

The Nan Couts House, January, 1990.

The Nan Couts House

Note: This report was prepared for the La Mesa Historic Preservation Commission by Karna Webster and Donna Regan, Commission members, and Kathy Flanigan. At its meeting on February 14, 1990, the Commission voted to recommend to the La Mesa City Council that the Nan Couts House be designated a La Mesa Historic Landmark. Since the property owner's consent for such designation was not given, the Council could not act on this recommendation.

The Nan Couts House is a charming example of the Craftsman Bungalows popular in Southern California from about 1905 until the early 1920's. The home is one of the few remaining houses built during the fruit ranching era before La Mesa became an incorporated city.

The house has major significance as the home of Nan Couts, who was one of the best known and influential citizens during the time La Mesa grew from a village to a modern city. She lived in this house for 40 years. In 1949, she was honored as one of the 10 most important people who had lived in the city in the first half century, and some of her most important work was accomplished after that. Nan Couts organized the La Mesa Welfare Association, the Grossmont Hospital Auxiliary, and the Edgemoor Auxiliary, and was largely responsible for the eventual construction of Grossmont Hospital, the La Mesa Youth Center and the Girls Cottage, which bears her name. In 1969, the mayor proclaimed October 5th as "Nan Couts Day" to honor her for her decades of service to the people of La Mesa.

THE HOUSE

Concealed by mature trees and dense shrubbery, the Nan Couts House stands on a knoll behind other houses on La Mesa Boulevard. A narrow driveway leads from the

street and curves around this charming Craftsman Bungalow. A stone-faced concrete block retaining wall borders the driveway, and a walkway leads to wide concrete steps and the front door.

The house features a complex roofline with low gables, wide eaves with exposed rafter ends, and knee braces under the eaves. An attic air vent with carved wooden slats graces the front gable. Painted and staggered wood shingles cover the second floor exterior, while the ground floor features narrow, horizontal, clapboard siding. An open shed-roofed porch with square post supports shelters the entrance and the paneled front door. The house has several types of windows, including one-over-one double hung and at least two box bays with knee brace supports and hoods. An unusual feature is a section of the house that rises almost two stories and has a hipped roof.

The most important landscape feature is a fine specimen ficus tree believed to be 70 to 80 years old.

The Nan Couts House stands on land subdivided as the Fruitvale Tract on January 11, 1908. Norman A. Stewart, a rancher, and his wife Harriet purchased several lots in this subdivision on February 2, 1909. In 1909 or possibly in 1910, the home known today as the Nan Couts House was constructed for the Stewarts on this property. Although research has not yet uncovered the name of the builder, the home shows interesting details typical of the Craftsman style, then popular. On November 24, 1916, the Stewarts sold their home to Everett P. and Maude Neff, who held the property only until June 6, 1917, when they sold it to William J. and Mary E. Seat. Everett Neff was one of the proprietors of a La Jolla pharmacy in 1915, and in 1917 was a salesman at a San Diego automobile agency.

The Seat family sold the house on October 3, 1923 to Joseph A. and Jennie L. Meier. After five years, the Meiers deeded the property on January 30, 1928 to Kneeland Jenkins and William S. Birney, a building contractor. Birney and Jenkins, who may have purchased the house as an investment, sold it again on July 5, 1928 to John Forster Couts, Jr. and Sarah A. (Nan) Couts. J. Forster Couts was associated with the First National Bank in San Diego. At the age of 77, he drowned on August 5, 1965 while swimming at Mission Beach.

Nan sold the house on September 16, 1968 to John C. and Geraldine M. Malone. She had lived in her La Mesa home for forty years. Then she moved to El Cajon to live near her daughter, Nanette.



John Forster Couts, Jr., c. 1940



Nan Couts, c. 1940

NAN COUTS

Sarah A. ("Nan") Couts was born in England in 1889. She was the daughter of James Taylor Van Rensselaer and Agnes Sarah (Bradley) Van Rensselaer.

When Nan was one year old, her parents brought her to San Diego and the family lived for a time at the Hotel del Coronado. The family then moved to a ranch at Fallbrook. As a child, Nan met her future husband, John Forster Couts, Jr., the grandson of two famous San Diego County pioneer residents: Col. Cave Couts and Ysidora Bandini. Col. Cave Couts is remembered in San Diego today as the colorful military man who built the famous Rancho Guajome. Nan and Forster were married by 1915.

After their marriage, Nan and her husband lived in Mission Hills, but when a son developed asthma, they moved to La Mesa for the drier climate here. They purchased a nearly 20-year-old farm house, added a screen porch at the rear and enlarged the kitchen.

Before long, Nan became involved in La Mesa community activities. When she discovered a need, she did something about it. While serving as the welfare committee chairman for the P.T.A., she learned that some sort of community group was needed to provide clothing, health care and often food in the community. To meet these needs, she organized the La Mesa Welfare Association and its thrift shop in 1931 and served as its president for 19 years. She also obtained a visiting nurse for La Mesa through the SERA program. During the Depression she worked as the supervisor of surplus commodities in the La Mesa area and gave many hours to the American Red Cross. Nan also worked with county and state welfare departments and in 1939, served as the acting administrator of the San Diego County SRA (State Relief) office.

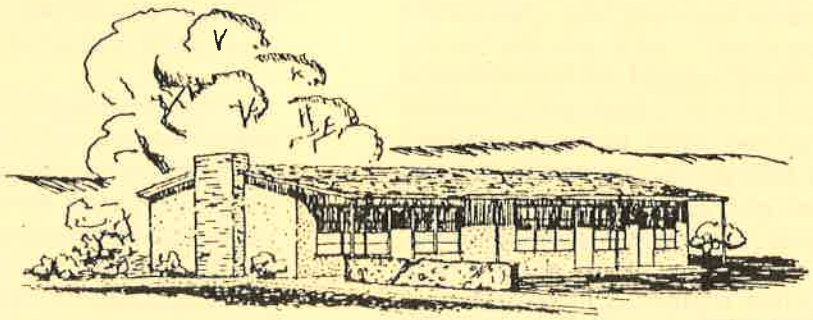
During World War II, Nan Couts held a staff job as director of Home Service for the Red Cross and did volunteer service for the organization as well. She served on a number of committees and boards including a citizens' advisory board for an alcoholic clinic. Through her various activities, she became aware of additional needs in the community. In 1947, she was one of a small group of citizens who organized to build some sort of health care facility in the area. She spearheaded the drive that resulted in the construction of Grossmont Hospital and turned the first spadeful of dirt at the ground-breaking ceremonies. When the hospital officially opened on August 15, 1955, Nan had already organized the Grossmont Hospital Auxiliary on July 15, 1952 and served as its charter president. She also helped organize the auxiliary at Edgemoor Geriatric Hospital.

Nan was instrumental in the establishment of the La Mesa Youth Center, and when she discovered a special need for a facility just for girls, she started a drive that raised funds for the Girls Cottage that was completed in MacArthur Park in 1957. She persuaded service clubs and the City Council to help with this project. The building was named the Nan Couts Cottage in her honor.

Nan Couts served the city, too, on the Police Commission, the La Mesa Park and Recreation Commission (five years), and the La Mesa Personnel Appeals Board (six years). On October 5, 1969, the city held a large reception to honor her for her many years of service to the community; the mayor proclaimed the occasion "Nan Couts Day." She was 80 years old at the time. When Nan passed away on September 9, 1985 at the age of 96, her obituary related her important contributions to La Mesa.

Nan Couts is remembered for her advice to young people, "Look for things that need doing and do them." During her 40 years in La Mesa, Nan Couts found many thing that needed doing, and her accomplishments touched the lives of all La Mesa citizens.

We wish to thank Nan Couts' daughter, Nanette Couts Thompson, and Nanette's daughter, Cathee Thompson, for their generous assistance in the preparation of this report.



Nan Couts Girls Cottage in MacArthur Park.

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