



# La Mesa Historical Society LOOKOUT AVENUE



Volume 19, Number 1

Winter 1998

## A HISTORY OF THE LA MESA FIRE DEPARTMENT

By Pat Kettler

### *HOSECART TO HORSEPOWER*

The construction of buildings and houses in La Mesa Springs didn't begin until after the railroad was completed from San Diego through the east county in 1889. In 1892 the tiny community's population of about 150 residents consisted mainly of ranchers with 10 to 15 acre citrus groves that were scattered around the outlying hills.

By 1895 the town began growing up around the railroad tracks on La Mesa Boulevard and Nebo Drive. By this date, La Mesa Springs had a blacksmith shop, a hotel, a school house, a citrus packing house, a depot, and a two-story brick store. (The depot and store are standing today at their original sites on La Mesa Boulevard.)

The earliest record found to date with reference to a fire fighting unit was found in a March 16, 1908 *La Mesa Springs Scout* newspaper which carried the following notice:

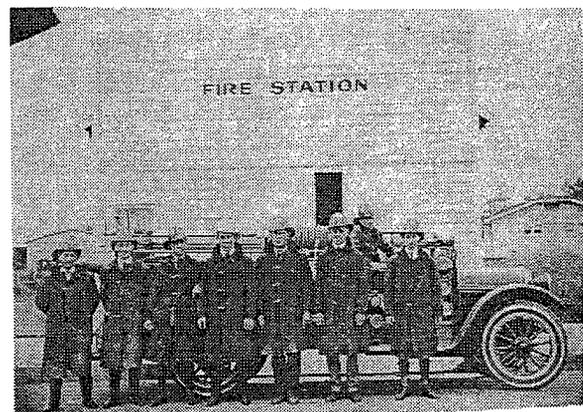
*"Persons who desire to have the protection of the fire company will make it more convenient for the department in case of fire if they will be sure to have an 1-1/2 inch reducer on their faucet near the house. It will pay you to have this attended to at once, because you cannot tell when you may have use for it."*

### *OF FIREMEN AND FIRES*

La Mesa's early volunteer fire department consisted mainly of men who worked or owned businesses on or near

La Mesa Boulevard, people who were in earshot of the fire gong. They could drop whatever they were doing, get to their gear, and be ready to go fight a fire. One such volunteer, a banker in town, would "shoo" customers out of the bank, lock it up, and be on his way to the fire station. Ray Lyles, a butcher by trade, was a "sight" dashing from his store after hearing the alarm, heading for the station several blocks away.

These were truly dedicated volunteers who were willing to give of their time for the good of the community. In November of 1919, a large fire threatened to destroy the entire downtown area between Palm Avenue and Spring Street. Due to the help of townspeople assisting the volunteer firemen, the destruction was confined to three stores on the north side of La Mesa Boulevard.



La Mesa Fire Department (c. 1924)

### *FIRST LA MESA FIRE STATION*

The first fire station in La Mesa was located on the south side of La Mesa Boulevard (then called Lookout Avenue),

*(Continued on Page 3)*

# BLAZE, THE SMOKE HOUND

by Pat Kettler

He was the La Mesa Fire Department's only mascot, a *one of a kind* dog. Blaze was given to the department when he was a pup in 1945 and lived at the fire station his entire life. He was cared for and trained by the fire chief's wife, Erma Lyles. Blaze's father was a Springer Spaniel and his mother a Pointer; he was white with liver-colored spots.

As a youngster, Blaze rode the fire engines to fires like a real "smoke eater". But the firemen had become so fond of Blaze that Chief Ray V. Lyles feared someone might break a leg trying to keep Blaze on the engine when on a fast run. He banned Blaze from fire runs about the same time the dog



Blaze (c. 1962)

decided he didn't want to go due to an overdose of smoke that made him ill.

In between naps Blaze was official greeter at the fire station. He brought the slippers and the daily papers to Mrs. Lyles and the Chief, who lived at the station, and he did many tricks.

Blaze sat up, played dead, rolled over, chased



his tail, said his prayers, wore a fire hat, and held a pipe in his teeth for special occasions. His pay was dog biscuits, and Blaze would ignore one dropped on the floor or placed on the bridge of his nose until Mrs. Lyles said, "10-4". Then he would snap it up.

As a greeter, Blaze welcomed visitors from a seat atop a fire plug on the lawn in front of the station. The plug had a smooth top for easy sitting.

In later years Blaze developed arthritis, and everyone at the La Mesa Fire Department mourned his death in 1962.

***The "History of the La Mesa Fire Department", an exhibit of photos, uniforms, and artifacts (c. 1908 to present) continues at the McKinney House through May, 1998.***

## MEMBERSHIP IN LA MESA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### *An Invitation to Join*

The Society depends upon membership dues, 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 include:

- |                          |                                |                                  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Benefactor..... \$250    | Sponsor/Organization.....\$ 25 | Student (under 18 yrs.).....\$ 1 |
| Life (Single)..... \$125 | Family (2 adults).....\$ 15    |                                  |
| Patron..... \$ 40        | Individual..... \$ 10          |                                  |

To join the La Mesa Historical Society, please complete and return this form with your check to :  
**LA MESA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, P.O. BOX 882, LA MESA, CA 91944.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* I would like to become \*  
 \* involved in the \*  
 \* Society's work.  \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

*(Continued from Page 1)*

west of the railroad tracks near the southeast corner of Date Avenue.

The building, originally a livery stable, was used by La Mesa's Volunteer Fire Department until March of 1927 when it was scheduled for demolition to make way for a new store.

The fire station had been captured on celluloid some time in the mid-1920's when a silent movie production company from Grossmont Studios filmed several scenes in front of the building.

The San Diego and Arizona Railroad Company offered the City of La Mesa a site for the fire station on their right-of-way north of La Mesa Boulevard between Spring Street and Nebo Drive. By 1932, a move was made to a building on the northeast corner of La Mesa Boulevard and Date Avenue, also occupied by the California Forestry Department.

In 1937, the Forestry Department had moved into its new building on north Date Avenue, and the La Mesa Fire Department was located on Nebo Drive.

In 1922, a new Reo "Speed Wagon" was purchased by the City for \$5,000 which replaced the previous Moreland fire truck. It came equipped with two chemical tanks, ladders, over 500 feet of hose, and a force pump operated by the truck's engine.

The hose threw a 150-foot stream of water at 120 pounds of pressure, and the pump discharged 350 gallons of water a minute.



**FIRE CHIEF ROSS ORSBORN**

(c. 1908-1915)

J. Ross Orsborn was born in Maxburg, Iowa in 1880. His parents and five adult siblings moved to La Mesa from Iowa in 1898 and he joined them a year later.

Ross found work as a local carpenter and helped build many of La Mesa's earliest houses and buildings. He was a member of La Mesa's earliest baseball team and had the distinction of several firsts.

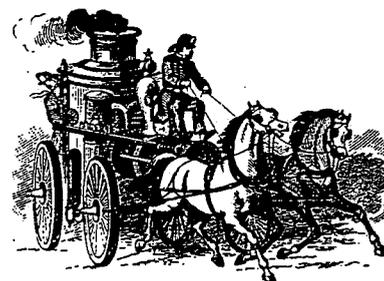
Orsborn was La Mesa's first constable, its first tax collector, and its first volunteer fire chief (sometimes referred to as fire marshal). He served as fire chief from about 1908 until 1915.

Ross continued in the construction business for many years and lived out his life in La Mesa, a confirmed bachelor. He died in 1952 at the age of 72 years.

***La Mesa's Fire Chiefs From Past To Present***

In its approximately 90 year history, the La Mesa Fire Department has been served by a total of seven chiefs:

<b>J. Ross Orsborn</b>	c. 1908 - 1915
<b>Harry L. Smith</b>	1915 - 1920
<b>Luther C. Gordon</b>	1920 - 1942
<b>Ray V. Lyles</b>	1942 - 1965
<b>Robert O. Sever</b>	1965 - 1981
<b>James O. Orsborn</b>	1981 - 1990
<b>Chris Carlson</b>	1990 - present



## RUBEN MARTIN LEVY

By Pat Kettler

"Rube" Levy arrived in La Mesa in June of 1919, following his discharge as a US. Army 2nd Lieutenant at the end of World War I. He and his first wife came from Sacramento to join his father, Henry Levy, in the hardware business in La Mesa.

In 1920, Rube was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his extraordinary heroism in action in the Argonne offensive in 1918. At the time he was a Sergeant in Company B, 363rd Infantry, 91st Division of the American Expeditionary Forces.

German machine guns had cut off and pinned Company B down and they were unable to get back to the American lines. Rube was able to destroy the German machine guns and make it possible for his Company to make it to their destination.

He also received a medal and a special award from the French Government - the "Medaille Interalliee de la Victoire" - in 1919.

Rube Levy was a volunteer fireman in the 1920's, and became an active member of the La Mesa Chamber of Commerce. In 1928, he was elected a

Director of the La Mesa, Lemon Grove, and Spring Valley Irrigation District (now called the Helix Irrigation District).

In 1939 he was elected President of the Board, where he remained until his death. The R. M. Levy Water Treatment Plant was named in his honor for his over 30 years of service.

Levy died in September of 1959 from the results of an automobile accident. At the time of his passing, Reuben Levy was 70 years of age.



Rube Levy (c. 1918)

### Rube Levy Artifacts Donated to La Mesa Historical Society

Appreciation is extended to Beverly Whitcomb for her donation

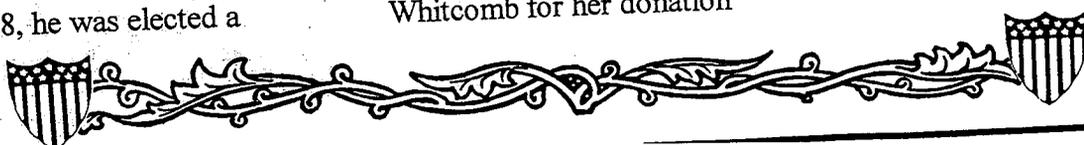
of the following Rube Levy artifacts to the Historical Society:

**Framed Portrait (Tinted)** of Rube Levy, c. 1918 in WWI Army uniform with cap, 9- 1/4" x 13- 1/4" (see photo this page);

**Scrapbook** belonging to Rube Levy, 9-1/2" x 11- 1/2" brown simulated leather with gold lettering, "Rube Levy, June 22, 1958, Appreciation, 30 Years Service, Helix Irrigation District". Contents include letters of congratulation from VIPs from Sacramento to La Mesa. Includes two 8" x 10" black & white photographs of Rube Levy in front of the Irrigation District building about 1958;

**Framed Certificate of Award** presented to Reuben M. Levy, 14" x 15". "Distinguished Service Cross for Extraordinary Heroism in military operations against an armed enemy of the United States at Verny, France, Sept. 26, 1918 while serving as sergeant, Co. B, 363rd Infantry, 91st Div., Amn. Expeditionary Forces. Given under my hand at the city of Washington this 30th day of October, 1925". Signed by Dwight F. Davis, Secretary of War.

**Framed Certificate** presented to Reuben M. Levy, "Medaille Interalliee de la Victoire", April 1919.



## Progress on Children's Bedroom Restoration Displayed at Open House

by Donna Regan

Visitors to the Christmas Open House were able to see the continuing progress on the restoration of the children's bedroom. On display were several pieces of McKinney furniture, period toys and books, and the newly purchased lace curtains.

We are fortunate to be able to furnish the room with pieces original to the house: an oak dresser, a Craftsman oak rocker, a small rocking chair used by Donald McKinney when he was a boy, a storage chest and a wardrobe.

In restoring the McKinney House, we have used the traditional lace curtains and dark green window shades typical of the turn of the century. Machine-made cotton "Nottingham" lace curtains were popular and easily affordable. The 1908 Sears catalogue offered pairs for less than \$1.00. Such curtains were used with heavier fabric curtains, or by themselves with window shades.

The resurgence of interest in lace curtains in recent years has led to the reproduction of period patterns by mills in Scotland. The children's bedroom curtains, ordered from London Lace in Boston, were made on Victorian looms in a Scottish mill. A simple floral design, the pattern was first manufactured in 1890.

### LA MESA HISTORICAL RESEARCH GROUP RECRUITING MEMBERS

We are forming a historical research group to gather information about La Mesa families, to index issues of the *La Mesa Scout*, and to copy some important records. Also, from time to time, researchers are needed to gather information for special historical projects. Those interested may contact Karna Webster at 463-1029.

## NEW ACQUISITIONS

We gratefully acknowledge the following donations made to our collections in recent months:



**Jerry Schatz:** Woman's embroidered net blouse and black sateen petticoat, c. 1910; beaded silk dress, 1920's.

**Dorothy James:** Grossmont High School Christmas Pageant program, 1963; 1962 La Mesa commemorative brochure.

**Friends of the La Mesa Library:** Book, *Appleton's School Physics*, 1891.

**Marjorie Cray:** Children's book, *Dorothy Dainty in the Country*, by Amy Brooks, 1909.

**Karna Webster:** Sheet music, *A Perfect Day Waltz*, Carrie Jacobs-Bond, 1916.

**Estella Sommerville:** Postcard, view of Carrie Jacobs-Bond's Grossmont home; Victrola 78 record, *A Perfect Day*, by Carrie Jacobs-Bond; sheet of stationery with pickle recipe handwritten by Jacobs-Bond.

**Virginia Brennan:** La Mesa dog tags, 1916 and 1987; infant's slip, 1920's.

**Carol Lockwood:** Grossmont High School Christmas Pageant program, 1953; Grossmont 75th Anniversary T-shirt.

**Mary Kelley:** Child's cardboard game, *Animal Wonderland*, patented 1912; child's china teapot.

Our Grossmont High School 75th Anniversary exhibit resulted in the donation of a number of items which had been used by the donors while attending school there:

**Virginia Herlihy:** Baton, purchased in 1948.

**Mary-Peace Romig Holloway:** Black cotton gym bloomers, worn while attending 1929-1933.

**William Hood:** Megaphone used while a cheerleader in 1953.

**France Bair Dodson:** *El Recuerdo* yearbooks 1931-1934; also 1922-1929.

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## DOCENTS WELCOME SCOUT GROUPS TO MCKINNEY HOUSE AND GROUNDS

by Carol Lockwood

In November, the McKinney House hosted two tours for Scouting groups. Junior Girl Scout Troop 6184 visited on November 3rd, and included 16 girls in the 5th grade and their leaders. On November 18th, Cub Scout Pack 319, Den 2, visited the house and grounds, including 15 boys, leaders and siblings.

Both groups walked from Lemon Avenue Elementary School for the tours, which started in the Thelma Palermo Building where photographs of the early days in La Mesa were viewed. Then the docents introduced each group to McKinney family history before the tours of the house began. Girls' clothing of the era was on display by special loan from Jo Pearson.

A special handout was developed by Marjorie Cray for the Girl Scout tour, featuring historical information including children's and women's fashions, reprints from two children books in the McKinney House collection, and learning activities.

Following the second tour, a note of thanks was received from Noelle Krueger, Jr. Girl Scout troop leader, commenting that the girls' favorite was the four-seater outhouse. "They really got a kick out of it and they are looking forward to the Christmas Open House."

Special thanks to docents Donna Regan, Pat Kettler, May Ann Ehlers, Betty Teague, Dorothy James and Carol Lockwood for their assistance with the Scout tours this past Fall.

## New Year Brings Adult Groups to McKinney House

On January 7th, a group of 17 from Delta Kappa Gamma, a honorary educator group, toured the McKinney House and enjoyed a light supper and business meeting. The event was hosted by Carol Lockwood, docent chair, who is a member of the organization.

Approximately 20 members of the La Mesa Senior Center "Exploring San Diego" class toured the McKinney House and grounds in January. Starting at the La Mesa depot for a one-hour tour with Betty Teague, the group made its way to the McKinney House where Pat Kettler presented an overview including historical photos. The class then split into two groups for a docent-led tour of the house.

The Golden Leaguers group from Clairemont Lutheran Church have requested a tour of the McKinney House in March.

## DOCENTS NEEDED FOR REGULAR SATURDAY OPEN HOUSE AND OCCASIONAL TOURS

by Carol Lockwood



Have you often wished you could spend more time in the McKinney House, enjoying its charm and learning more about its history?

We invite you to join the Docent Committee where these wishes can really come true. Training is provided. Volunteer time can be regular or occasional.

Currently, we are looking for docents who can provide service during occasional group tours of the McKinney House. Also needed are docents for regular Saturday open house from 12 to 3 so that we may have two docents available on each day.

Contact Carol Lockwood, 463-5648.

## HOLIDAYS USHERED IN AT ANNUAL OPEN HOUSE

by Marjorie Cray

On an otherwise rainy weekend, a few tentative rays of sunshine broke through grey clouds just in time for the start of a most enjoyable Christmas Open House.

The annual event, held on December 6th, was co-chaired by **Karna Webster** and **Pat Kettler**. It provided many with an "old fashioned Christmas" setting in which to enter into the holiday spirit.



Betty Teague greets guests

Guests were greeted at the McKinney House with festive seasonal decorations, lovely strains of Christmas music played on the parlor organ by **Elizabeth Montgomery**, and the wonderful aroma of scones freshly baked by **Marilyn Webb** and her able assistant. Even though there remained an ongoing possibility of inclement weather, a steady stream of

visitors attended throughout the afternoon.

For the first time ever, the Children's Bedroom was available for viewing upstairs. (*See article this issue on restoration.*)

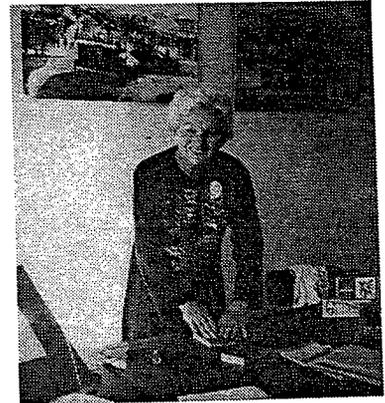
Other exhibits included the "History of the La Mesa Fire Department", an exhibit of historical photos, "La Mesa Then and Now", and a display on the La Mesa Depot as it appeared in 1915.

Thanks to **Pat Kettler** for all her work with the various exhibits, and to **Karna Webster** for coordinating the progress on the Children's Room.

**Carol Lockwood** demonstrated the art of block printing in the Thelma Palermo Building, utilizing her own linolium blocks as well as those of former Grossmont High School teacher, Dorothy Smith.

Nearby, guests were able to view and purchase quilted items provided by **Gay Tulp**. Printed items and publications were also on display and for sale.

This year's drawing was conducted by LMHS President **Donna Regan** who was assisted by a member of the Junior Girl Scout Troop that recently toured the McKinney House. (*See article this issue.*)



Carol Lockwood & block printing

Winners of the drawing were:

**1st Place:** 1930's-1950's Vintage Clock Collection, Ruth Kramer;

**2nd Place:** Judith Bledsoe Lithograph, Robert McKinney

**3rd Place:** Floral Arrangement, Wanda Brent

**4th Place:** Gift Certificate/La Mesa Village Antiques, Robert McKinney

Proceeds from the drawing and sales of quilted and other items came to approximately \$1000, benefitting LMHS.

Thanks to all who helped make the Open House such a success.

### Future Events at the McKinney House

**March 18, 7:00 p.m.**  
Workshop, "Researching Historic Buildings"

**March 28 (Time TBA)**  
Yard Sale Fundraiser

**June 13, 1-4 p.m.**  
Ice Cream Social (same day as Flag Day Parade)





P. O. Box 882, La Mesa, California 91944

# La Mesa Historical Society

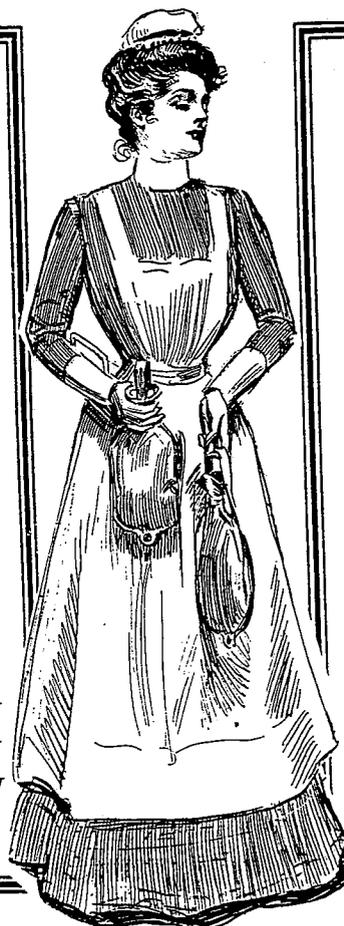
Museum: Rev. Henry A. McKinney House (1908)  
8369 University Avenue  
(619) 466-0197

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## La Mesa Historical Society Officers and Directors 1997-1998

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- Director ('96-'98) ..... ED BLACKMAN
- Director ('96-'99) ..... DOROTHY JAMES
- Director ('97-'99) ..... JIM ORSBORN
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- Newsletter Chair ..... MARJORIE CRAY
- Historic Preservation Liaison ..... BETH BLACKMAN



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) in La Mesa. Hours are 12:00 Noon to 3:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoons or by appointment. Docent tours are available. Call 466-0197 for further information.

**LOOKOUT AVENUE** is the official publication of the La Mesa Historical Society, P.O. Box 882, La Mesa, CA 91944. Published quarterly. Production: Marjorie Cray, editor, 562-8617. Office Depot Business Services, La Mesa, 464-2900.