

# Bears, bandits and bridges highlight Arroyo Story

(Fifth in an exclusive series on places and personalities of Northeast Los Angeles)

**BY WILFRID DELLQUEST**

Geographically, the Arroyo Seco ("dry creek") is the most prominent feature of the northeast Los Angeles landscape. This great, long gash in the surface of the earth, extending from the foot of the Sierras north of Pasadena, southward along the western edge of South Pasadena, skirts the Garvanza district continuing south through Highland Park until it joins the Los Angeles river not far from Elysian Park.

## Primeval Hunting Ground

From prehistoric times, the Arroyo has been deeply bound with the life and development of the land. Before the Spanish era, there were doubtless numerous villages on the banks of the Arroyo inhabited by the Gabrieleno Indians. The Arroyo, which was dry most of the time, was a primitive hunting ground. Wild animals, especially bears and coyotes, roamed among the live-oaks, sycamores and lush grasses that lined the course of the vast natural drainage ditch.

## Hideout

The narrow, winding wilderness area later became a hideout for outlaws during the Spanish, Mexican and American periods. Here they rendezvoused, divided and buried their loot and established bases from which they emerged for predatory raids upon travelers and settlers. To this day, rumors persist of caches of bandit loot buried in the Arroyo, although by this time the treasure has doubtless been covered by tons of silt and debris washed down from the mountains.

## The Camels Were Coming

In the 1850's, the Arroyo became identified with a herd of camels imported from the Old World for the U.S. Army Camel Corps at the instigation of Jefferson Davis, then secretary of war. The idea was to use dromedaries for army transportation in the arid Southwest.

Greek George, a camel-driver from Smyrna, brought to the U.S. by the war department to handle the ungainly animals,

used to take part of his herd for water and pasture to the Arroyo. He often had a number of camels tethered beneath the giant sycamore around which Charles Lummis later built his famous "El Alisal" home on the Arroyo bank at Avenue 43.

## The Bandit Vasquez

After the camel experiment flopped, Greek George took to farming a small plot of land near Cahuenga canyon in what is now Hollywood. In 1875, it was discovered that Greek George was herding bandits instead of camels. The outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez was holed up in George's farmhouse and there a posse finally caught up with the bandito. He was taken north and hanged for his crimes. According to tradition, Vasquez used a cave in the Eagle rock for a convenient hideout. The Arroyo and canyons adjacent to Hollywood were his favorite haunts, although his holdups ranged up and down the state. Vasquez was the first Hollywood bandit, a profession that has been zealously maintained by his successors.

## Bears and Bulls

The bears and bulls were not always confined to the Spring street stock exchange. In decades following the beginning of the 19th century, bullfights and bear fights were popular sports of jolly Angelenos. In the 1840's and 1850's there was a gaudily painted corral on Calle de Toros (Bull Street) near the Plaza, somewhere in the Main street and Old Chinatown vicinity, where bullfights were held regularly. Often a wild bear was pitted against a bull and such events were features of the Christmas and New Year's celebrations.

Bears for the bull arena were hunted in the Arroyo Seco. Fighting bears were caught near Devil's Gate on the upper Arroyo, and also in the Sycamore Grove area.

## Sin Comes to the Arroyo

The inviting shade of Sycamore Grove on the Arroyo easily accessible to nearby Los Angeles, has for more than a century lured Angelenos seeking relaxation. Picnics were held there as early as 1857. In the late 1860's the spot became of-

ficially known as Sycamore Grove. Clois Henrickson built a "hotel" there; also a dance pavilion, saloons and shooting galleries. The German turnverein held gymnastics, singing and sack races and a good time was had by all until the proper people in the community became aroused at what they regarded as "sinful goings-on."

Stage coaches brought merry-makers from Los Angeles to Sycamore Grove every two hours on Sundays. When the Sabbath was over, many reveliers, filled with liquor and beer and the sinful life staggered or were carried to the stage coaches for the trip back home. They had forgotten that the Arroyo was dry.

Now, this was no way to observe Sunday, and the people who lived in the area, grown weary of the weekly hoop-de-la, banded together to take action. As a result of their efforts, in 1898 Garvanza and Highland Park were annexed to Los Angeles and laws passed abolishing the saloons and "road houses" in Sycamore Grove. Before then, Highland Park and Garvanza were under the jurisdiction of Burbank and Glendale townships. The Highlanders cleaned out the saloons about the same time that Admiral Dewey cleaned out the Spaniards. Area residents may owe a left-handed debt of gratitude to the carousing lushes of Sycamore Grove. If they hadn't kicked up their heels in the beer suds, Highland Park would still belong to Glendale.

## Bridges Over the Arroyo

The Arroyo prevented easy access to San Gabriel Valley and Pasadena to the east. A number of bridges spanned the gap; at first, wooden bridges that were swept away by flood waters in the rainy season; later, steel and concrete bridges. There were bridges at the northern reaches of the Arroyo near the Devil's Gate gorge and at La Loma crossing; afterwards at Colorado boulevard connecting Eagle Rock and San Rafael districts directly with Pasadena.