

Buyers and sellers of land in the vanguard of progress

(Eighth in an exclusive series of articles about persons and places in the early history of Northeast Los Angeles.)

BY WILFRID DELLQUEST

Seventy years ago there were only six houses in Highland Park. In the early 1880's, before the big boom period was well under way, real estate developers began searching out suitable suburban acreage for subdivision. There have been three phases in the growth of metropolitan Los Angeles: settlement, centralization and decentralization. From the beginning there have been many residents of the great metropolis who were not satisfied with living in the central district of the city. They reached out into the nearby valleys to establish their homes, at first seeking quietude and rural surroundings; later, forced away from the hub of the city by increasing traffic congestion and the need to be closer to industrial centers where they found work within the expanding perimeter.

On May 20, 1882 building lots in the Northeastern area were offered for sale as the Hunter Highland View Terrace situated above Cypress Avenue and along Isabel Street. Five years later, when the boom reached its hysterical zenith, Highland Park acreage was subdivided by G. W. Morgan.

A HOUSE TO A BLOCK

The new residential districts grew slowly at first. Only a few lots were sold. As late as 1892, streets tributary to Pasadena Avenue (now North Figueroa Street) were nothing more than country lanes, and building along the avenue averaged about one house to a block.

Activity was centered at the town of Garvanza where York Boulevard approaches the Arroyo Seco. During the last half of the 1880's, real estate sales in a Garvanza rode the high tide of Southern California's greatest inflation in land values, while interest in Highland Park, Hermon, Annandale, Lincoln Heights and other Arroyoside sections was comparatively slight.

A DOLLAR AN ACRE

Background for modern real estate development was laid in 1870, when Andrew Glassell and A. C. Chapman bought Highland Park from the Verdugo estate for one dollar an acre, afterwards leasing most of the land for sheep raising. Headquarters for one of the several sheep ranches was located on North Avenue 54, almost exactly where Franklin High School now stands.

The maps (disenos) accompanying Spanish land grants were crude and often ambiguous with such hazy boundary, definitions as: "thence to the big oak tree," "in a line from the boulder," and "east to the skull in a tree." Grantees, holding immense ranchos, each one a kingdom in itself, were not disturbed by the lack of precise boundaries—give and take a few hundred acres—quien sabe? —and what difference did it make?

It was left to American surveyors to draw up well defined maps with triangulation, meridians and compass bearings when title transfers were confirmed by the courts.

TO THE HIGHEST BIDDERS

In 1887 in Garvanza, where the first outpost of modern land development connected Los Angeles with the alluring northeast empire, Ralph and Edward Rogers, James Booth and W. F. McClure organized as Rogers, Booth and Company, laid out the Garvanza Terrace tract into streets. There downtown office at 134 North Main Street, shepherded prospective buyers to the new development, arranged daily free excursions by Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley Railroad and retained the expert services of Newhall, well-known San Francisco auctioneer to sell lots to eager investors.

Residential lots brought from \$300 to \$400, while business frontage approximated \$1500 a lot. One of the original auction posters shows a railroad train chugging toward the Highlands beneath a temptation caption: "Grand Free Excursion and Free Lunch to Garvanzo!"

HEALTHFUL TOWN

The poster continues: "Auction Sale at 10 o'clock a.m. Don't fail to examine the Business and Residence Lots in the healthful town of Garvanzo . . . Water is piped to this property from the Mountain Water Company, and charged for at the Los Angeles City water rates. This sale is peremptory, and it is to the interest of all persons desiring good investments to be in attendance at this sale . . ."

Following the usual pattern of land - boom operations, with transcontinental trains pouring hordes of willing investors into Southern California, sellers took advantage of the frenzy to collect prices at unrealistic valuations, and why not since anxious buyers were chewing their tongues to lay their money on the line and grab their deeds?

BRASS BANDS PLAYED

Throughout the Southland, new towns were springing up like mushrooms in the grass. Land sellers inflated their chests as well as their prices and saw themselves not as mere real estate agents but as "community builders" and creators of empire which, in a sense, they were, although in their elated bewilderment their immediate objective was to "buy low and sell high."

In the meantime, brass bands played; barkers screamed at the customers like midway orators; flags bedecked the landscape; free excursions and free lunches abounded; everybody was happy, and the goose hung high. It was not uncommon for lots to change hands five times a day, each time at a tidy profit.

THE GOOSE FELL LOW

In the 1890's, the goose of prosperity flopped to the ground with a sickening thud. Inexpacably, the spiral of inflation, ward migration was reached. The forced beyond the danger point, popped like a soap bubble. Land, poor investors, stunned and unbelieving, found themselves unable to raise the price of a nickel cigar.

It was ironic that, during the barren depression of the 1890's, solid progress was achieved in the upbuilding of Northeast Los Angeles. Eventually money hidden away in the old sock came timidly forth. Investors were more conservative. They based their transactions upon realism instead of bubble-headed dreams.

THE HANGOVER WAS RUGGED

It was not easy. The economic hangover was rugged. In the 1890's, lots formerly sold for \$1500 were offered for \$100. Highland Park acreage was foreclosed at \$300 an acre. The corner lot at N. Figueroa and Ave. 56 now occupied by the Security Bank branch was advertised in 1893 for \$125, with no takers in sight. In 1906, when the financial wounds had healed, corner lots in the same vicinity were back to \$1400.

THE OLD COUNTRY STORE

In 1891, J. P. Stockdale bought the corner lot on Monte Vista and Avenue 56 for \$60. There he opened the first store in Highland Park. His sign proclaimed: "Groceries, Flour, Feed, Cigars & Tobacco."

Stockdale's store was redolent with mingled odors of bulk grain, vegetables, kerosene, coffee, molasses and spices. There was a long-handled cutter on the counter for slicing plug tobacco, and a red and gold coffee grinder with a shining hopper for the coffee beans and a big side wheel that turned with a handle.

Following economic recovery progress was steadfast and consistent. Eagle Rock Valley was settled and became a thriving residential community. York Boulevard district had its greatest growth from 1920-1930 when numerous business buildings and hundreds of residences were erected.

The world-wide depression of the 1930's brought a temporary let-down in the reality market, but by 1936 recovery was substantially complete.

Our community, as well as Los Angeles and the entire state of California, have been the final setting in the great drama of American migration.

The Alleghennies were crossed; the central plains were crossed; the continental divide was crossed. Pioneers broke over the Rocky Mountain barrier; they crossed the desert into the fertile valleys of California. At the Pacific Ocean the ultimate westward migration was reached. The only direction left to the pioneer is straight up. The next wave of migration may be into space. If terrestrial space ships ever reach the moon or distant planets, you may be sure that some real estate salesman will be among the passengers, radiant with optimism and eager to stake out new subdivisions.