

Writer recalls history of Sycamore Grove

H.P.
News
Herald
July 27

(Editor's note: Northeast Los Angeles' observance of the 186th birthday of the city will be held Sept. 3 and 4 in Sycamore Grove Park, 4702 N. Figueroa. The history of the park and the surrounding area is recounted below by Henry Welcome, historian of the Eagle Rock Historical Society).

By Henry Welcome

The 186th birthday celebration of the city of Los Angeles will be celebrated Sept. 3 in Sycamore Grove Park as the northeast section's contribution to "la fiesta de Los Angeles."

The object of this article is to take the reader back in time, giving him a brief glimpse at some of the events, large and small, that occurred near this pleasant spot. We hope reading this will aid in creating a proper mood for today's events.

Sycamore Grove Park has been a part of the city's recreation system since 1905. It is

located on one edge of Rancho San Rafael, a grant of private land, made to Jose Verdugo in 1784, by Pedro Fages the military governor of Spanish California. As you look about you at these towering, aged sycamores it is not too difficult to picture them, a bit younger naturally, but nevertheless, witnesses of the founding of our city by Felipe de Neve in 1781.

ARROYO SECO

Until less than 40 years ago the Arroyo Seco below this park, flowed freely across the rocks, unrestrained by its concrete walls and bottom. Willows lined its banks and from a tiny canyon across Figueroa Street came a trickling brook which passed through the northern portion of the park, then under a small wooden trestle of the railway, disappearing in

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the cattails as it entered the arroyo.

At about this point in the main stream, sometime in the dim past a large pond had developed in the Arroyo Seco. As time marched on the youths of the neighborhood had enlarged the pool, adding a raft or two made from abandoned railroad ties. As little fellows we used to catch, in mother's canning jars, minnows and crayfish. We called them "crawdads," taking them and the tiny fish home in the evening, where in a few days they usually died of neglect. As we grew bigger we ventured into the big pond among the tules.

IMPORTANT PASSAGE

The valley is quite narrow at this point but since the coming of the Spaniard, a very important passage way through these hills. First came a trail leading from the Pueblo de Los Angeles. This more than likely followed an old Indian trail. When the American came, he brought with him wagons and buggies to replace the clumsy Mexican cart.

The upper San Gabriel Valley was being settled, first ranches, then farms, soon towns. Pasadena was founded by the Indiana Colony in 1874, growing well enough to incorporate in 1886. The trail wandering up the Arroyo from town was getting wider and dustier. It also had been given a name, Pasadena Avenue.

In September 1876 the Southern Pacific drove a golden spike in Soledad Canyon, a bare 50 miles from Los Angeles. This line connected the growing town with San Francisco by rail, but Southern California was to wait another 10 years for a direct transcontinental connection.

OTHERS CONSCIOUS

Others became conscious of this narrow valley to the growing pueblo, now called the City of Los Angeles. In the mid-80s the Santa Fe had completed its tracks over the Cajon Pass into San Bernardino. It soon acquired connections to San Diego. Eleven "jerkwater" railroads cropped up like toadstools in the Los Angeles-San Bernardino area. Some Pasadenans, led by J. F. Crank founded the Los Angeles & San Gabriel Railroad.

In 1885 the railway was completed to Pasadena. This, with most of the rest of nearly a dozen short lines, was purchased by the Santa Fe Railroad in 1887, completing the first direct rail connection with the East. These slim lines of steel lie just one block west of Sycamore Grove. Another artery of transportation, another lifeline to build the city, had been added. These old sycamores witnessed that also. Los Angeles rejoiced, boomed and grew.

MORE RAILS

At the turn of the century someone else came along with the idea of rail connections with Salt Lake City and the East. By 1906 the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad was in service. Not too many years passed before the Union Pacific took the line over. They reduced the traffic on the section bordering the

east side of this park to one meager pickup of freight daily. But even these sleepy rails had their exciting days of glamor.

In Hollywood's silent picture heydays many thrilling serials were filmed on speeding trains that passed up and down beside the Arroyo Seco. Cameras ground out thousands of feet of Saturday matinee excitement for the youngsters of the early 20s and even before. Fortified with gum and popcorn we kids would watch such heroines as Pearl White fight off ugly beady-browed villains, on top, inside and even under fast moving trains. So engrossed were

we in the desperate scene that we often did not realize Sycamore Grove or some other landmark passed repeatedly in the background of the picture.

STREETCAR ARRIVES

The 1890's brought something else in transportation. Electricity shelved the horsecar, ushering in a new era in of speedy, comfortable inter-urban travel, the streetcar. In 1895 the Pasadena and Los Angeles Electric Railway was completed between those two cities, Pasadena then being the most prominent suburb. These venerable old trees were disturbed that year by the constant stream of streetcars passing along their right of way at the far side of Figueroa Street.

The street was narrower then and still called Pasadena Avenue. In the 1920's the old road got its new name of Figueroa. Within a year Huntington owned the street railway and the Pacific Electric advertised uninterrupted rides from Santa Monica to downtown Los Angeles, out along the Arroyo Seco through Pasadena and Altadena to the top of Mount Lowe. The Big Red Cars had brought the ultimate to inter-urban transportation.

The smaller narrow-gauge urban streetcars familiarly known as the "Yellow cars" were Henry Huntington's baby too. He bought out the Los Angeles Railway Company in 1898. This organization he controlled until his death in 1927, though he had given up his interest in the Pacific Electric by 1910. In the first decade of the 20th century the "Yellow cars" were serving Garvanza, Annandale, Highland Park and the York area, their cars

passing on Marmion Way paralleling the west side of the Santa Fe tracks.

Sycamore Grove nearly bore witness to a most unusual artery of transportation. In 1899 so many people had bicycles in Southern California they were becoming a traffic hazard. As we have already noted, Pasadena seems to have been a spawning ground for ideas in travel.

CYCLEWAY

A gentleman named Horace Dobbins, a resident of that city, came forward with the idea of an overhead board cycleway, a bicycle tollway. This cycleway was to run from the grounds of the Green Hotel down to Raymond Hill thence westward to the Arroyo Seco and so on past Sycamore Grove to downtown Los Angeles.

The present day Pasadena Freeway follows closely the 1900 plan of the cycleway throughout the length of where it now travels the banks of that stream. This board road, for the two wheelers, was to be elevated from three to 50 feet so that it might clear all obstructions. It may sound like a wild dream to the reader but the promoter was a hard headed business man and after forming a stock company, actually completed about a mile of the runway south of the Green Hotel.

OPENING FANFARE

This section was opened with suitable fanfare on New Years Day, 1900. 600 people paid a 10 cent toll and rode merrily on to Raymond Hill and back. Competition was a bit stiff that day as most everyone preferred watching the 11th annual Tournament of Roses. Undaunted the planners actually continued

until they completed their first bridge across the Arroyo. The old trees missed watching this event.

The first survey for a highway along the banks of the Arroyo Seco was made in 1895 by another Pasadenan, T. D. Allen. Mr. Dobbins made his plans from it, four years later. Often through the years a highway or parkway was considered, in the late 20's the dream nearly materialized but the depression years of the early 30's shelved the projects, until work really got under way in 1938. The Arroyo Seco Parkway was completed in 1940 becoming one of the first freeways in the country.

ARROYO CONTAINED

Here beside this park the stream bed had to be constricted and contained between high concrete walls to provide enough room for a six lane highway between the old Salt Lake Railway right of way and the Arroyo Seco. The narrow valley seems crowded at times.

I regret to state that the jet age has sort of passed the old sycamores by. There is no great airport nearby, not even a heliport close. Except for an occasional sonic boom disturbing the quiet drone of the freeway or the infrequent passing of a train, the trees lead a relatively peaceful existence shading and protecting the park's frequent visitors. In completing this travel and transportation cavalcade of Sycamore Grove Park I do not regret having to say, "Thank goodness, we are not in the landing pattern of International Airport."