

Memorial Park, Claremont CA, Some Musty Recollections

By Sam Neff

So the war ended in 1945. I was 9, just starting 4th grade. Our family lived in the second parsonage, 220 West 6th Street, next to The Guildhall and the original, wooden Claremont Church where my father, Clarence Neff, was the Associate Minister. I think that it had been built in 1905.

Claremont, before the rapid post-war expansion, was very well defined. On the south were the tracks, south of which were the two barrios. The eastern one was called Arbol Verde, for the little store that sold Pan Dulces and other Mexican specialties that could not be found elsewhere in town. The Western Barrio had no name that I can recall except “By the Packing House” - that was the Sunkist College Heights Packing House, where we could get half a lug of slightly imperfect Navels for fifty cents.

The east side of town was dominated by the colleges, with the boundary being the Scripps President’s house. I think it might have been on Mills, but that seems too far away. The northern edge of Claremont was US 66, or Foothill Boulevard. The only notable institutions north of Foothill were Claremont High School, the Indian Hill Golf Course, and a small enclave of unusual homes on Via Zurita. To the West, Mountain Avenue was the limit, although there were few buildings west of Oxford. Outside of these boundaries were orange groves and rancher’s houses. Inside were, for the most part, the closely - packed houses of Claremont, along with the saintly habitations of Pilgrim Place.

There were two public schools. The Grammar School, now called Sycamore, K – 6th, covering the two blocks bounded by Eighth and Tenth on south and north, and Harvard and Yale on east and west. The high school, including playing fields, occupied about 10 acres north of Foothill and east of Indian Hill.

In 1945 I was 9 and my twin older brothers, John and Charles, were 12. Where did we play? Since we were near Pomona College we could use the college fields when nothing else was going on. We also were only a couple of blocks from the only park in town, Triangle Park - a roughly equilateral triangle of grass with 20-yard sides at the complicated intersection Indian Hill, 5th, and Harrison. It was one of the busiest intersections in town, so for ball games it was extremely dangerous. Across Fifth Street there was more to this park – a lighted tennis court, a roquet court (with equipment locked) and a lawn-bowling green, with beautiful low-cut grass – absolutely off limits to anyone but the post-sexagenarian bowlers. In fact, all through Claremont practically all the common grass covered areas were off limits for play in one way or another. It is not surprising that we devised a means of jimmying the lights, and made tennis our main sport during that period of our lives.

But a safe, grassy play area for families and children was not the only issue. There really was no outdoor place for community activities. Most activity in the community was either church or college related – like the College Wives’ picnics at the barbecue fireplace in right-center field, or the Wednesday Evening Potlucks in the Guildhall. If you weren’t part of the church or the college, there really was no place.

Now, within the city limits there was an anomaly. Between Eighth and Tenth, Yale and Indian Hill, there was a citrus grove. Valencias and lemons, as I recall. It was owned by Herman and Bess Garner. They had built a large home in 1928 on the property. We knew that house pretty well, especially the high tower on the south side. As late as Cub Scouts I remember the groves as being functional and in good shape. When den mothers ran out of ideas it was not unusual to take a hike through the grove. The oranges on the trees were enticing, but there was no water in the grove and the hikes would end up with sticky hands and dry mouths.

I barely remember Herman Garner, who invented an engine air filter that made him a fortune. Around 1945 he left Bess in a messy divorce. Bess was a very dear friend of my parents especially my mother, Priscilla Neff. Their friendship seemed to extend back to Guadalajara in the 30's, but I am not sure how. Bess wrote the early description of Claremont called This is Claremont, and I always felt that mother, the writer, had had some input as well.

I am told that something to do with the divorce settlement made the Garner property available for the city to purchase, the condition being that it would be used for a city park. To my family this was a proposal whose time had come. We, especially my brothers and I and our friends, could not see how this proposition could fail. The park would be large, centrally located, and next to the grammar school, whose playgrounds were either hard scrabble or black top. The idea of playing softball or football on grass was a heavenly vision.

We did become aware that the city had to vote on the measure, and for some reason – probably the fact that it included a substantial variation in property taxes, it would have to pass by a two-thirds majority. Certainly this did not bother us. What civic-minded citizen would oppose this measure? A 7-acre park, right there in the middle of town would enhance to town and make everything more livable for children and families.

But there was opposition, from powerful people. I am not sure if Claremont actually had a mayor at that time. It did have a city council with a chairman who acted like a mayor. He was a rancher named Stuart Wheeler. He was a staunch free-market Republican and I suppose he opposed anything that strengthened government and increased taxes. Apparently the idea that such a large part of prime Claremont property (I calculate about 4% of taxed land) would both become city responsibility and leave the tax rolls was counter to his beliefs.

He had support, too. The downtown business owners and the ranchers were on his side, as well as the businesses along Foothill. Of course all these people wanted a park. That was a no-brainer. But the park should not be in the middle of town on developable land. Instead there was land available across Foothill that would be fine for a park, and could be established with very little financial burden.

My recollection was that when the first referendum arose, those favoring the park, like my family, assumed that it would pass. The businessmen and ranchers were objecting but it was pro-forma and certainly the sensible members of the community would prevail.

They were wrong. The underlying conservative factions in the community were well-organized and the two-thirds majority was a real obstacle. The vote failed by a small amount – less than 30 votes (the number in my mind is 3).

Now in Claremont there were a countable number of centers of power. Along with the politically minded ranchers and businessmen, there were the Colleges, the Church, and Pilgrim Place. The latter two overlapped considerably. During these years, there were major concerns in all these centers, brought about mainly by the end of the war.

The colleges were dealing with the influx of veterans looking for an education and wanting to get on with their lives. In addition a new college, Claremont Men's College, was being founded both as a means of handling the influx veterans and as a counterbalance to Scripps.

The church had had a rough decade, dealing with the casualties of the war and with the tragic loss of the beloved minister, Theodore Hume. The new minister, Homer Yinger, just wasn't cutting it as the preacher to perhaps the most critical congregation in the country. Not only was this weakening the Church's resolve, but the head of the trustees, Henry Cook, had his own agenda: developing an inter-cultural community on the north edge of the Arbol Verde barrio. The park was important, but not at the top of anyone's list.

Into this breach stepped the other, underground center of power in the community: the Claremont Book Club. In "Those Days" all the observable positions of power were held by men. Yes, there might have been a woman on the city council, and Eleanor Condit was the principal of the elementary school, and Mrs. Paul was the librarian, but none were involved in decisions – at least not overtly. Nevertheless, women then and now had a means of organizing and exerting influence – without being noticed, of course.

This was the power of the book club. I think they collectively read books on occasion, but it seems more likely that their regular monthly meetings delved more deeply into improving the community. The membership included Dorothy Thomason, Jean Saunders, Priscilla Neff (my mother) – those are the only ones of which I am absolutely certain. But from the evidence I am sure that I should include Bess Garner, Sybil (Mrs. Stanley) Larson, Caroline Lyon and Mary Liz Blanchard. I cannot imagine that Marie Bruner would not be in it somehow, and Mrs. Henry Cook must have been there, too. Of course there were more, but the Book Club seldom met at our house and I never observed it directly.

The important matter was that they took on the campaign for the park. I remember it consuming much of our lives for that interim period between the two votes. The husbands of its members included a college president, the editor of the Claremont Courier, the associate minister of the church, and practically all the members of Bill Blanchard's every occasion jazz band. This would form the basis of victory.

My most vivid memory of that campaign was the parade through town before the vote. I know there was a truck with a PA system leading the parade, and I suspect the jazz band was on the truck – they usually would be there. Mother organized us, and we and everyone we could claim as a friend marched in the parade as it snaked through as many neighborhoods as possible. I clearly remember

that someone was reading a script on the need for a decent park in Claremont, and each time we passed Triangle Park that poor little patch of grass would be chastised and ridiculed for being so insufficient.

The book club not only motivated the community but on election day it delivered the votes. Mother had a particular task. She had lived in Mexico for ten years as wife of a missionary. She spoke Spanish fluently, and through her experience and connection with Bess Garner she had made many friends in the Western Barrio. She visited there regularly, and I remember going with her at least once. She pointed out to me how clean and immaculate the homes were. I was more impressed by the size of those little huts, provided for the pickers and other workers by the Packing House. One room not more than 12x12 for each family.

Mother intended to deliver personally as many votes as she could from the Barrio residents. I do not know what kind of difficulties she might have encountered, since the impermanence of the Mexicans, many of them migrants, made them marginal inhabitants of Claremont. It was up to mother to convince her friends that this park would be for everyone, and their votes were needed.

On the day of the election – probably a school day like Tuesday - we did not see mother until after seven when the polls had closed. She was exhausted. All day long she and other book club members had been finding voters and bringing them to the polling place. Just as it is today, the older, more conservative voters vote in great numbers, while younger families, for whom the vote is far more important, are often too busy to take that walk and cast a vote. The book club wanted every one of those votes, and probably delivered most of them.

The vote was tallied the next day and to our excitement, the ayes had it. Mother then informed us that it had been nearly as close the second time – a margin of fewer than 20 votes – the number that sticks in my mind is fifteen.

So it was, in my mind at least, that The Book Club found a way to give us a park. It took more than a year to clear the trees, level the ground and grow a solid turf. The tennis court was laid out, toilets were built, and for a time the Garner house was the home of the caretaker and family, a former semi-pro pitcher named Mr. Steele. A small building was constructed on the corner of Yale and Tenth to store equipment and to serve as a community youth center. In one of the Claremont history books there is a picture of some of my brothers' friends helping level the grounds around that building.

We watched the process through the windows of the grammar school (now known as Sycamore). I'm sure there was a ground breaking ceremony and an opening ceremony, but I don't remember them. My memorable inauguration to the park was playing softball for the first time on a grassy field designed for that purpose. The first game was between the San Dimas Church and the Claremont Church Sunday Schools. I think I was in 6th grade. We lost, being overwhelmed on mound and at plate by future San Dimas Mayor Frank Johnson.

The park was an essential part of my teen-age years. I played many official and unofficial softball games on the field off Eighth Street. Right field was a bit short for adults, but just right for a left-hander like me. The organized teams were always bolstered by friends from the barrios without whom we would have been pretty weak.

The picnic area off Tenth Street quickly became an event center for the entire town. The tennis court was lit, so I played there with friends and brothers during many cool evenings. The youth center also was a good place to hang out, watching pro wrestling or roller derby with my buddies on the one community TV.

The park became an absolutely essential part of Claremont. It was established at the right place and at the right time. Just as it was built the town was growing both larger and younger. My school class had 30 members in first grade, forty-five in fourth and sixty in sixth. By the time I was in college there were two more elementary schools (Oakmont and Vista del Valle)* and, naturally, each had a community park adjacent to it. So Memorial Park not only gave Claremont a needed community center, it also began a “park” tradition that continues to enhance the city today.

*Of course this may not be accurate, since Condit may have been built at the same time. (By the way, Eleanor Condit, the beloved but feared principal of Sycamore when I was there, was infamous among the sixth-grade boys for her ruling that any ball hit over the fence along Harvard Avenue was too dangerous and therefore an out rather than a home run.)

There were parks at each school. I helped dad and the Rotary Club put up picnic tables at the Vista del Valle Park around 1955, and played several games of over-the-line with Ward Jones and friends over at Oakmont around the same time.