



Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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September 2017

It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.

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Murrieta Valley Historical Society

P.O. Box 1341

Murrieta, CA 92564

951-387-4862

Email:

info@murrietahistoricalsociety.org



Hunt Memorial Park

By Jeffery Harmon

Murrieta's first public park was Hunt Memorial Park located at the intersection of Juniper Street and Adams Avenue in Historic Downtown Murrieta. The park was established in 1957 through a land donation by Mrs. Inez Hunt. It was built and maintained through the years not by tax dollars, but through community volunteers and donations. Though it is a testament of community spirit, few realize that this is the only known park in Southwest Riverside County established in memory of a World War I soldier.

Inez Marie Powelson was born September 3, 1872 in Saginaw Co., Michigan. She was the daughter of Wallace and Elizabeth (Brown) Powelson. On May 22, 1892, she married Jay Henry Russell. They had three children, but only one survived childhood, Millard F. Russell. He was born August 13, 1891 in Genesee County, Michigan.

The Russell family moved to California by 1900. Jay and Inez were divorced in 1906. On April 16, 1907, Inez married David L. Hunt and they lived in Los Angeles, California. They had no children.



The former Hunt House/Murrieta Town Hall ca 1960. From left to right: Ray and Robert Vose, Lenny and Lawrence Dunham Source: The Alice Vose Collection

Millard Russell, Inez's only son, served in the U.S. Navy for four years, and then settled in San Diego, California. In 1917, he was working at San Diego's Fire Station #8. He was one of 25 San Diego firefighters that were either enlisted or drafted during WWI. He was a private in Company F, 8th US Engineers. He served in WWI from May 25, 1917 to May 16, 1919.

After the war, Millard married Hazel A. Douglas in July 1919 in the San Diego home of Mr. and

Mrs. David Hunt. The newlyweds may have had a son, Millard F. Russell, Jr. born 1917. It is unknown how the marriage ended, but in November 1923, Millard married Floy H. Downes. His second marriage ended in divorce and Millard moved to Los Angeles.

Millard's health declined following the war. He checked into a veteran's home in Sawtelle, Los Angeles Co., California on September 13, 1932. According to his records, he was infected with syphilis. Many soldiers were infected by this disease during the war. Millard

died a few months later on November 13, 1932 and was buried in the Los Angeles National Cemetery.

David and Inez Hunt moved to Huntington Beach, California in 1920 to care for Inez's parents. Her father died June 5, 1920. Afterwards the Hunts established a homestead in the Santa Rosa Mountains west of Murrieta. David Hunt's homestead patent of 108.17 acres was approved on November 5, 1925. He sold his property to John F. Watson that same year.

The Hunts then purchased a single story Murrieta home from John Walter in 1926. John Walter built the house around 1922 from a kit purchased from a catalog. Once moved into their new home, David Hunt made a living as a carpenter in Murrieta and Inez became involved in several social clubs in the community.

Inez Hunt entertained the Murrieta Sewing Club in her home and participated in the Ladies Aid Society. She was treasurer of the PTA in 1928. She made pot holders as wedding gifts for Murrieta's newlyweds. She also made pot holders to be sold as a fundraiser for the Elsinore American Legion Post.

David Hunt may have died in 1942 in Eureka, Humboldt Co., California. On June 12, 1956, Inez donated her land to the Murrieta Valley Town Hall Association (MVTHA) in memory of her son, Millard Russell. When Inez died on April 4, 1957, her home was transformed into Murrieta's Town Hall. Relatives contested her donation in court, but in 1958, the judge ruled in favor of the MVTHA.

Hunt Memorial Park became the social center of Murrieta for the next forty years. Through a government block grant, a new 7,300 square-foot town hall was built next to the former Hunt House/Town Hall in 1981. In 2001, the City of Murrieta acquired the park and town hall. Plans were drawn up



At the MVTHA meeting in 1956, a draft of the park layout was presented.

From L to R: Inez Hunt, Priscilla Burnett, Gladys Freeman, Vic Garrison, Lawrence Dunham, and Raymond Thompson. Source: The Arlean V. Garrison Collection

to develop the Hunt House into a museum in 2006, but with budget concerns, the museum project was shelved.

Then in March 2017, the Society met with City representatives at the Hunt House and began negotiations to convert the structure into the Murrieta History Museum. Several meetings, studies, and inspections began shortly afterwards. It is hoped that Murrieta will soon have its first museum.

Today there are fifty public parks and multiple recreational trails in the City of Murrieta. The origins of the park system and the city can be traced back to Hunt Memorial Park when Inez Hunt donated her land for the children of Murrieta and the community. Yet her donation was in memory of her only son, Millard F. Russell, a World War I veteran. It is fitting that Murrieta's first public park was created in honor of a soldier's military service.



The Murrieta Sewing Club meeting at the Hunt House.
Inez Hunt sitting on the right side of the couch.
Source: The Alice Vose Collection



This plaque, mounted on a rock monument, is located at the northwest corner of the park behind the white perimeter fence.

Photo by Jeffery Harmon



The Historic Hunt is the proposed future home of the Murrieta History Museum.

Photo by Jeffery Harmon

Ray's Murrieta Café Property Cleanup Project

Many remember and recognize Ray's Murrieta Café located on what was the iconic Highway 395, now Washington Avenue. Once owned by the Lakemans and Eilers, it was purchased by the Bezanson family in 1950 and thereafter called Ray's Murrieta Café.

Ray Bezanson, a very talented musician and music composer, along with his wife, Joanne, ran the café until Ray's death in January 1973. The Bezanson family also owned the historic house next door. This house was originally built by the Burnett family in 1885. It is the second oldest house in Murrieta and it arrived on the train as a kit house. The house was assembled by Buchanan and Doolittle at its current site.

After his father's death, Gilbert, a.k.a. 'Skip' Bezanson with help from his sister, Muriel, continued to run the bar and grill until it was forced to close in 2006. However, Skip continued to live in what had become known as the Lakeman house next door.

Both in declining health, the Bezanson family weren't able to keep the property up to city standards. The City was extremely patient, but in December 2016, after ten years of failing efforts, the properties were both red tagged. Skip and Muriel were told that they could

not re-enter due to extreme health and safety conditions. The property was only weeks away from receivership by the City if it wasn't brought up to city code standards.

Connie Cain McConnell, another long time resident of Murrieta and a childhood friend, had expressed her concern to Muriel regarding not wanting the Bezansons to lose control of their property. Due to this friendship and being on the board of the Murrieta Valley Historical Society, she was invited to join a meeting between the City and the Bezansons. From that meeting, Connie became the unofficial liaison for the Bezanson family, keeping Skip and Muriel's best interests up front.

On Saturday, April 8, 2017, volunteers from the Historical Society and the Arts Council were given permission to enter the property and begin cleanup. Pat Jennings and Casey Jurado each brought a tractor and began carving paths through the waist high weeds and debris. Jason Brawner wrapped a chain around a fifty year old overgrown century plant that was partial blocking the sidewalk in front of the property. The tractor yanked it out and we had our first major victory of the task at hand.

Jeffery Harmon's two

teenage children, J.T. and Alexis, helped Connie sort and bag over six hundred dollars in recyclables with the money going directly to Muriel. The kids helped continuously for the rest of the project.

Volunteers have labored tirelessly cleaning out trash and vegetation debris, also recovering historic artifacts for preservation from both the café and the house next door. These items will be the foundation of our Murrieta History Museum opening in the near future. Due to safety concerns and privacy, only a few trusted volunteers were allowed onto the property.

The City had set a very stringent timeline for total cleanup of the property, but after seeing the progress being made, Jeff Morris, the City attorney was able to get an extension. Brian Ambrose from the City and Jeffery Harmon, Historic Society President, through a city partnership with Waste Management, negotiated four forty-foot dumpsters and two twenty-foot lowboy dumpsters donated for the cleanup project. We are VERY grateful for this donation by Waste Management. After that we have continued to fill another four, forty-foot containers with debris. The cost for these containers has been shared by the Historic Society and Muriel and Skip.

Connie McConnell along with Annette and Pat Jennings, Jenny Mayoral, Jeffery Harmon and Carol Sierra were the major cleaning crew for the café. Connie stated, "We kept Muriel and Skip busy going through boxes, deciding what the family would keep and what they would let go."

Jeffery Harmon, Pat and Annette Jennings, Jenny Mayoral, Carol Sierra, Connie McConnell, Casey Jurado and Jason Brawner were the cleaning crew for the house. There have been other helping hands, but these volunteers did the lion's share.

During this time, Skip and Muriel realized that it was in their best interest to sell the property. A group of local investors realized the historic role and value of same and entered into negotiations. Escrow closed the first week of July. The Bezansons are now able to purchase another home in the Hemet area near family.

By sorting out items to be kept, setting aside historical artifacts, (of which there have been many), and displaying yard sale items, we have brought an enormous task to completion.

The yard sale took place on the Café property on Friday, August 4th and Saturday, August 5th. It was a great success.

It is impossible to name everyone who helped out. We are grateful for all they did, and we are also grateful that the City



A few members of the volunteer cleanup crew. Pictured from left to right: Jeffery Harmon, Pat Jennings, Connie Cain McConnell, Jason Brawner, and Casey Jurado
Photo by Peter Thorwarth

let us step in and help. It has been a win-win situation, thanks Murrieta.

Now that the cleanup effort has come to a close, what do the new property owners plan to do with the two historic buildings? Multiple proposals have been made, but there have been no final decisions. The Murrieta Valley Historical Society stands

ready to volunteer their services if the two historic structures are to be restored. A strong partnership has been formed between the Society and the new owners. It is our hope that this property will become a treasured jewel in Historic Downtown Murrieta, drawing new life, family, friends, and tourists to this area.



Special thanks to Waste Management for donating dumpsters for the Society's cleanup efforts at the Ray's Murrieta Café property.

Murrieta Valley Historical Society
P.O. Box 1341
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Phone: 951-387-4862
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Next Monthly Board Meeting:

Monday, October 2, 2017 at 5:30 p.m. at
Honeycutt Farms Family Restaurant
40477 Murrieta Hot Springs Road, D2
(In the Alta Murrieta Shopping Center)
All members welcome to attend



**JOHN
THOMAS,**
**9/11 + K9 HANDLER
FOR CATF6**

**MONDAY, SEPT. 11
6 PM
MURRIETA LIBRARY**
located in the community room at
8 Town Square, Murrieta, CA 92562

**On September 11, 2001
John Thomas responded
with CaTF6 to the World
Trade Center as a Rescue
Specialist. Listen to his
story and how he became
a K9 handler.**

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Membership Application

Individual

Annual \$25.00
Lifetime \$150.00

Family

Annual \$35.00
Lifetime \$250.00

Senior/Student

Annual \$15.00

Business

Annual \$200.00

Sponsorship

Annual \$300.00

Membership dues are for
one year and will be up for
renewal the month you
joined.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____

Email: _____

Membership: _____

\$ _____

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