

California Nostalgia

Palos Verdes Musical and Dramatic Yesterdays

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As Palos Verdians dedicated their Norris Community Theatre, they glanced back over their shoulders to a unique and engaging past. Let us pause now to reflect upon some Palos Verdes musical and dramatic yesterdays.

We realize that despite the many rapid changes of our own time, only a few generations take us back to earlier, pastoral times, when our little corner of the world was first settled and built-upon by a few hardy folk who stayed and established families here.

Of course, only three generations ago, there were a lot more horses and cattle than there were men and women on Palos Verdes land.

As for music and drama - well, right from the days of the old Spanish Dons, with few rancheros and much wide open range, earlier folks in these parts were more apt to be participants than passive spectators. That was simply characteristic of their independent lifestyle in general, as it was of their entertainment activities in particular. But make no mistake about it - yesterday, just as today, folks always managed to find time to entertain themselves.

Often their entertainment was somehow connected with their labors. There were for example the rodeos, which were originally the rounding up of the stock every season. They gradually began to include festivities, with each ranchero acting as host when the rodeo took place on his estate. Folks gathered together from miles around the Palos Verdes Rancho which belonged to the Spanish colonial Sepulveda family. On special occasions, there were great fiestas; each one of them lasting for a whole week. During the day, there were dusty horse races and bullfights; while at night, there was colorful dancing and music. This was the ranch style that was life in these parts, even in 1874, when the Bixby family acquired an interest in the spread known as old Rancho Palos Verdes.

After World War One, while some places in America were hawking their "Roaring Twenties", Palos Verdes was still very much "way out in the country".

Those few folks living in Palos Verdes during the 1920's, like the earlier Old Californians, pretty much made their own entertainment. There was no formally established theater or music organization back then; but Palos Verdians met in their homes and read from the classics. Group singing was also popular, and dances were held every month.

The Palos Verdes Woman's Club started sponsoring concert recitals, which as with a prior generation, drew from their very own talents. The 1920's record shows that sometimes Mr. Ripley Dorr played his musical saw.

By 1926, the Palos Verdes Woman's Club was officially organized with a charter membership of twenty persons at the home of Mrs. Dawson, and in that same year a Thanksgiving operetta entitled "*On Plymouth Rock*" was performed. A play, called "*Tommy Murphy's Christmas*" followed later that year, in which the entire Palos Verdes Police Department played the part of Santa Claus in the person of a William Woosley - the only cop on the Peninsula.

It was a milestone for music and theatre arts on the Peninsula when those performances were presented at Malaga Cove School, which was the only public school in Palos Verdes during the "Roaring Twenties".

Throughout the depression of the 1930's, the Dickens Fellowship presented readings and discussions of such works as *Oliver Twist* at private homes during monthly meetings, and at the school Malaga Cove.

While the local press in the 1930's was reporting real Fox Hunts with hounds and horses chasing all over the rolling hills of Palos Verdes, Sinclair Lewis was performing in the Shrine Auditorium at Los Angeles, but Palos Verdians were finding time for their music and theater presentations in their homes, churches and schools.

The Palos Verdes Players were part of the Palos Verdes Woman's Club in the 1920's and 1930's. The early records of the group, even after it formed its present organization, are incomplete, but the first year produced a bill of one-acts, and "*June Moon*" under the direction of Dan Howell, followed by "*Meet the Duchess*" under the direction of Gene Rizzi. Performances in the 1930's were presented in a room above the old Palos Verdes Drug Store at Malaga Cove Plaza, where they played to a full house of around forty people. Of course, that was considered a good draw in those pre-World War Two days, when the Peninsula population was so sparse.

It was in 1939 that a Peninsula Light Opera group was developed from the Woman's Club Community Arts Association, and by 1941 it was going into its second season with Gilbert and Sullivan's "*Mikado*", rehearsing in the Schellenberg home.

After the Second World War, the Palos Verdes Players resumed their thespian activities in school auditoriums, and in the 1960's leased space on Via Tejon in Malaga Cove Plaza until 1979.

Before World War Two, the Palos Verdes Community Arts Association conceived the idea of a Palos Verdes Peninsula Symphony Orchestra; and thus began a symphony story of "two Josephs":

The first conductor of the original Palos Verdes Symphony Orchestra was Josef Piastro, a violin virtuoso, born in 1891 in Russia. Piastro had studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and by 1939 was making his residence on Via La Selva in Palos Verdes Estates, when he began rehearsing local musicians at Malaga Cove

School.

By 1942, because of wartime "dimouts" and musicians going off to military service, the Piastro Palos Verdes Symphony discontinued until after the war. It tried to resume after World War Two, but Josef Piastro had moved from Palos Verdes and the Symphony floundered during the 1950's, and disappeared.

Enter then, a second - and our current symphonic Joseph: During the 1960's (1967) the Peninsula Symphony Orchestra came under the baton of Joseph Valenti. Maestro Valenti has a rich and varied musical background which encompasses performing, conducting, composing, arranging, and instructing. Joseph Valenti is on the music faculty of an area college, where he rehearses his musicians.

The Peninsula Symphony Orchestra regales audiences of over a thousand in various auditoriums.

We have seen that Palos Verdes music and drama has, in our time, reached a significant point with the dedication of the Norris Community Theatre. The Community Association of the Peninsula (CAP), joined with all who heralded our modern Norris Community Theatre, so that our ever-increasing cultural groups may indeed have a performing arts facility for the benefit of us all.

Palos Verdians gratefully acknowledged that fine gift to their community from the Kenneth and Eileen Norris Foundation, and toasted its dedication, with a hearty "Curtain Up", to the beginning of a new era in the remarkable history of Palos Verdes.

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