



City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402

LIBRARY NEWS JULY 2012

By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

For the July newsletter, we have another article by Mark Landis, freelance writer for the San Bernardino *Sun*. This story is about local photographer Walter Steele, whose legacy is his preeminent collection of photos of San Bernardino that has proven to be so valuable to historians and researchers.

“Photo By Steele” - Snapshots of History

By Mark Landis, Correspondent

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then photographer Walter Steele’s enduring photos have filled volumes and provided a visual narration of the San Bernardino Valley’s history. For 72 years, Steele and his renowned photo service was the cornerstone in producing, collecting and distributing historic images of the region.

Walter Henry Clarence Steele was born in the tiny rural community of Berlin, North Dakota, on June 6th, 1897. Following in his father’s footsteps, he entered the photography trade and received training at the Eastman and Ansco Companies, two of the world’s largest camera manufacturers at the time.

After serving in the military, Walter came to San Bernardino in 1920 and began working in a small photo studio that his father operated at Urbita Springs Park (site of the present-day Inland Center Mall). It was at Urbita Springs that Steele met his future bride, Beatrice Preston, who was working at a soda fountain there.



Walter in Uniform



Photo courtesy of Ron Coats
Walter and Beatrice Steele in the 1940's

Walter and Beatrice were married in 1923, and the couple embarked on a remarkable 62-year partnership. Beatrice Steele received training at the Eastman Kodak School of Photography in Los Angeles and went on to become an accomplished and respected photo studio technician.



This early 1920's view shows Steele's first photo studio at Urbita Springs Park, site of the present-day Inland Center Mall

The quality of Walter's work was quickly recognized, and he became the first official photographer of the National Orange Show, a position he held for 30 years. Steele was also the first photographer for the *Sun*. "He was the only photographer for the *Sun* in the early years," said Ron Coats, grandson of Walter Steele. "They didn't have a full-time photographer, so my grandfather worked for them as a sub-contractor."

The scripted "*Steele*" name became a common sight at the bottom corner of classic photographs. It was apparent that Walter had a gift for capturing the essence of a scene and freezing a unique moment in time. He frequently took photos of buildings and landmarks that were scheduled for renovation or demolition so the evolution of the area could be documented.

As Steele's notoriety grew, he became known as San Bernardino's unofficial, "official photographer." Steele also acquired many photos from other photographers, local residents, and collectors such as the Security Title Insurance Company.

The photo business moved to several locations in downtown San Bernardino and for 10 years, Beatrice ran a studio in Harris's department store.

Walter and Beatrice were both deeply involved in helping the community and they participated in numerous service organizations. The busy couple had two daughters, Eloise Coats and Evelyn Cranston, who along with other family members helped run the photo business through the years.

The Steele's also took in 11 other children to raise in their home. In a 1978 interview, Beatrice told a *Sun* reporter "We were not registered with the county as foster parents, but we took children who needed a home and cared for them until they were out of high school."

"My grandfather was so busy, sometimes I wonder when he ever found time to take pictures," said Coats. "He was an American Legion Post Commander, a member of the Elks, and Masons, and he was also a Boy Scout Troop leader."

In a 1973 interview, Steele said noted *Sun Telegram* historian, Burr Belden "got me interested in taking historical pictures." As a result of Walter's prodigious photography and years of gathering historical regional photos, the Steele collection grew into the area's premier historic collection.



Steele Photo – Author's collection

This classic 1928 Steele image captures the look and "feel" of the time. Ward Furniture was located at 300 D Street. "The Southern Hotel" at the far left, was located at the southeast corner of 4th and D Streets.

Local writers, historians, and collectors would come to Steele's studio where they could search through hundreds of albums and purchase copies of the photos. According to Coats, "some of the photos were so old, the originals were on glass negatives." Steele's photos have been widely used in history books and many of them are prominently displayed in museums, businesses, and government buildings.

In 1955, a tragic fire at Steele's studio at 370 N. D Street destroyed a large portion of the collection. "When the fire happened, my grandfather was at home recuperating from a heart attack," said Coats. "The doctor was so concerned about his reaction, that he gave him the news personally in case it threw him into another heart attack!"

"After the fire, my grandfather put out a plea asking that if you had bought photos, please bring them back so he could rebuild his collection," said Coats. "A lot of people that had bought photos, did bring them back so he could have copies again."

In the later years of operation, the mainstay of the studio was passport photos, portraits, and selling copies of historic photos. Although limited by his failing health, Walter stayed active in the business and kept taking photos well into his 80's. When Walter's health began to keep him out of the studio, Beatrice took over much of the portrait and darkroom work.

Walter Steele passed away February 5th, 1985 at the age of 87. The Steele family kept the studio at 1040 N. D Street running until 1992, when the business finally closed its doors. Beatrice passed away December 19th, 1996 at the age of 97.

"It was my grandfather's wish that when the business closed, his collection would be donated to the San Bernardino County Museum," said Coats. "Unfortunately, some of the collection was sold off before it was donated to the museum."

A significant portion of Steele's photo collection was donated to the San Bernardino County Museum in the early 1990's. According to Michele Nielsen, Curator of History for the museum, "The museum loves the collection. We've used the photos for many exhibits, and they help the public understand the past."

Ron Coats fondly remembered one of his grandfather's quotes; "If you don't take a picture, it will be gone." Thanks to an enduring family business and a man with a passion for history, the San Bernardino Valley has a photo album that will last for many generations.



Photo courtesy of Ron Coats

**Steele's Photo Service used a historic photo of the
Arrowhead Springs Hotel as a background for this business card**

End of Story



STEELE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 1924

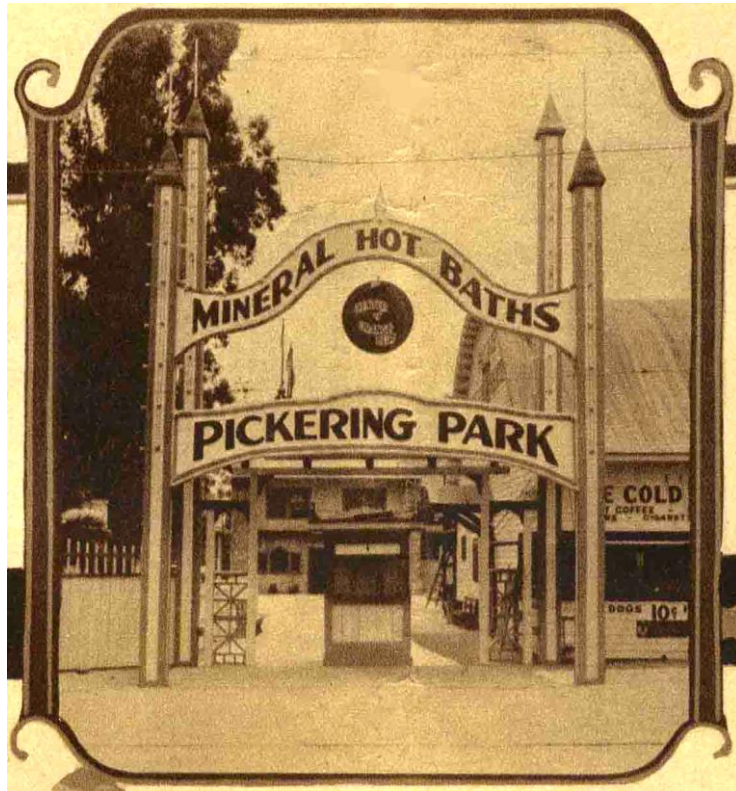
The following photographs are a selection from an eight-page rotogravure insert in the July 20, 1924, issue of the San Bernardino *Sun*. They were taken by Walter Steele and some of them have his distinctive signature that he used throughout his career. The insert was donated to our Society's library by President Steve Shaw.



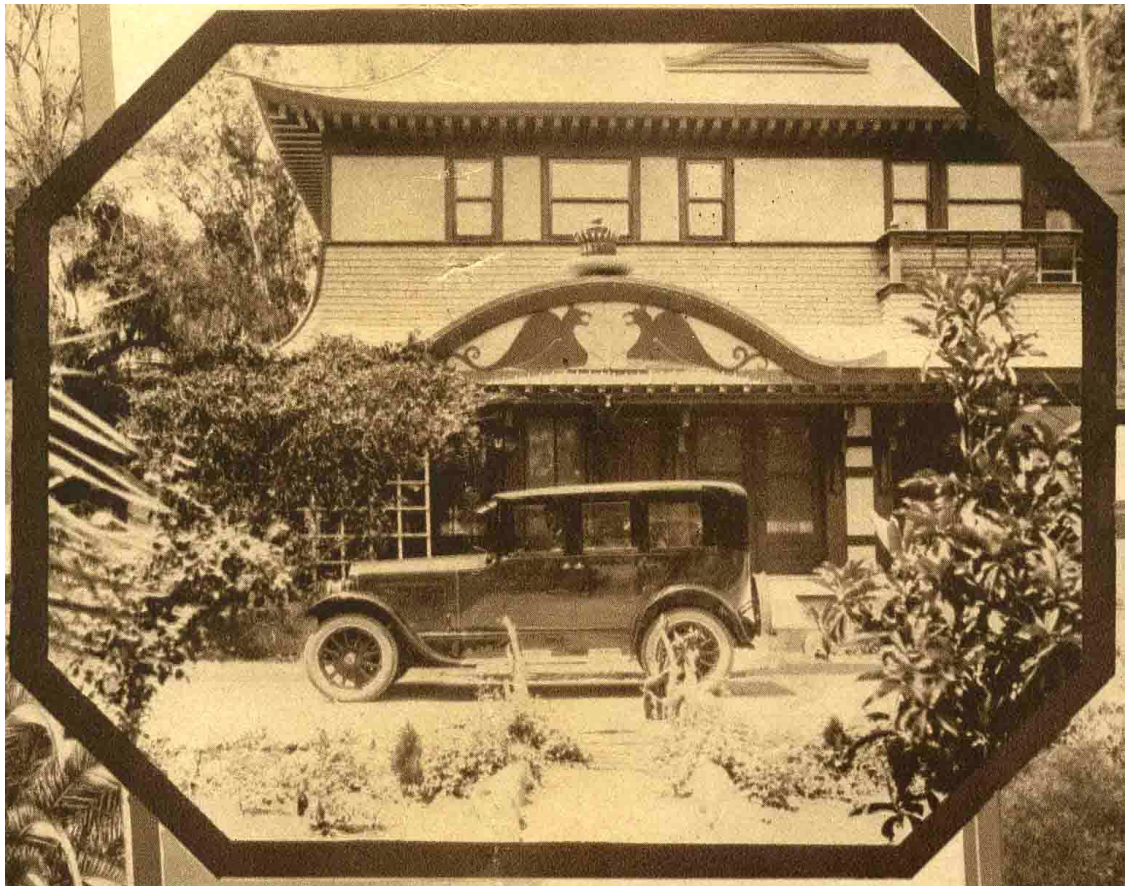
Butter Krust bread and cakes on way to your tables.



Gill Batteries are being given wide distribution.



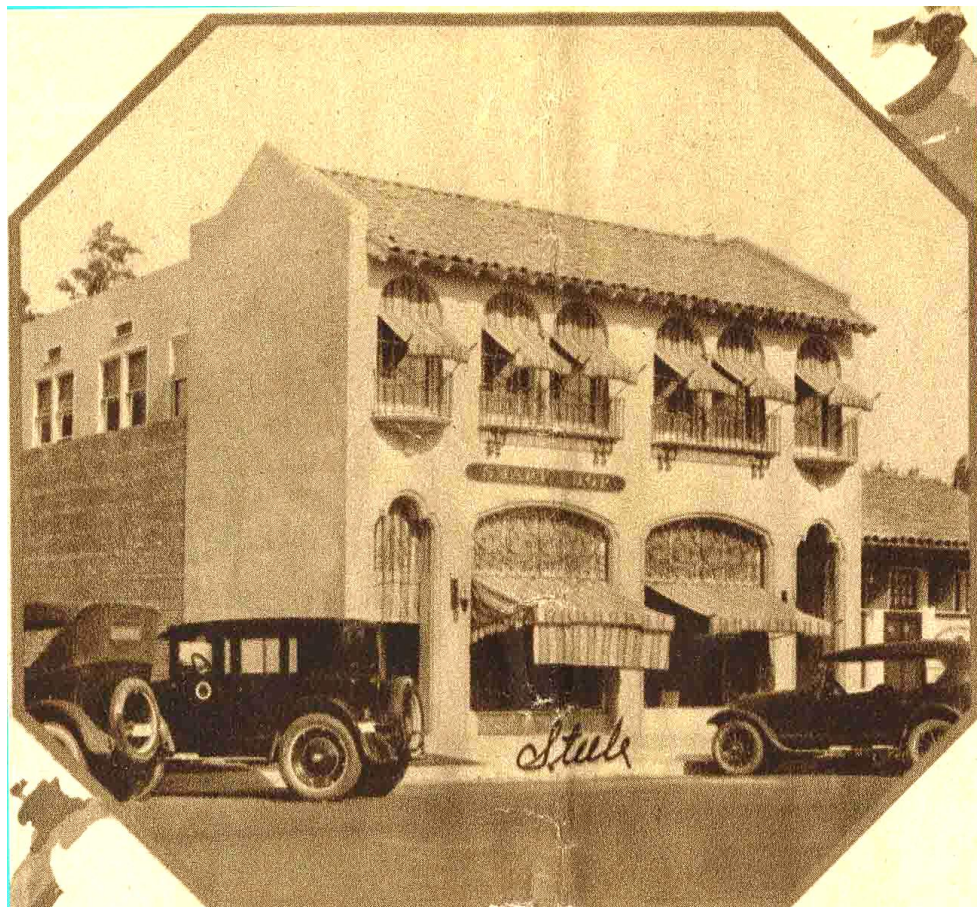
Caption: "Roller skating rink at right of entrance"



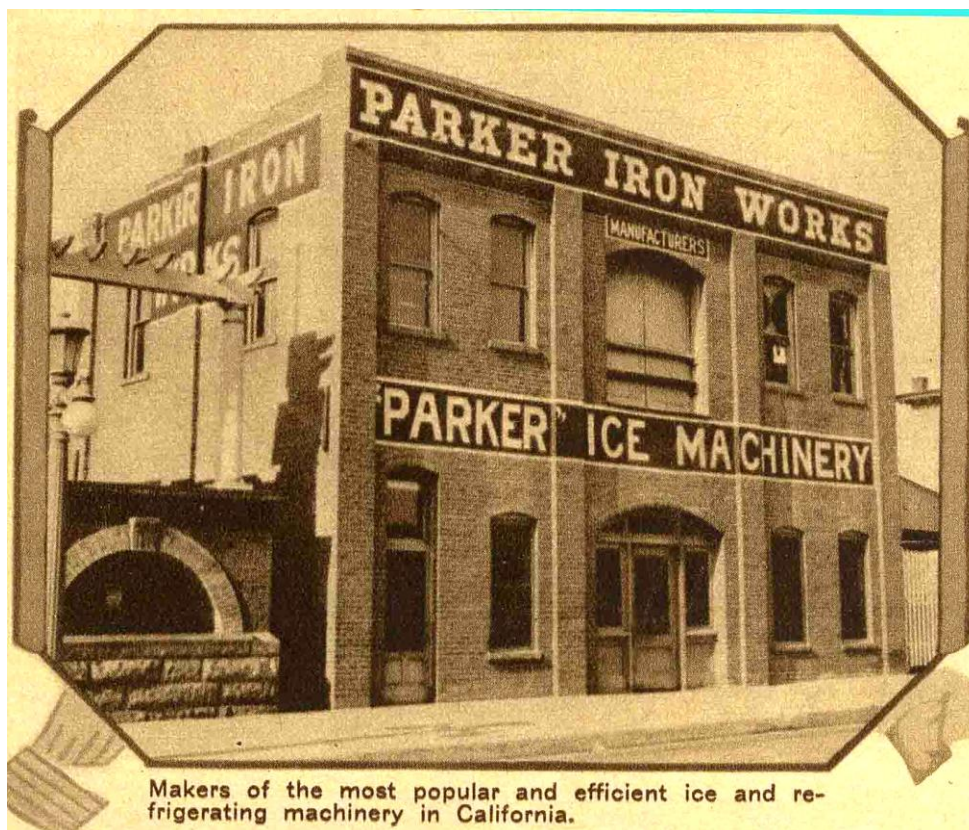
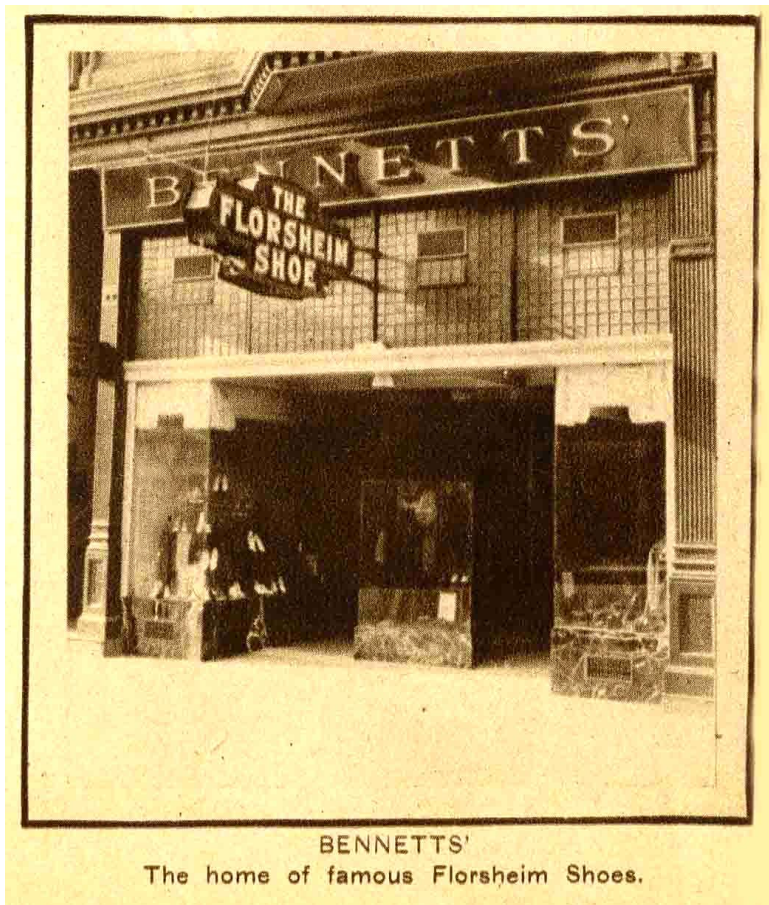
Caption: "Country Club"

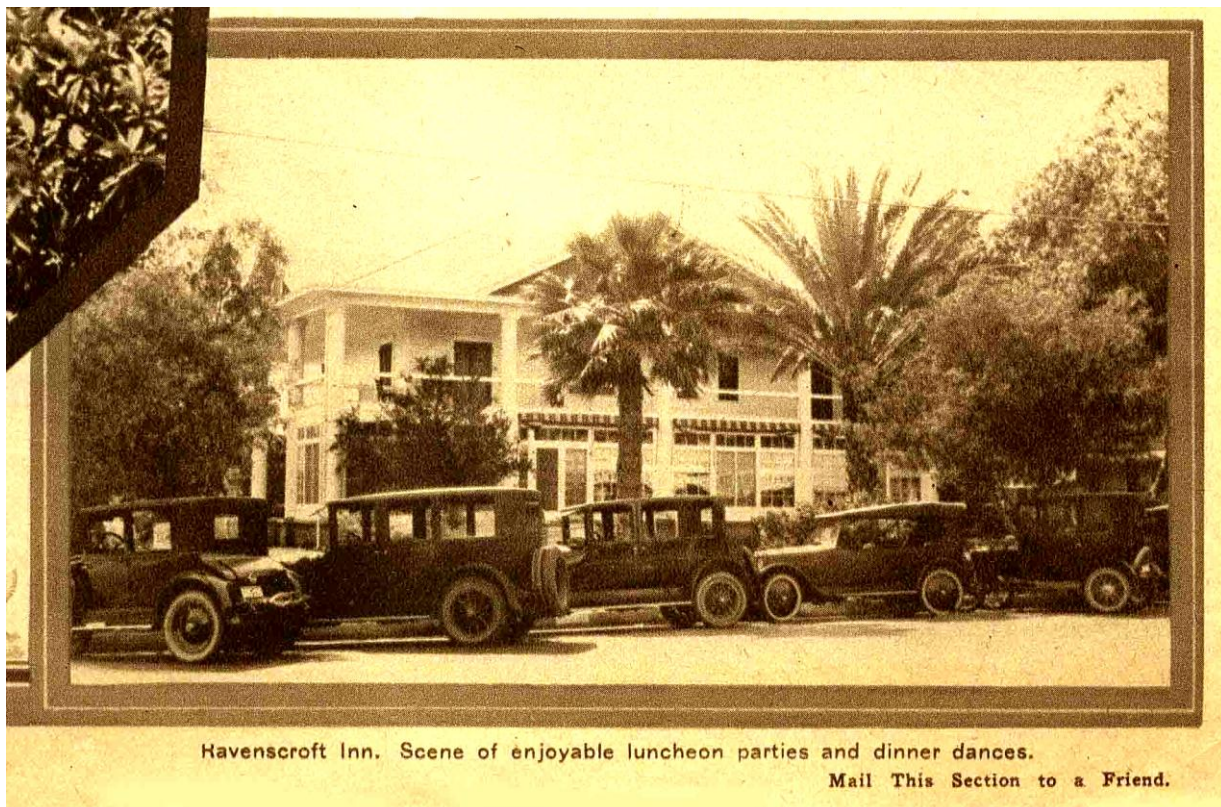


Part of Christopher auto fleet serving city and mountains.



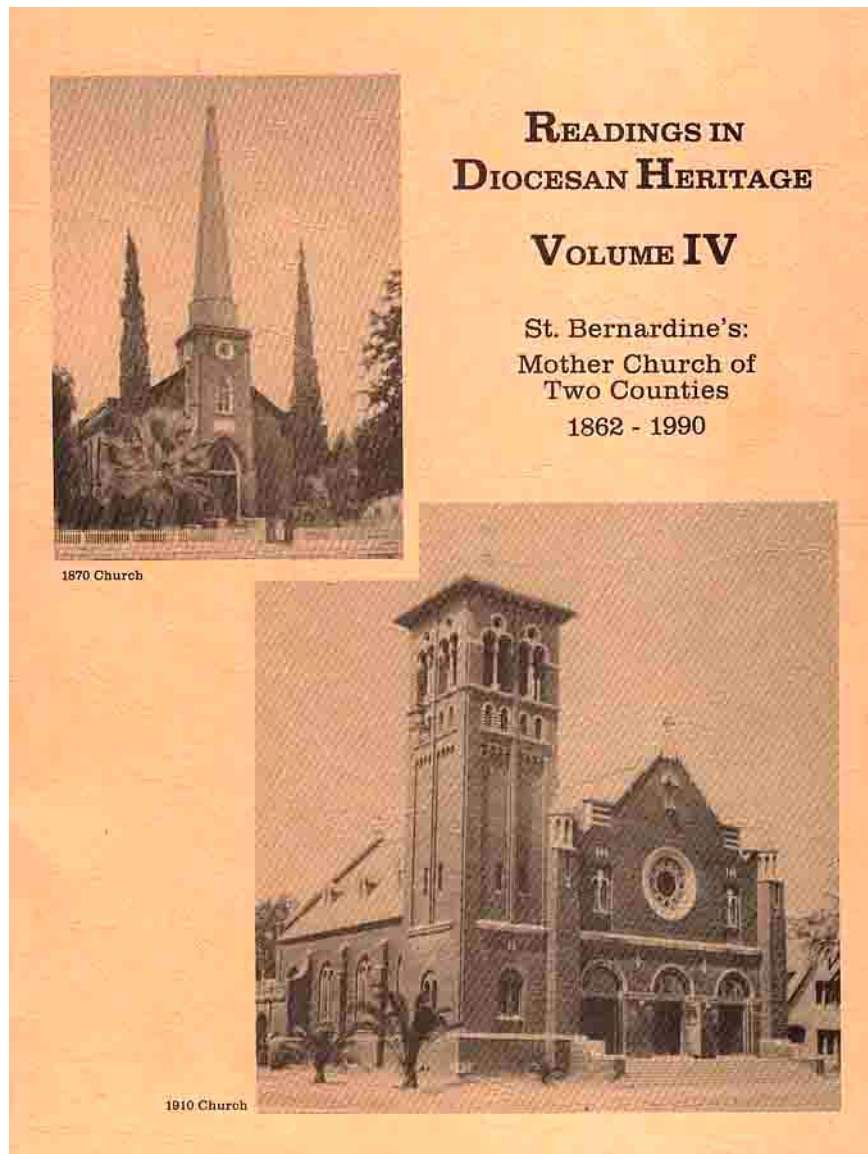
Caption: "Main office, Platt Investment Co. A magnificent theatre is to be erected on adjoining lots."





LIBRARY ACQUISITION

The Society's library has for some time had an incomplete set of R. Bruce Harley's 13-volume work, *Readings in Diocesan Heritage*. We were missing Volumes IV, VI, and VII. Recently President Steve Shaw acquired a copy of Volume IV, pictured below. This is probably the most interesting to citizens of San Bernardino, as it covers the history of St. Bernardine's Church from 1862 to 1990.



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