



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

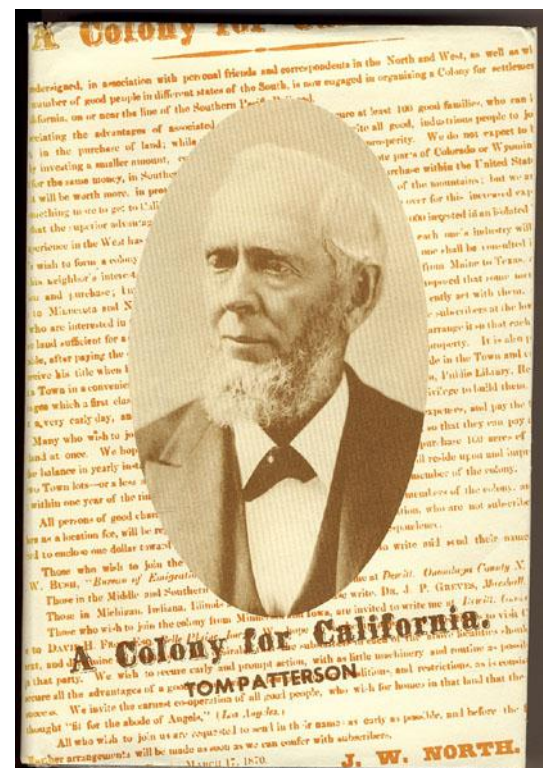
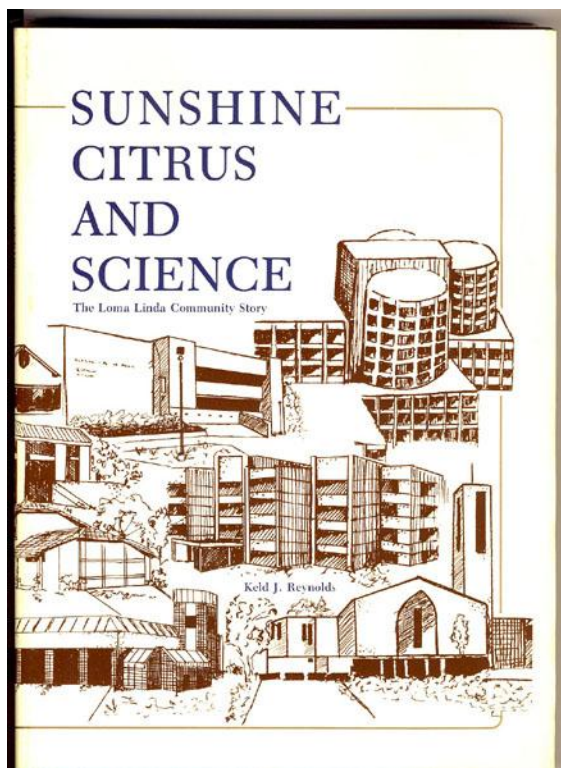
LIBRARY NEWS NOVEMBER 2008

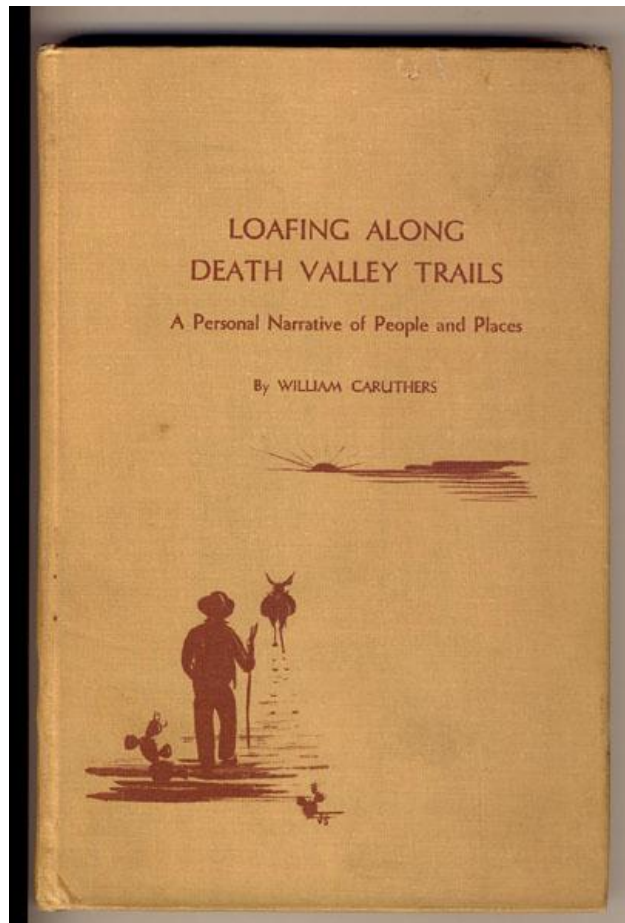
By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

THIS OLD HOUSE

On October 18th we had another meeting at the Heritage House to discuss our progress on learning how to research the history of a residential structure. Carolyn Covey wins a gold star for performing work in accordance with the purpose of the discussion group. She had a ring binder filled with about a two-inch stack of documentation she had found. She did not rely on the title report for owners but looked up the deeds herself at the Recorder's Office. This entails a lot of work, but anyone who purports to know how to research house history needs to do it at least once to learn how it is done. She also contacted the water company to get records, sought previous owners/residents and interviewed them, and obviously spent a lot of time on the project. Congratulations to Carolyn.

RECENT ACQUISITIONS (The following three books were recently added to our collection):





SHERIFF ELI M. SMITH & SOME WILD TALES

During my research for a talk on Sheriff Smith, I found several incidents in historical works that over the years have become the perceived wisdom among historians, but that in my view are suspect. George and Helen Beattie's highly respected *Heritage of the Valley* provides several examples of questionable stories, two of which I will discuss here. Helen Beattie wrote the Civil War portion of *Heritage of the Valley*, which includes information on Sheriff Eli Smith. (I should mention that the information for Mrs. Beattie's Civil War history was taken from her master's thesis at the University of Redlands, and, our own San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society library has the original thesis with her hand-written corrections.)

They Had Come to Lynch the Widow Rains

This first example is a dubious tale about a group of men, dining together at Billy Rubottom's tavern, who supposedly were threatening to lynch Doña Merced Rains, whom they believed had killed her husband John Rains (p166). Eli Smith was reportedly one of those ready to slip a noose around her neck. Rubottom overheard them and there was a confrontation. Mrs. Beattie got this story from a book entitled *On the Old West Coast: Being Further Reminiscences of a Ranger*, written by Major Horace Bell, whose histories, she acknowledges, are embellished with dramatic flourishes:

...Stripped of minor inaccuracies and the arrangements and additions for dramatic effect so characteristic of Bell's writings, Rubottom's tale was substantially as follows: There were many threats against the suspected widow of Rains, and one afternoon about a dozen of Rains' personal friends, all armed, gathered at the Rubottom tavern and ordered supper. From what was being said, Rubottom realized that they had come to lynch Mrs. Rains. He and his son and a son-in-law armed themselves, and took their stand in a room adjoining the dining room. While the party was eating, Rubottom covered them with a double-barreled shotgun, called in his assistants, and informed the party that they would not be allowed to hang a woman without a trial. His son then disarmed the men, and they were sent away with invitations to return for their arms on another day, one at a time. The rage against Mrs. Rains cooled, and the men did not revive their murderous plan. Rubottom's forethought had averted another and much more shameful tragedy.

Lynching was a fairly common occurrence in Los Angeles County in those days, but lynching women was very rare. Smith and the others were friends of John Rains, and presumably of Mrs. Rains as well, at least before the murder. Even if they thought her complicit in her husband's demise, it would be most unusual for them to contemplate dragging her out and hanging her.

Many associates of John Rains were killed following his murder by ambush in November 1862. A man named Manuel Cerradel is supposed to have confessed to taking part in Rains' murder, but later recanted. He was lynched in December 1863. Jose Ramon Carrillo, one of the Rains family majordomos and a good friend of Mrs. Rains, was accused of the murder, and in May of 1864 he was ambushed and killed. Robert Carlisle, Rains' brother-in-law, who was thought by many of being behind the Rains murder, was killed in a gun battle at the Bella Union Hotel in July 1865. These deaths are all connected to the Rains murder, but only in Carlisle's case was there a dinner party prior to the killing, as there was at Rubottom's—however, this dinner did not involve his killers sitting down and discussing the details of the proposed killing in front of eavesdropping witnesses.

My problem with the Horace Bell story is that it does not seem likely to have happened. Maybe some of the boys did go to Rubottom's; maybe their intentions were less than honorable—more likely they had business to discuss—but it is not believable that a dozen well-armed men would go to a public house and openly discuss killing the widow Rains. If Mrs. Rains were slated to be done away with, it would be done in ambush or in the dead of night. As Helen Beattie states, Bell was known for “arrangements” to achieve dramatic effect and this is probably another case of the old storyteller weaving a tale loosely based on fact.

Fifty Killings in Holcomb Valley

This second example, a story that I feel has no credence, has to do with the reportedly large number of killings in Holcomb Valley during the Civil War. Eli Smith was in Holcomb Valley in the early 1860s, and was elected sheriff at the height of the trouble there.

In *Heritage of the Valley*, Mrs. Beattie writes of the shootings in Holcomb Valley during that period (p368). This version of the story is a paraphrase, taken from another paraphrase of Uncle Billy Holcomb's written memoir that appears in Ingersoll's *Century Annals of San Bernardino*:

...It was claimed that the sheriff was sometimes powerless to handle the ruffian element, and a call was once sent for United States troops. Forty or fifty men were shot in Holcomb Valley during its heyday, but of these not more than three or four were innocent men. The others were of the hard class, generally strangers in the place, and their bodies rest in unmarked graves.

And here is how the same information from Holcomb's memoir appears in Ingersoll's *Century Annals* (p361):

Still, of the forty or fifty men who were shot at different times, not more than three or four innocent men were killed. The rest were of the tough element, generally strangers in the place and their bodies now rest in unmarked graves.

Uncle Billy had his memoir typed on the legal paper of that time (with numbers typed in the left margin). He signed and dated it July 18th, 1909, and presented it to the Pioneer Society, so we have access to his original text regarding the killings in Holcomb Valley:

...This reign of lawlessness was of course, a great drawback and hindrance to the working classes, for they were in almost as much danger from accidental shooting as the rowdies were from intentional shooting, still of the forty or fifty men shot, but three or four innocent men were killed, the rest were of the rougher classes, and generally strangers in the place, and whose bodies now lie in some unmarked, obscure and unknown place, and there they rest as though they had never been, and there let our mantles of charity cover them in their solitary and ever lasting abode.

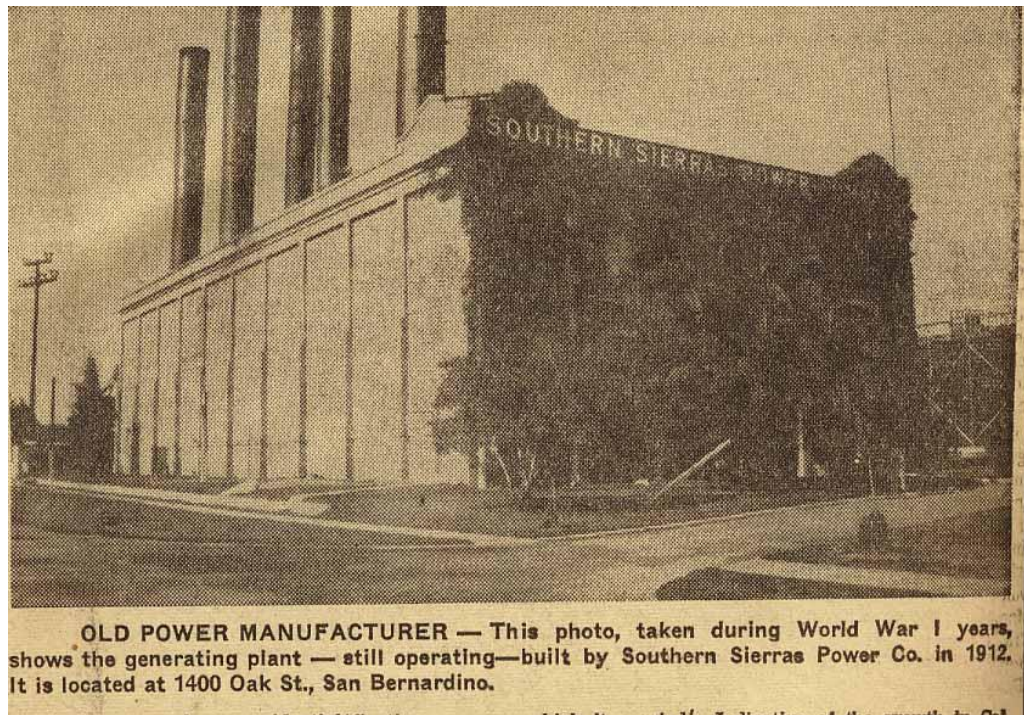
I don't think one can take any other inference from these quotes but that *there were 40 or 50 men killed in Holcomb Valley's heyday*. However, in my Eli Smith research I carefully studied the records, looking specifically for crime statistics, and especially for any murders. The newspapers of the day covered killings just like they do today, probably even better since there weren't so many of them. Also, there was a coroner's inquest for all killings. Based on these records it appears to me that there were only about three or four killings in Holcomb Valley altogether. There may have been fifty shootings, but death was not always the result.

Probably the most widely known shooting was that of "Hell Roarin'" Johnson by Constable St. John in September 1861. This case appears in the Los Angeles *Star* (which uses Johnson's moniker) and there was an inquest into the events leading to Johnson's death. Another killing was by George Bennett, son of Asahel Bennett and brother of Melissa Bennett, all of Death Valley fame. George shot one of the El Monte boys, Elijah Chilton. This was covered both in the newspaper (*Star*, Feb. 15, 1862) and the coroner's inquest. Another inquest was for Leonardo Sandoval. It is not clear how he died; the inquest was inconclusive. These are the only killings I found in Holcomb Valley; and remember, I was specifically looking for them. I think Beattie (and Ingersoll or anyone else who printed this story as history) was hoodwinked in this matter as she was in the proposed lynching of Mrs. Rains.



SOUTHERN SIERRAS GENERATING PLANT

Several months ago our Society had a tour that included the old generating plant on Oak Street, near Mill and Mt. Vernon. Not much was known about the building, although Redlands historian Tom Atchley proved to be very knowledgeable about the coming of electric power in the area at the time. Recently I ran across a newspaper article on the history of California Electric Power Co., Southern Sierras parent company. The photo below is from the San Bernardino *Sun-Telegram* and is dated January 9, 1955, the occasion being CalElectric's 50th anniversary. The power plant was still in operation. However, this is not the same building as seen on our recent tour, although the address shown in the caption is about right.



Old photo of Southern Sierras Power plant, published in the 1955 *Sun-Telegram* article

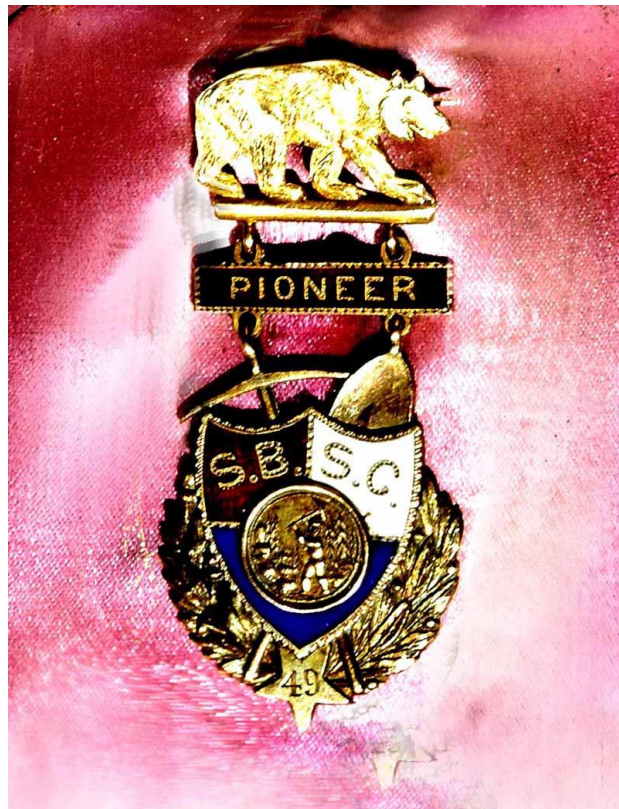


Southern Sierras Power Company building as seen on June 14th tour

PIONEER MEMORABILIA

Gary Lord, direct descendant of “Uncle” George Lord, Sr., stopped by the Heritage House on a recent Saturday morning. He brought several family photographs and talked about his family. He is a collector of family mementos, and he brought by a pin presented to his ancestor by the Pioneer Society in 1888. George Lord was our Society’s charter president, and much beloved by all. Luckily for us, on the day

Gary came by Dick Molony was there to take a photo of the presentation pin. Steve Shaw scanned the photo and we have this colorful picture of the pin for our library:



ROUSSEAU DIARY

As many of you know, Society board member Dick Molony is a descendant of Dr. James A. Rousseau, a pioneer educator and surveyor, among many other talents, who brought his family across the plains in company with the Earp and Curtis families in 1864. About a year ago Dick donated a photocopy of the entire diary covering the trip, kept by Sarah Jane (Daglish) Rousseau.

A small portion of the journal (17 pages) was published in the winter 1958 issue of the *San Bernardino County Museum Association Quarterly*. Prominent historian Gerald A. Smith wrote a foreword and an appendix, both consisting of James Rousseau's doings in San Bernardino, and having nothing to do with the trek. Interestingly, only once in the entire publication is the diarist's name listed, not on the cover but in the interior, and then only as "Mrs. Rousseau, wife of Dr. J. A. Rousseau."

Dick has donated a CD with the full 100-page diary, plus drawings of Mr. And Mrs. Rousseau, photos of some descendants, other photographs, genealogies and census records. Thank you, Dick, for the very complete information on the Rousseaus.

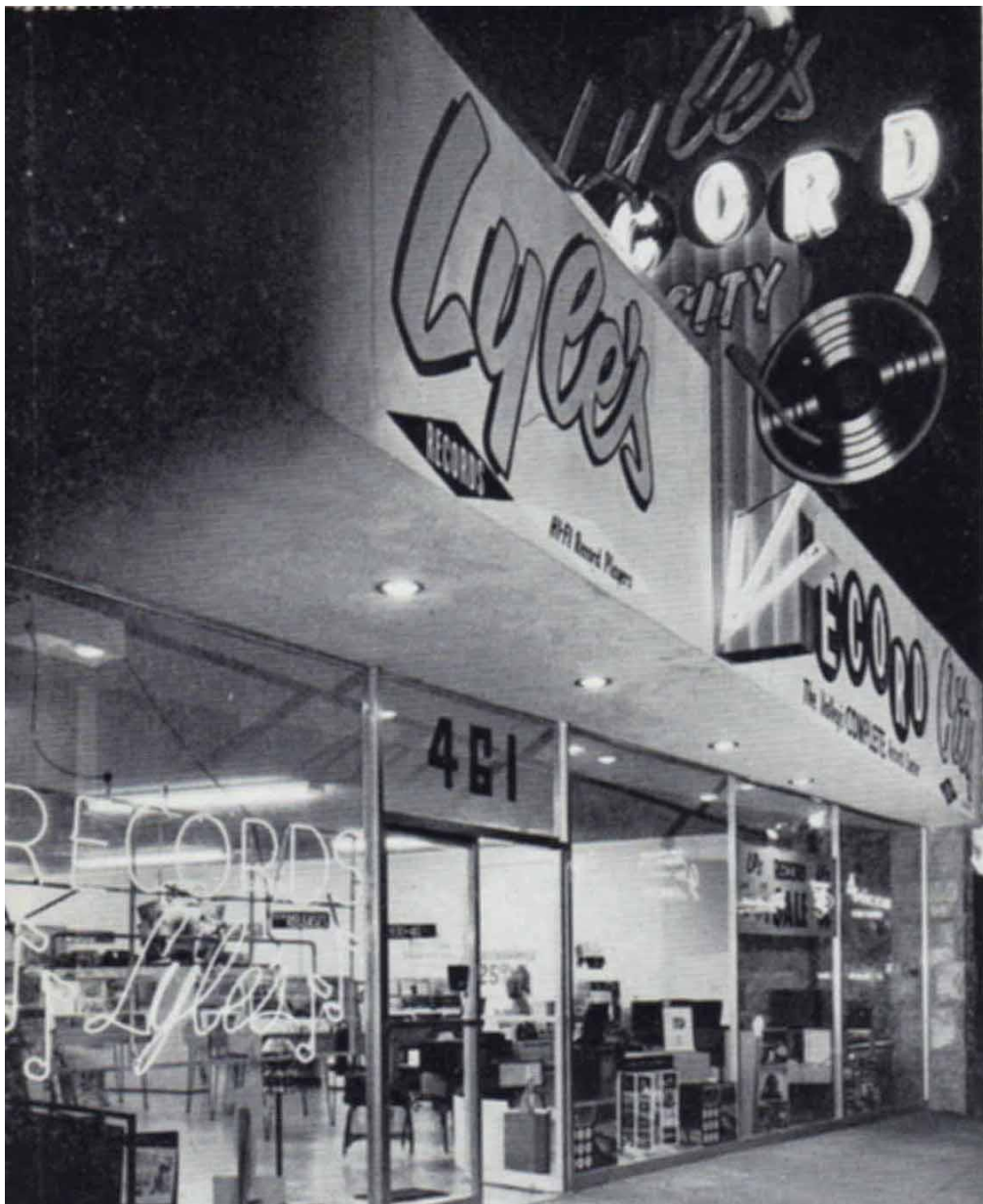


LIER'S MUSIC COMPANY (AND LYLE'S RECORD CITY)

In mid-October we received an email containing several photographs relating to Lier's Music Company, along with a story by someone who signed himself "Ronnie." I thought the story was rather well done and wrote for permission to print it. I received an answer from Ronnie Featherstone, who said he was a 52-year resident of Rialto before moving to Arizona in 1995. In subsequent correspondence he sent two photos of Lier's competitor, Lyle's Record City, located at 461 West Highland Avenue. Since this issue of the newsletter is getting a bit long, I thought I would whet everybody's appetite by printing just the two Lyle's photos and hold the Lier's story off until next month.



Photograph courtesy of Ronnie Featherstone



Photograph courtesy of Ronnie Featherstone

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