



# The Historian

Preserving Today for Tomorrow

Volume 2 Number 6

November - December 2008

## The Journey from the “Old” Schoolhouse to St. Nicholas Catholic Church

One of the first needs of a new community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was always a schoolhouse. El Toro was no exception. Shortly after the town’s founding in 1888, land was deeded for a school on the corner of Olive Avenue and First Street. A lumber yard now occupies the site. The property was deeded on August 25, 1890. Three months later, the El Toro Grammar School was built at a cost of \$2,000. In this one-room school, one teacher taught all eight grades. Children came to school from all over the valley. Students walked or they rode horses, so they had to get up very early to get to school on time.

The architectural style of the building is typical Victorian. Characteristic of one-room schoolhouses of the day, the building is in a “T” shape with separate side entrances for the girls and boys respectively, to the cloakrooms for the girls and boys, which also served as washrooms. A small library/study and the teacher’s office were located to the rear of the building. The school never had indoor plumbing, rather two “two-

*See St. Nicholas - Page 3*



The El Toro Grammar School, built in 1891, became St. Anthony’s Catholic Church in 1914. In 1976 it was moved to Heritage Hill in Lake Forest.

## The Great Adventure – Laguna Woods Women in World War II—Part II

by Gloria Moldow, Ph. D.



Dr. Gloria Moldow

*This article is the second excerpt from “The Great Adventure” written by Gloria Moldow. The first excerpt appeared in the May/June 2008 issue of the Historian. You can read the original article at the Society’s Office. The acronyms are; ANC – Army Nurse Corps, WAACs – Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, the forerunner of the WACS, WACs – Women’s Army Corps, WAVES – Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (Navy), SPARS – United States Coast Guard Women’s Reserve, WAAF – Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (England), WASPs – Women Air Force Service Pilots (England), and WRENS – Women’s Royal Naval Service (England).*

Women enlistees had diverse initiation experiences once they arrived in boot camp. Dolores M. Huber recalled “a lot of marching with backpacks, bedrolls, all equipment... [and] crawling on [her] stomach under fire” with live ammunition. Penny Mercer Baker said boot camp was “strenuous,” especially with the heavy loads she had to carry when on bivouac. Shirlee Glogers Abrams, a SPAR, recalled with dismay the 6 a.m. obstacle course, the barbed wire, the calisthenics and the marching, marching, marching. On the other hand, Mary Waltern Moncure thought basic was great. “I had a marvelous time,” she recalled; “I loved the physical part of it.” Brenda Boynton Ross believed that women survived the rigors of basic even better than the men, “who dropped like flies,” she said.

*See Women - Page 5*

## MUSINGS

### ***This Month's Stories***

The final installment of *The Great Adventure*, by Gloria Moldow, should appear in our January-February issue.

I would like to thank **Keith Melford**, Treasurer of the Saddleback Area Historical Society and **Irma Contreras**, Business Manager of St. Nicholas Church, who assisted me in the preparation of the St. Nicholas Church article.



**Bob Ring**

The sources for the article were: the Saddleback Area Historical Society's El Toro Grammar School Fact Sheet; Orange County's Harbors, Beaches and Parks' Historical Building Report, dated October 1974; *The Old El Toro Reader* by Joe Osterman, published by Old El Toro Press in 1992; and *Leisure World Churches—The First Five Years* by Kathryn G. Hansen and Hildegard Wylde, published by the Historical Society in 1981.

### ***Honoree of the Month***

Our congratulations to **Ruth May**, our Laguna Woods Honoree for November. We are grateful to the Video Club, whose members video tape the ceremony.

We would like to thank **Avalon The Regency** and **Avalon Las Palmas** for sponsoring the Honoree of the Month Program from July 2005 to November 2008, when both facilities were part of **Renaissance Senior Living**. Both facilities have continued to serve our community and continue to prosper as part of **Avalon—Vintage Senior Living**. We believe that it has been a mutually beneficial partnership.

### ***Save the Date***

Scheduled for Sunday, March 22, 2009, the Society's Annual Dinner will be a gala event to celebrate the 10th Birthday of our city, Laguna Woods.

### ***New Affiliate***

I am pleased to welcome **Better Health & Wellness Center** as a Friend of the Historical Society. Drs. Fara Sabeti and Ali Sarvestani are ready to fill your chiropractic needs.

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## ***Genealogy Seminar***

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, the Historical Society was pleased to co-sponsor a genealogy seminar with the City of Laguna Woods and Orange County Cemetery District. Over 60 people attended the 1½ hour event, which was held at Laguna Woods City Hall. Speakers from the Orange County Public Library and South Coast Genealogical Society were also on hand to discuss how to begin researching your family's history and where to find the resources that you will need. Terry Baker, Historical Society Board Member, and Jerry Bolliger, President of the Writer's Club, spoke of their personal experiences with genealogy.

In addition to sharing the importance of preserving your family's history, as evidenced by his father's extensive research, Baker provided the audience with information on the Historical Society's Obituaries database. The database, which has nearly 7,000 entries, is the product of countless hours of volunteer labor, spearheaded by Baker and Mary Williamson. The database allows our archives volunteers to quickly locate the obituaries of former Laguna Woods residents. Obituaries can be the source of vast and varied genealogical information, such as former places of residence, maiden names, etc. In the coming months, the Historical Society will combine its existing Laguna Woods Globe and Leisure World News database with newer records from the Orange County Register and LA Times.

As our volunteers will attest, one of the many benefits of creating such a database has been learning about, and remembering, some of the extraordinary people who have lived in Laguna Woods. Take for example, National Football Hall of Famer Bernard Bierman (d. March 1977), three-time Academy Award winning costume designer Charles LeMay (d. March 1978), and Evelyn Firestone (d. January 1981), a pioneer in the treatment of learning disabilities in brain injured and mentally impaired children.

For more information on the Obituaries Database, please call the Society at (949) 206-0150.

### ***Your 2009 Society Membership***

Enclosed with this newsletter is the form to **renew your tax-deductible membership** for the 2009 calendar year.

### **St. Nicholas (from Page 1)**

holer” outhouses were built to the rear of the school. There also was a small stable for the teacher’s horse. The original interior of the building was finished with tongue and groove redwood paneling (including the ceiling), with wainscoting up to the lower level of the windows. The classroom had blackboards located all around its perimeter. Originally the schoolhouse had no interior lighting. As the school was also used as a community meeting hall until such a hall was built in 1902, people brought lanterns to use for lighting when events were held in the building after dark.

Teachers, throughout the years, called the children to school by ringing the school bell which hung in the rather unique hat-like belfry structure, topped with a steeple and flagpole. In the early years school attendance averaged 14 to 29 children. Though total enrollment was higher, absenteeism was common due to the need for children in farm families to do chores at home.

### ***El Toro Builds a New School***

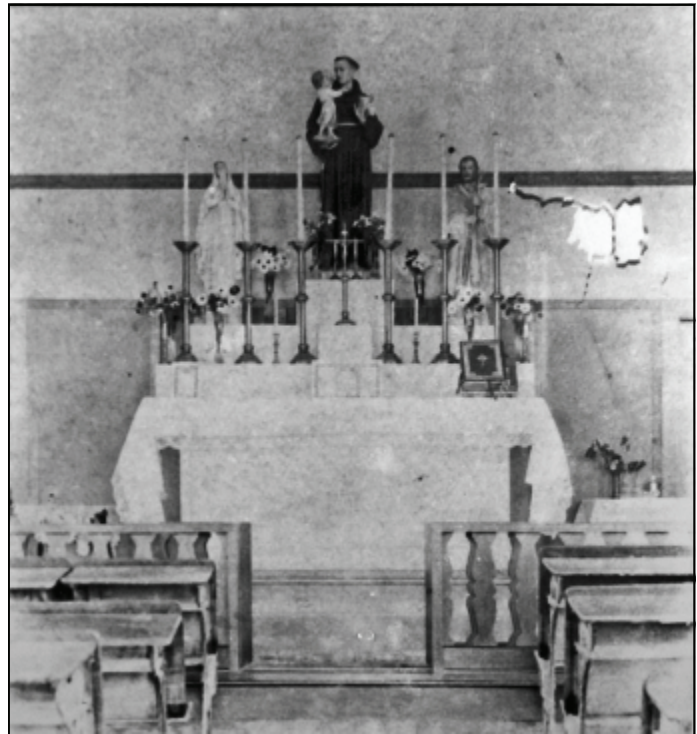
Education was basic—*reading, writing, and arithmetic*. Not too much attention was paid to grade levels. Good readers worked together, as did good math students. Everyone helped each other. Very few farm community students of that time went beyond the eighth grade because they were needed at home to work on the family farms. During the 1889-90 school year 21 pupils were enrolled. Enrollment peaked at 75 in 1945.

The few El Toro students who continued their schooling had to go to Santa Ana High School, the closest of the five high schools in Orange County. During the week students stayed with relatives or friends. Some got jobs and rented apartments. They would come home to El Toro over the weekend. Higher education was a real challenge for young people of the farm community.

Eventually, El Toro had more pupils than the one-room school could handle. In 1913 the wood frame school was purchased by Antoinette and John Gless who had it moved two blocks to El Toro Road so that it could be used by the newly formed El Toro Catholic Parish. A brick two-room school was constructed on the Olive Avenue property.

### ***St. Anthony’s Opens***

St. Anthony’s Catholic Church opened in the “old school house” in 1916 with a cross on the steeple where the flagpole was. An altar was installed with statues of St. Anthony, St. Joseph, and the Virgin Mary. The old school desks were used for seating. In 1920 John Gless bought pews for the church, and in later years stained



**St. Anthony’s—circa 1917. School desks were used for seating.**

Courtesy Saddleback Area Historical Society

glass windows were donated to St. Anthony’s from a church being razed in La Puente.

### ***St. Nicholas Church Authorized***

St. Anthony’s did not have enough parishioners to support a full-time priest. Priests from the Mission San Juan Capistrano usually led Sunday morning Masses. On Thursday, July 15, 1965, The Reverend Otto E. Sporrer was appointed to the El Toro Parish that would also include Leisure World. Three days later, he held Masses at St. Anthony’s Mission.

In his diary he remarked, “The turn-out was a wonderful experience and the enthusiasm of the people most amazing to me after the long years of indifference in the service, where the only enthusiasm seemed to be for the Commanding Officer. The delight of the parishioners at El Toro as well as Leisure World seemed to know no bounds. Their friendliness and eagerness in welcoming me left no doubt that they wanted their own priest. They demonstrated their generosity to the tune of \$178.50.”

On Monday, July 19<sup>th</sup>, after a lengthy interview with the president of the Leisure World Foundation, it was decided that a rectory outside of Leisure World would be more accessible for the parishioners. A two-story house was quickly leased. After doing some quick figuring, Father Sporrer concluded that \$7,000.00 would be necessary in order to furnish the rectory. Fortunately, Rossmoor Corporation, the de-

**St. Nicholas (from Page 3)****St. Nicholas Church, photographed by Harry Ashe in 1970.**

veloper of Leisure World, offered to furnish the rectory for \$4,000. The Exchange at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station was the source for the kitchen and dining room utensils, as well as the appliances.

When Father Sporrer moved into the rectory on Friday, July 23<sup>rd</sup> conditions were far from ideal, since none of the wooden furniture had been delivered. On Sunday a total of 503 people were at the three Masses – two at El Toro and one at Leisure World. At Leisure World there were 150, who put a very generous amount in the collection.

***St. Nicholas Opens, St. Anthony's Closes***

In September, 1965 Father Sporrer held his first Mass in Leisure World's Clubhouse II. On the eve of St. Nicholas Day, December 5, 1965, Father Sporrer broke ground for a new church which would seat 750 people, a small meeting hall and rectory, in its current location on El Toro Road.

The day the forms for the building footings were put in, Father Sporrer noticed that the layout markers were not located exactly where they should be. He advised the construction superintendent and was told, "Don't worry about it; we'll adjust as we go along with the job."

Father Sporrer knew what he wanted so he revved up his motorcycle, ran it right through the layout markers, destroying them. His comment, "Now you will put them where they belong!"

On August 28, 1966, Father Sporrer celebrated the first Mass in St. Nicholas Church. Shortly thereafter, St Anthony's was closed and the building was relinquished to the County. On July 9, 1967, his Eminence James Francis Cardinal McIntyre, Archbishop of Los Angeles, officiated at the dedication of St. Nicholas.

Orange County retained title to the St. Anthony's property until 1968 when the Assembly of God Church

bought the site from the County for \$10,000. In 1969, El Toro Road was widened and the building had to be moved to the rear of the property. In order to receive the permit to move the church, the owners were required to accept the then current County designation for the building of "Agricultural Warehouse". The church was given three-years to bring the site in compliance with the building codes. This action prompted the group who held the loan on the property to foreclose and put the site up for sale.

***St. Anthony's Site Sold***

In 1968, permission was given for St. Nicholas to build a new building at the rear of the site to accommodate classrooms, an administration office, storage space and a kitchen. By January 1970 it was ready for occupancy.

At about the same time the St. Anthony's site was bought by Gil Ramirez of Garden Grove and Chuck Larkin of Tustin. They planned to use it as an income tax and real estate office. It was found that it was too expensive to renovate the building in order to meet existing building and safety codes. Thus, the building was abandoned for some time, during which it suffered vandalism and eventually was threatened with condemnation.

During 1975 and 1976 the east and west transepts of St. Nicholas were extended and the offices were remodeled. In 1982 a wing was added to the rectory.

In 1976 the St. Anthony's site was sold to the Jehovah's Witnesses for the construction of their new church, and the schoolhouse was donated to the County of Orange for restoration and preservation as part of Heritage Hill Historical Park. The Saddleback Area Historical Society and other community groups helped raise money to defray the costs of moving the building.

***St. Nicholas Continues to Grow***

Father Sporrer retired in 1987 and Reverend Theodore Olson was appointed as Pastor of St. Nicholas. During his tenure, Father Olson oversaw the building of a new Parish Office and meeting rooms. Reverend Juan Caboboy was installed as the third Pastor in 1993 and during this time, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel was added to the existing church building.

In 2008, under the direction of their fourth Pastor, Reverend Richard Delahunty, St. Nicholas has undertaken the largest expansion in its 41 year history – a new 20,000 sq. ft. Parish Center to be used for religious education and other parish activities. It is scheduled to be completed in late summer of 2009.

**Women (from Page 1)**

Graduate nurses, who signed up with the Navy were able to avoid the grueling basic training the other women experienced. Ninetta Chapman joined the Navy, she said, because “groveling on the ground under barbed wire” as the WACs were forced to do, was not for her.

**Brenda Boynton Ross**

Initially, the services were unprepared for women. “Kotex machines were placed over the urinals,” Ross remembered. And women complained when they had to watch sex programs designed for men, a particular problem for many women still naive about sex. At the other extreme, some instructors

“never mentioned any part of the body between the shoulder and the knees,” Ross noted.

The need to wear appropriate dress was a particular issue that women had to deal with early in the war when appropriate uniforms were unavailable. Moncure recalled wearing women’s WWI uniforms until others became available. Ross, who had helped to organize the civilian Massachusetts Women’s Defense Corps, was one of the first enlistees in the WAACs (the forerunner of the WACs). At first the army issued “GI clothing” for the women – “men’s clothing” she emphasized, including male underwear! Soon thereafter women received regulation uniforms and were required to wear skirts and stockings – and girdles. Upon completion of basic training each WAAC faced an intensive interview with the male CO (commanding officer) and was instructed by her female superior officer to wear a girdle for the meeting. Ross laughingly remembered that she refused to wear a girdle and told her buddies: “Let him find out!”

**Penny Mercer Baker**

Baker filled her mess kit with dirt and heated it to press her clothes to keep up her appearance, even while she drove and repaired all kinds of vehicles, from ¾ ton to 2½ ton trucks and jeeps. But she drew the line on some demands. When pulled over by an MP in Germany for being “out of uniform,” she com-

plained: “You try keeping a hat on with bobby pins while driving a jeep.” (Baker later married that MP.) Adelyn Bonin, an ambulance driver in the North African heat, was elated when she finally could wear slacks. Skirts were “really impossible,” she wrote, “when one climbed up into the driver’s seat of the big Austins.” Women pilots who were required to wear skirts, stockings and high heels, even when flying B26s, had the same complaint.

Women were assigned to a wide range of tasks that were vital to the conduct of the war effort. About half remained in the United States. There, Mary Grady performed cryptanalysis in the code department for the Signal Corps. Abrams, a SPAR with the Coast Guard, tracked the movement of ships on the East Coast. Her work was so essential that when the FBI discovered that she was underage and she was discharged, her commander arranged to have her installed in the SPAR reserves to get her back.

**Mary Grady**

Stateside nurses worked in major armed forces hospitals throughout the country, caring for the wounded when they were shipped home. Some, like Betti Handler Birnbaum, accompanied seriously wounded patients cross-country to hospitals close to their homes. Moncure, a physical education major in college, trained eight hours a day, six days a week for three months to be a physical therapist in the WACs. Initially stationed at Walter Reed in Washington, D.C., she cared for “wards and wards of amputees.” Ross, also a physical education graduate, developed physical training and sex hygiene films for servicewomen.

**Mary Waltern Moncure**

Other women who remained in the United States performed jobs that seemed to them less essential, such as packing parachutes, purchasing basic supplies, and performing clerical and secretarial duties. Muriel Friedman Tuteur was frustrated with her parachute packing assignment, convinced she was making “too modest a contribution.” Shirley Wolfberg Fleck, a WAVE who signed up for aviation machinist school,

**Women (from Page 5)**

was sent to corpsman school for medical assisting instead. She worked as a medical secretary in the San Diego Naval Hospital and claimed all she learned in the service was how to “shoot pool and smoke a cigar.”

**Beverly L. Beesmeyer**

Beverly L. Beesmeyer experienced more than her share of adventure – and danger – within American borders. As a WASP, she and her fellow female pilots (seven of whom lived in Laguna Woods at one time) ferried planes between airfields, tested planes that had been damaged and repaired, delivered planes that required repair,

performed check flights, towed targets for live anti-aircraft gunnery practice, flew searchlight tracking missions, and trained inexperienced male cadets. Beesmeyer was always in harm’s way when she flew a B-26 in target practice or flew a damaged plane. Once, when instructing a male student pilot “under the hood,” he “kicked the plane into a secondary spin.” Her quick action pulled it out and saved both their lives, she recalled. She flew every plane the Army had, from the old Steerman biplane to the AT6 and the B26. It was “exciting” and she loved it, she said.

“We all wanted to go overseas,” declared Mary Pratt, an army nurse who was sent to Omaha Beach shortly after D-Day. Almost half of the Laguna Woods female inductees did get overseas, in equal numbers to the Pacific theater and to Europe. Getting there was an adventure itself. Moncure recalled the “exciting and rough” Atlantic crossing. At one point, the captain cut off the engines because the water was “full of U-boats.” The ship drifted silently for hours. Verona Cassano endured twenty days at sea en route to Manila without benefit of escort vessels. We were never afraid, many women remarked. “With twenty women and 5000 men, how could we be frightened?” Moncure laughed.

Jeanne Samelov Dworkin, a WAC who performed the same secretarial duties she might have at home, dismissed the value of her contribution. She tracked the movement of men and materiel that General MacArthur’s operations required—but from a tin shack in New Guinea, not far from danger. Molly Landau Busch, another WAC stationed in New Guinea and the Philippines, decoded messages for the signal corps. Joan Beckham Crockett, a WREN in the British Navy, was promoted from teletype operator to

cipher officer, part of the “really secret service” in Ceylon. She “knew everything that was going on,” she said. Anne Westman Gilbert, a member of the WAAF in England, did “deplotting” of German enemy aircraft as part of the Fighter Command in Newcastle. Her analyses determined when and where the British air command

**Anne Westman Gilbert**

would send fighters. When her superiors learned that she spoke fluent German, they sent her to Dover. At the time, the Germans were using women to relay instructions to pilots in the Luftwaffe about where and when to intercept British planes. Gilbert pretended she was one of the German operators and talked more than one disoriented German pilot into mistakenly landing on English soil. The Germans caught on, she said, but could not figure out how to stop her.

Nurses were usually closer to the battlefield and in great peril. Helen Lang Cronck arrived in Normandy on D-Day plus 10 to set up a field hospital. The encroaching fighting line forced her group to retreat. Casualties were brought in 500 a day. “It was rather rough,” she recalled; we “ran on adrenaline.” Pratt and Huber arrived at Omaha Beach not long after. Moncure remained in England and experienced the horrors of battle nevertheless. Sent from Walter Reed in Washington, D.C. to England, Moncure was responsible for setting up a unit soon “overwhelmed” by casualties from the Battle of the Bulge.

Mae Hanson Ankeny, a Navy nurse, and Cassano, an Army nurse, were stationed in the Pacific. Ankeny, one of the first flight nurses in the war zone, treated severely wounded casualties and gave intravenous injections during rough and hazardous flights. Cassano worked in a tent in Batanga, seventy miles from Manila, surrounded by barbed wire, guards and hostile Japanese soldiers. These women appeared to have shared Cronck’s sentiment that she “never felt frightened....We “just accepted it. That’s what we were there for.”

**Gloria Moldow received her M. A. and Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland. She has published numerous articles and a book, Women Doctors in Gilded Age Washington: Race, Gender and Professionalization, and taught American history and women’s history. She retired from Iona College, New Rochelle, N.Y. as Dean of the Columba School.**

## BITS AND PIECES OF LEISURE WORLD HISTORY

(Selected from the *Leisure World News*) . . . . . **Evelyn Shopp**

### 40 Years Ago — Nov. - Dec. 1968

Construction of \$2.5 million Beverly Manor began with groundbreaking ceremonies attended by local dignitaries, medical center staff and physicians, and representatives of the parent company. (In 2004, new management changed the name to Country Villa.)

Guests at the Eastern Star Christmas party at the Golden Grill were asked to bring a "Toy for Tots", a project of the Marine Corps Air Base.

Admission to the tree decorating party in the Main Lounge of CH-2 was a wrapped gift for a child which went to the Navy Relief Society.

Attendees at the CH-1 Holiday Open House were invited to bring a gift for a disadvantaged patient at Fairview Hospital in Costa Mesa.

Members of the Women's Club contributed wrapped gifts for VA Hospital patients.

Friends of Leisure World and the Hikers Club arranged for carolers to sing throughout the community on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. Residents were invited to join the carolers as they embarked from CH-1. A party followed!

Specials: Bananas, 10¢/lb.; Grapefruit, 9¢ each; young fryers, 29¢/lb.

### 25 Years Ago — Nov. - Dec. 1983

Oakbrook Village celebrated its third birthday.

12 month Certificates of Deposit were earning between 10.79% to 11.23% APY.

Construction plans for a health facility at the corner of Moulton and Calle Aragon were approved.

An 84 year old resident was hospitalized after an early morning accident near Gate 6 which destroyed 8 feet of Leisure World's wall and a 20 foot tree.

The Library celebrated its 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Librarian Irma Franklin reported an inventory of more than 20,000 books. She said over two-thirds of all books are donated by the residents.

The Security Officers Club arranged tables for non-smokers at its annual Christmas dinner. Tickets were \$7.50.

The AARP annual Christmas luncheon featured Bingo and door prizes. Tickets were \$2.50.

G.R.F. received a \$1 million settlement from Bradford National, a subsidiary of McDonnell Douglas, for failure to fulfill a contract for a computer software system for the financial services department.

Saddleback Kiwanis held its annual Ladies Christmas luncheon. (At the time, Kiwanis was an all male service club.)

### 10 Years Ago — Nov. - Dec. 1998

A Leisure World man became the first person in Orange County to be issued a citation for refusing to install a smoke detector. A recent amendment to the State Safety Code made detectors mandatory. Over 9,000 have been installed to date in Leisure World.

The new G.R.F. president outlined his business plan which included: new administration building, a sound wall on Moulton Parkway, an equestrian trail on the 23-acre site, the widening of Moulton Parkway, and cityhood. G.R.F. agreed to approve all of its committee appointments during its organizational meeting.

Fire Marshall "pulled the plug" on a Rhonda Mendoza holiday display because the household extension cords used to power the display posed a fire threat.

A new El Toro study indicated that no homes would be subjected to high noise levels with an airport. Leisure World residents challenged this finding!!

Sixteen persons were jailed in fraud that bilked some Leisure World residents in a massive telemarketing scheme that offered 80 silver coins valued at \$8,000 for a \$1,400 claiming fee. The actual value of the coins was far less than the \$1,400 fee.

The Orange County Register named Leisure World the best retirement community in Orange County.

Sixteen residents were certified as candidates for the five-member council of the proposed city of Laguna Woods.

### ***Your 2009 Society Membership***

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Shirlee Gloger Abrams



Betti H. Birenbaum



Dr. Adelyn Bonin



Helen L. Cronk



Jeanne S. Dworkin



Dolores M. Huber

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