



# The Historian

Preserving Today for Tomorrow

Volume 3 Number 3

May - June 2009

## Leisure World Churches The First Five Years

By Kathryn G. Hansen  
and Hildegard Wylde

In 1964 there were just two tiny chapels within miles of Leisure World. Both were on El Toro Road east of the freeway. **St. George's (Episcopal) Mission** was on the south side near the train tracks, which in those days crossed the road. **St. Anthony's Chapel**, erected in 1899 as the El Toro school house, purchased in 1916 and donated to the Catholic Church, was a short distance away on the north side. The chapels, the country store, a community building and a large warehouse were the landmarks in those days. The rest was farmland, with a few residences. (See *Churches*, Sep. & Nov. 2008 issues of *The Historian*.)

Of the first 30 or more residents of Leisure World who had moved into the new manors in buildings 1, 2 and 3 on Thursday, September 10, 1964, a few hardy souls found their way to the two venerable chapels on Sunday, four days later. For the others, Reverend H. Carl Roessler, Director of Religious Services of the Leisure World Foundation, held a prayer meeting in Clubhouse 1.

Ross Cortese had envisioned Leisure World as a total way of life, in which religion, medical care and recreation were all to be included.



Christ Scientist Church in 1970. In 2006 it became Calvary Chapel Pacific Hills. Photo by Harry Ashe

See *Churches* - Page 4

## 1857 - Ambush Near Gate 6

By Donald & Mary Decker



Sheriff James R. Barton  
Courtesy OC

Just two miles northwest of Gate 6 and the corner of Carlota and Ridge Route is the spot where one of the most famous ambushes in Orange County took place. Long before El Toro, Lake Forest or Laguna Woods, the El Camino Real road ran along our present-day border. It was this path that was followed by one of the most colorful bandits of the 1800s, Juan Flores, after he had made a raid on San Juan Capistrano in January 1857.

James R. Barton had been elected Sheriff of Los Angeles County, which at that time included the Orange County area, serving five consecutive years (1851-55) with a one-year hiatus when two other men tried unsuccessfully to fill his shoes before he took the reins once more. Crime was rampant in Los Angeles, averaging one violent death a day. When Barton learned that a notorious gang of escaped prisoners under the leadership of Juan Flores and Pancho Daniel was looting and pillaging near San Juan Capistrano, he went after them.

Pancho Daniel, a notorious bandit who had served time in San Quentin, had along with 14 others, escaped and joined forces with the gang led by Flores. A vicious criminal, Flores himself had a long and cruel record. His band had a reputation of

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## MUSINGS

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

***Ambush Near Gate 6***, was written by Donald & Mary Decker. Residents and local historians Donald and Mary Decker have co-authored eight books including the new city history, *Laguna Niguel: Honoring the Past, Fulfilling the Present*.



**Bob Ring**

The next issue of *The Historian* will feature a series on the history of Leisure World written by Marjorie Jones, the Society's first Archivist, in 1975. The original document covers the period from 1963 through 1975.

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

Our congratulations to **Barbara Marsh**, our Laguna Woods Honoree for April and **Hillel Pitlik**, our Honoree for May. We are grateful to the Video Club, whose members videotape the ceremony.

### ***Society Board Members***

The Society is pleased to welcome **Richard Tyhurst** as a member of its Board. Dick will focus, to some extent, on our Veterans History Project. We would like to thank former Board members **Ruth May** and **Mary Arine-Beer** for their contributions. Ruth was recently named President of the Foundation of Laguna Woods Village. Mary continues to be one of our volunteers.

### ***Birth of a City—Perspectives***

Our 90-minute documentary, "Birth of a City" features former Leisure World Globe Editor, Myra Neben's interviews with Dave Blodgett, Cynthia Chyba, Marty Rhodes, Henry Eilbirt and Leslie Keane. It is scheduled to be shown on Channel 6 on Thursday, May 7<sup>th</sup> at 8 p.m.; Monday, May 11<sup>th</sup> at 6 p.m.; Tuesday, May 19<sup>th</sup> at 4 p.m. and Friday, May 29 at 8 p.m. We are grateful to TV Channel 6 for producing and editing this documentary and to The Robert Mayer Corporation for funding the project.

### ***Annual Directory***

The Society's Annual Directory goes to press in less than 30 days. If you are an individual member and you received this issue of the *Historian*, you will be listed in the directory. We have made you a member of the Society if you were one of the many people who made a gift honoring someone.

### ***Ambush (from Page 1)***

being the worst to ever to infest the Southland. When Flores and Daniel joined forces they became an extremely dangerous alliance, threatening to kill everyone in their path.

### ***Siege of San Juan Capistrano***

Juan Flores, about 22 years old at the time, was of medium height, slim, lithe and graceful, reported to be a most beautiful figure in the fandango or on horseback. It was said he had a tiger-like walk—always seeming to be in the very act of springing up on his prey. His eyes, neither black, gray nor blue, greatly resembling those of the owl, were always moving, watchful and wary. Juan Flores had been sentenced to San Quentin Prison as a horse thief.

Flores gathered a gang in prison, and they escaped together to Los Angeles. On January 20, 1857, the gang rode into San Juan Capistrano, where they were familiar with the town and its residents. A short time later they murdered a storekeeper as he was preparing his evening meal. Legend has it that the bandits placed the victim's body on the table and then sat down and ate what he had prepared for himself. Other members of the gang plundered the stores in town and terrorized all in their path. Then they quickly left, only to come back in the dark of night. Such assaults were typical of the crimes this gang committed in the vicinity of the old mission town.

That night the gang shot at anyone who ventured outside. Some residents made their way to the old mission buildings where they hid, while others fled to Lake Elsinore. Finally a messenger got through to the Sheriff Barton in Los Angeles, and reported the continuing siege of San Juan Capistrano.

### ***Sheriff Barton to the Rescue***

Sheriff Barton called for volunteers to accompany him to San Juan Capistrano to capture the outlaws. His posse, consisting of six men in addition to himself, left Los Angeles and rode south on the night of January 22, 1857. A gang member, left behind in Los Angeles as a lookout, immediately rode straight to Capistrano and informed Flores of the posse's destination.

The posse stopped for breakfast at the main house of the Rancho San Joaquin, which was southwest of the present city of Santa Ana. It was owned by one of California's finest old Dons, Jose Sepulveda. Among those gathered about the Don's adobe buildings was Chola Martina, an Indian girl who happened to be the sweetheart of Flores. Leaving their guns on a table in

an outbuilding, the posse members sat down to breakfast. It has been suspected, but never proven, that Martina removed the rounds from the guns of the posse while Barton and his men were having breakfast.

Don Jose warned Barton that Flores had a large force of 50 or 60 men, although some reports have only 11 in the gang who were well armed and mounted. He advised the Sheriff against going further, since the posse would probably be outnumbered.

### ***Ambush Near Gate 6***

Barton, however, insisted on continuing the pursuit, and immediately after breakfast he and his small posse resumed their quest. The lawmen had traveled about twelve miles and were riding through a canyon when they were suddenly ambushed by the Flores gang at a rise of land which was probably visible, in those days, from our Gate 6.

They grabbed their guns to return fire, only to discover that someone had removed the ammunition from the weapons. To the outlaw gang, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Bandits came out of hiding and shot Barton through the heart, and killed three members of the posse in the violent gunfight.

The three remaining deputies rode fast horses and were able to get away before the outlaws could organize a pursuit. The deputies decided to split up— one rode to Los Angeles, another to San Gabriel and the third headed for San Pedro.

Within a few hours after the facts became known in Los Angeles, a posse of approximately sixty men was organized by General Andrés Pico. Two more armed posses were gathered and quickly sent to confront the Flores outlaws. When one of the posses arrived at the place of the ambush, they found what was left of Sheriff Barton and the three deputies. The location where their bodies had been mutilated and the remains scattered became known as Barton Mound. The mound was leveled in the construction of the I-405 freeway, but a marker referring to the site may be found at the end of Sand Canyon Avenue near the junction of the freeway and SR133.

The manhunt lasted for several days. Finally, the posse led by General Pico located the gang hiding in Modjeska Canyon. Several of Flores' men were captured, but he managed to escape. Flores Peak, in Modjeska Canyon, acknowledges the battle.

The killers were pursued into the mountains, and



**Sheriff Barton was shot through the heart during the ambush at Barton's mound.** © W.T. Smedley/Printroom.com Photography

most of them were soon captured. General Pico was most efficient. He captured two of the most noted of the gang and hanged them on the spot. Fifty-two were arrested and lodged in the Los Angeles jail. Of these, eleven were hanged and the others were set free.

### ***Justice Served at Flores Peak***

Flores was found and captured some days later alone in the Simi Pass, north of Los Angeles. He was condemned by popular vote and hanged near the top of Fort Hill (present site of the Los Angeles Board of Education) on February 14, 1857. Flores was defiant to the end.

Almost a year later, Pancho Daniel was captured hiding in a haystack near San Jose. After three mistrials, a change of venue to Santa Barbara was eventually granted. On the morning of November 30, 1858, Daniel's body was found hanging from a beam across the gateway of the jail yard.

More than a hundred of purported gang members were either captured or killed during the manhunts for Flores and Daniel. Sheriff Barton and his three deputies became the first lawmen in Los Angeles County to lose their lives in the line of duty.

Thus it was that the ambush and gunfight between the Flores gang and the Barton posse could have been viewed by anyone standing at Gate 6 (if, indeed, Gate 6 had existed). The legend of that battle lives on, especially if you should look upward to Flores Peak in Modjeska Canyon or use your imagination whenever you go through Gate 6 to return to the day of the deadly ambush in 1857.



**Churches (from Page 1)****St. Nicholas Catholic Church in 1970.**

Photo by Harry Ashe

At Leisure World Seal Beach he had built a community chapel within the gates, and expected to do the same here. In fact, plans for the chapel were actually drawn, but it soon became evident that the individual churches wanted to establish their own congregations. Cortese offered to deed property, outside the walls, to each church that had at least 100 members living in Leisure World, provided that construction would begin within two years of the grant.

Groundbreaking and building of the churches began during the next two years. In the meantime, rooms in Clubhouse 1, and later in Clubhouse 2, were used for Sunday services.

**Services in Clubhouse 1**

Before the first residents arrived in 1964, the Southern California Council of Churches offered the **Methodist Church** the privilege of be-

**Laguna Hills Methodist Church in 1970. It is now Laguna Country United Methodist Church.**

Photo by Harry Ashe

ing the first congregation to hold a service in the new community. Bishop Gerald Kennedy appointed the Rev. Joseph D. Butler, Associate Pastor of the Leisure World Seal Beach Methodist Church, to serve as Pastor, beginning October 1, 1964.

He sent letters extending a warm invitation to the new residents to attend the first service on Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup> in the Art Gallery in Clubhouse 1. Rev. Butler borrowed the speaker's stand from the sales office to use as a pulpit. By Thanksgiving, 1964, the Methodist congregation had increased from 31 to 81 members and had moved to Clubhouse 1's Main Lounge.

The **Lutherans** immediately took over occupancy of the Art Gallery, holding their first service for 26 persons on November 22, 1964. The Board of American Missions had already established Lutheran Churches in the Leisure Worlds in Seal Beach and Walnut Creek. Rev. Roessler, who came from Seal Beach, was commissioned to establish a church in Laguna Hills.

By April 1965 Clubhouse 1 hosted services in the Art Gallery for the **United Church of Christ (Congregational)**, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Clark Harshfield, at 9:30 a.m. and the **Lutheran Church** led by Rev. Roessler at 11:00 a.m. The **Methodist Church**, led by Rev. Butler, used the Main Lounge at 11:00 a.m. In mid-May 1965, the Presbytery of Los Angeles invited the Rev. Edward James Caldwell to be the organizing pastor of the **Presbyterian Church of Leisure World**. Caldwell's first service, with 196 attending, was held in the Main Lounge at 9:30 am on Sunday, May 16, 1965. Less than 30 days later the congregation changed its name to **Geneva Presbyterian Church**.

Also on May 16<sup>th</sup> the **Church of Religious Science**, led by Rev. Henry Wiens, started services in Classroom I. The first gathering of the **Christian Scientists** was an informal meeting in Clubhouse 1 on Sunday, June 13, 1965. The following Friday, Milton W. Feldman officiated at services for those of the **Jewish** faith at 7:30 pm in the Art Gallery. *The Leisure World News (LW News)* reported that the following week the **Christian Science Church** started services at 9:30 am in the Art Gallery and the **Congregational Church** moved to one of the dining rooms.

Fifty-five persons assembled in Clubhouse 1 on November 7, 1965 for the first **Baptist** service. The Church was officially founded with 36 charter members on December 14, 1965 with Dr. Olson in the pulpit.

In January 1966, the **Christian Science congregation** was recognized by the Mother Church in Boston as a **Christian Science Society**. The first elected Readers of the Society were Alva T. Smith and June Young.

The formation of the **First Christian Church in Leisure World** was the result of action by pastors in the Santa Ana and Santa Monica Christian Churches to persuade Rev. John Wes-

ley Runyan to start a congregation here upon his retirement from the Poway Valley Christian Church. Rev. Runyan called an evening meeting on January 2, 1966 in Clubhouse 1 and on April 1<sup>st</sup> the **First Christian Church of Laguna Hills** was born. Later in the year Runyan resigned, due to ill health, and Rev. Frank Purnell became the Pastor. At this time the congregation moved their services into the Art Gallery. Although the **Christian Church** was offered a building site in 1966, the congregation did not expect to meet the 100 member requirement.

The *LW News* of April 18, 1968 carried an invitation to all residents interested in the "Daily Word" to come to a **Unity Church** meeting the following Wednesday in Clubhouse 1. The meeting was conducted by the Rev. Hertha Tuntland. These midweek meetings continued through 1969.

### ***Clubhouse 2 Opens***

When Clubhouse 2 opened on September 25, 1965, the **Presbyterian** congregation moved into the Main Lounge and held their services at 11:00 am. Five weeks later the congregation was officially organized with 304 charter members and Rev. Caldwell was installed as Pastor.

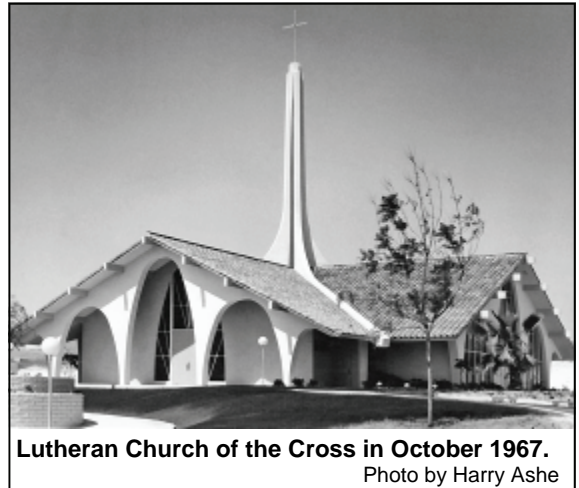
The completion of Clubhouse 2, in September 1965, allowed Father Sporrer to hold Sunday Mass at 9:30 am in its Main Lounge. Daily and evening Mass continued at **St. Anthony's**.

By January 1966 nine church denominations used Clubhouse 1 or 2 to conduct weekly services: **Baptist, Catholic, Christian, Christian Science, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian** and **Religious Science**.

The Church Calendar, which had appeared in every edition of the *LW News*, listed 16 churches in the January 5, 1966 edition. After that the Church Calendar was printed on a space available basis, which caused several churches to purchase advertising on the Religion Page. The Clubhouse Schedule continued to appear in the *LW News*; however it only listed the church's name together with the time and location of the service.

On August 2, 1966, the *LW News* carried an article by Rev. Roessler, Director of Religious Activities, which reviewed the "spiritual expression" in Leisure World. He stated that "nine different denominations conducted regular weekly worship services with a total attendance of more than 7,000. Thirty-seven different group meetings were held, with 10 special programs such as dinners and receptions. Two inter-denomination programs were conducted and the clergy and lay leaders participated regularly in Channel 6 programming."

He continued, "New edifices are being built by our rapidly growing congregations. **St. Nicholas Catholic Church** is almost completed. The beautiful new church on El Toro Road, near Gate 1, will be dedicated soon. **Laguna Hills Methodist Church** on Moulton Parkway will be filled with joyful members for their first service in October. The **Lutheran Church**



**Lutheran Church of the Cross in October 1967.**  
Photo by Harry Ashe

**of the Cross** on El Toro Road will be under construction before the end of this month. Not too far behind are **Geneva Presbyterian Church, First Baptist Church, the Mormon Church** and **Temple Judea**.

The **Christian Science Church** is initiating plans for their newly-located site at Gate 3. **St. George's Episcopal** is also in the early design stages for their new church."

In January 1967 six church denominations used Clubhouse 1 or 2 to conduct weekly services: **First Baptist, Christian, Christian Science Society, Lutheran Church of the Cross, Geneva Presbyterian, and Religious Science**. By January 1969, the Lutherans and Presbyterians had moved into their own facilities and four churches remained.

### ***Churches Select Sites***

The first edition of the *LW News*, on March 17 1965, announced plans for establishing **St. Nicholas Catholic Church**, the first church to be built. In June 1965, the Lutherans were chartered as the **Lutheran Church of the Cross** under Rev. Roessler; and Father Otto E. Sporrer was named as the priest of the soon-to-be constructed **Laguna Hills Catholic Church**. On Sunday a total of 503 people were at the three Masses – two at El Toro and one in the Main Lounge of Clubhouse 1.

On April 1, 1965 the *LW News* announced that the **Methodist Church** had selected a 3½ acre site on the east side of Moulton Parkway, adjacent to the proposed shopping center. The **Mormon** and **American Baptist Churches** each chose 2-acre sites directly across the street. A



Temple Judea in 1970.

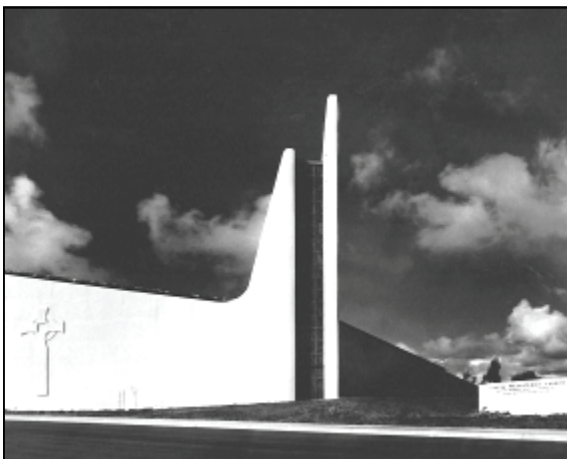
Photo by Harry Ashe

week later the Catholic and Lutheran Churches announced sites on El Toro Road. The **Lutheran Church** received a 3-acre site on the north side of El Toro Road opposite **St. Nicholas**, and adjacent to the area in Phase 2 where the first Garden Villa manors were to be erected.

In June 1965, the Lutheran congregation was officially organized as the **Lutheran Church of the Cross** with 81 charter members. On December 26<sup>th</sup> Rev. Vernon E. Kotter took over the ministry from Rev. Roessler.

In late June, 1965, Rev. Alec G. Nichols was appointed as the Senior Pastor of the Methodist Church that adopted the name **Laguna Hills Methodist Church**. Rev. Butler remained as the Associate Pastor.

On September 2, 1965 Nathan Eichen, President of **Temple Judea**, announced that the Temple had selected the site adjacent to the Methodist Church on Moulton Parkway.



Geneva Presbyterian Church in 1970.

Photo by Harry Ashe

On February 27, 1966 the Methodists broke ground for 13,500 square-foot building which would ultimately become their Fellowship Hall. The first Sunday service was held in the newly constructed 650-seat facility on November 6, 1966. By this time the Rev. Butler had retired, and the first pastor in the new building was the Rev. Alec Nichols, who remained until his death in 1968. In 1968 **Laguna Hills Methodist Church** became **Laguna Hills United Methodist Church** as a result of the merger of the Methodist and the Evangelical United Brethren Churches in the United States.

The opening of Leisure World and the continuing growth of neighboring settlements assured the future of **St. George's Mission** as a self-sustaining parish. By the last week in October, 1965 its seating capacity had been increased and the congregation approved the construction of a significantly larger parking lot which opened in June 1966.

The November 11, 1965 *LW News* announced that architectural plans for the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints** were being reviewed. This church was ultimately built on Aliso Creek Road and dedicated on January 15, 1995.

On the eve of St. Nicholas Day, December 5, 1965, Father Sporrer broke ground for **St. Nicholas Church on El Toro Road**. It would include 750-seat sanctuary, a small meeting hall and a rectory. The groundbreaking ceremony for St. Nicholas was held on December 6, 1965 at the site on El Toro Road west of Leisure World Gate 1. Rev. Sporrer celebrated the first Mass in the 600-seat sanctuary on August 28, 1966. Dedication ceremonies were held on July 9, 1967.

Groundbreaking for the **Lutheran Church of the Cross** took place in September 1966. The first service was held on July 23, 1967 and the Sanctuary was dedicated on November 12, 1967. Rev. Vernon E. Kotter remained as the Pastor of the new facility.

The **United Church of Religious Science** built a 3½ acre facility near the intersection of El Toro Road and Laguna Canyon road. Rev. Henry Wiens, who was in his seventh year of leadership of the congregation, led the formal dedication service of the 250-seat church on September 25, 1966.

Early in 1966, 28 members of the Jewish faith met in the Art Gallery to establish a Jewish house of worship. The groundbreaking ceremony on November 23, 1966 and the formal dedication of **Temple Judea** was conducted on Sunday, March 31, 1968. Knowledgeable laymen were selected to conduct the religious services which consisted of portions taken from Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rituals.

**St. George's Episcopal Church** had been offered a building site west of Moulton Parkway. However, in order to have the church more accessible for members living throughout the Saddleback Valley, as well as in Leisure World, the Church chose to purchase 3½ acres on Avenida de la Carlota



near the El Toro exit from the Freeway. This site was offered to them by Rossmoor Corporation at a price considerably below market value. The project, in Spanish mission motif, included a 300-seat sanctuary with a large multipurpose room and a separate administration building which included eight classrooms. The groundbreaking ceremonies took place on August 1968. The Rev. Frederick C. Hammond, who had been Vicar of **St. George's Chapel** since 1966, was the first Rector of the new Church. The first service in the Sanctuary was held on July 27, 1969.

About a half a mile west of the **Lutheran Church** site, adjacent to what would later become Gate 7, the Presbyterian congregation received 3½ acres from Rossmoor Corporation and purchased an additional half-acre. Groundbreaking for the 800-seat sanctuary of **Geneva Presbyterian Church** was held on May 21, 1967. The first service, with Dr Caldwell in the pulpit, was held in the Sanctuary on August 25, 1968 and dedication services were held later that day. Sunday school classes were started in a temporary mobile unit in the church yard in 1969.

Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Hall were hosting a small group of Congregationalists in their manor in 1967. As the group grew in size they decided to establish Sunday afternoon Vesper Services at St. George's Chapel in El Toro. Rev. Fred Niedringhaus, Pastor of the Santa Ana Congregational Church, conducted the services. On October 6, 1967 a committee of the members recommended that a church be organized under the name of **Mayflower Congregational Church of Laguna Hills, California**. Since Rev. Niedringhaus was to retire from the Santa Ana pastorate in December, he was called to minister the new church. Services were held at 4:00 pm, every other Sunday at St. George's in El Toro.

Their first Sunday morning service was held in Dining Room 3, Clubhouse 1, on January 7, 1968. The **Mayflower Congregational Church** officially joined the community's family of churches on Palm Sunday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, when 82 residents enlisted as charter members. Although the size of their membership increased to the point where they were qualified to apply for a building site, the members decided to remain in Clubhouse 1 where they continue to meet today, 41 years later, at 11:00 am.

On May 5, 1968 the **Christian Science Society of Laguna Hills** held their first services in the Main Lounge of Clubhouse 1. Grading began on July 22, 1968 for the Spanish contemporary structure designed to seat 300. The site, which included a Sunday school and a reading room, was that originally assigned to the **Mormon Church**. On February 13, 1969, with work under way on the building, the Society became the **First Church of Christ, Scientist, Laguna Hills**. The first meeting in the new building was on July 27, 1969.

Fifty-five persons assembled in Clubhouse 1 on November 7, 1965 for the first Baptist service. The Church had been com-



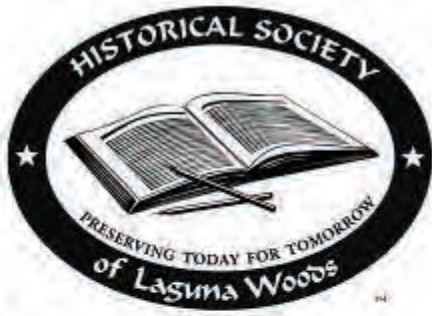
**First Baptist Church in 1970. It is now known as Grace Community Church.** Photo by Harry Ashe

missioned by the Executive Secretary of the Southern California Baptist Church earlier in the year, and Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Verner Olson, missionaries of the Mission Society, were called to organize the congregation. The Church was officially founded with 36 charter members on December 14, 1965.

A candlelight buffet supper in the Main Lounge of Clubhouse 1 on August 4, 1968 marked the completion of the architectural plans for the **Baptist Church**. The ground breaking ceremonies for the **First Baptist Church of Laguna Hills** were held on September 22, 1968. The 400-seat Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall of the **First Baptist Church of Laguna Hills** were dedicated on October 12, 1969 under the leadership of Dr. Verner Olson.

On September 13, 1964, there were just two little chapels in El Toro, and a prayer meeting at Clubhouse 1 for the 35 residents of Leisure World on their first Sunday morning. Five years later, in the fall of 1969, more than 12,000 residents had a choice of worship services at three Clubhouse locations. In addition, there were eight churches in the surrounding community of Laguna Hills on sites made possible by the generosity of Ross Cortese.

This is the last installment of a series of articles on the Leisure World Churches. This article is based on *Leisure World Churches—The First Five Years*, written by Kathryn G. Hansen and Hildegard Wylde in the *Leisure World History* published by The Leisure World Historical Society of Laguna Hills in 1981 and the 1965 - 1969 editions of the *Leisure World News*.



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**Bob Ring, Editor**

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Terry E. Stephenson and Wm. McPherson under the branch of the sycamore limb on which Gen. Andreas Pico hanged two members of Juan Flores' gang who ambushed Sheriff James Barton in 1857. The tree stands in Precito Canyon, a side-canyon of Limestone Canyon.

Courtesy O.C. History Roundup