



The Historian

Preserving Today for Tomorrow

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1976 — Celebrations Mark the Bicentennial Year

This article, adapted from a December 30, 1976 article written by *Leisure World News* staff writer Bruce Watson is the fourteenth in this series. Additional information was taken from five Historical Society Journals published between 1980 and 1982, *Fulfilling Retirement Dreams*, published by the Historical Society in 1989 and numerous issues of the 1976 *Leisure World News*. Note: All dates without a year refer to 1976.

What Might Have Been

“This is MISSION COUNTRY,” a column written by Warren Morgan in the March 11, 1976 issue of *The Leisure World News* declared that “Leisure World almost became a part of San Juan Capistrano.”

“Ross Cortese tried, despite the fact that the city’s center was nine miles away from Clubhouse I. He proposed that San Juan annex a ribbon of land on the ocean side of San Diego Freeway tying the city to Leisure World’s 3,580 acres. If he had succeeded Laguna Hills would never have existed. We would have been San Juan Capistrano North.”

Cortese’s projected Leisure World’s population would be 40,000 compared to 1,200 residents in San Juan at that time. San Juan declined. Ross retreated and asked Santa Ana, who almost bought the idea. Then, he tried Laguna Beach who had no interest in “being controlled by the folks over the hill.”

A Year of Parades, Politicians and Snow

The nation’s two hundredth year was ushered in with patriotic songs, historical commercials and other red, white, and blue hoopla, and 1976 lived up to its advance billing. In Leisure World, the year featured parades, Bicentennial tributes, visits from politicians, elections, rain, snow and a full 366 days.

On a sunny winter day in January, more than 100 residents gathered at Clubhouse III to witness the hoisting of a Bicentennial flag and a presentation of a Liberty Bell replica, donated through the California Club.

The election campaign touched Leisure World in May as politicians, including President Ford, Ronald Reagan and former Senator John Tunney visited the community. On May 23, President Gerald Ford be-



After 200 years of waiting, residents prepared for the event by recording history on their hydrants. During May, fire hydrants throughout the community were decorated to resemble Bicentennial heroes, some complete with caps and powdered wigs, were painted in red, white and blue.

came the first United States President to visit Leisure World. Ford addressed a crowd of 3,000 on the Clubhouse II lawn. Three days later, Ford’s chief opponent in the primaries, Ronald Reagan addressed a crowd of 1,000 at Clubhouse III.

Bicentennial activities continued when hundreds of residents gathered for patriotic ceremonies at Clubhouse II on Flag Day, June 14. The long Bicentennial year culminated on July 5 with a festive parade. Marching down Calle Aragon and Avenida Sevilla

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There were many facets of Leisure World's Bicentennial parade, from bonneted spectators to Aquadettes, clowns and Uncle Sam.

were 70 different units representing 35 clubs and organizations. The two-hour parade featured walkers, floats, golf carts and mini-buses. More than 4,000 residents lined curbs to watch the parade pass in review.

Politics returned to Leisure World in October, bringing a gust of candidates inside the walls. Meanwhile, both Democratic and Republican clubs telephoned, walked, talked, and prepared to get the voters to the polls on November 2. Their efforts were successful as 89.3% of Leisure World voters went to the polls on Election Day.

The Leisure World Scene

First and Second Laguna Hills Mutuels entered the new year as one—United Laguna Hills Mutual. Later in the month, Mutuels 51 through 56 and Mutual 62 joined with Third Laguna Hills Mutual. By February, the 15 mutuels which opened the year had merged into seven.

Aliso Creek was bone dry until the year's first winter storm on February 4 ended an eight-month drought

that brought less than one inch of rain to the Saddleback Valley. February brought 4 inches of rain in four days and March followed with the first recorded snow in the history of the Saddleback Valley.

Valentine's Day was a winning day for residents Louise and Frank Donovan as their horse, George Navonod, won the \$76,900 first prize in the Strub Stakes at Santa Anita. While their horse was racing to victory, Leisure World horses were banned from trails along Aliso Creek. The temporary ban was made permanent in August. With no horses to ride, residents turned to their cars and rolled up an impressive record of 97 traffic citations during the first week of February. Tickets were awarded in lieu of prizes.

Historical Society Formed

The Historical Society was established as a committee in the summer of 1976 following the publication of a chronological history of Leisure World written by Marjorie F. Jones. At the request of GRF, this brief study was designed to educate the officers and directors of the various boards.

The committee continued to function under the direction of the Club President's Committee, which represented the myriad organized groups and clubs serving the community. Considerable interest was aroused by this early publication, and much credit should go to Marjorie Jones for laying the foundation of the society.

As a result of resident interest in the history of Leisure World, this committee became the Leisure World Historical Society—incorporated in November, 1977, as a non-profit corporation. Behind this action was the firm conviction that the residents of Leisure



Aliso Creek on February 9, 1976, when 1.48 inches fell.

Courtesy Leisure World News

World wanted to preserve the history of the unique community that was especially designed for them and remains one of the most creative and innovative of all retirement complexes in the United States.

Honoree of Month Program

In a full-page ad on March 4, Leisure World residents were invited to submit nominations for Leisure Worlder of the Month to the Rossmoor Corporation. This award was to honor “enthusiastic, energetic, articulate people whose lives have been enriched by their retirement.” Nominations, mailed to Rossmoor, were to include a brief description of what the nominee accomplished before coming to Leisure World, what activities that person had engaged in since retirement and what that individual had done to make life more challenging and exciting in Leisure World.

An original oil painting was commissioned for each Leisure Worlder of the Month and the painting was displayed in the main pavilion of the Rossmoor Sales Office for one month prior to its presentation to the honoree in an informal ceremony.

Emeritus Program

The community’s first exercise class was the outgrowth of a research project, funded by a grant from the Administration of Aging, conducted by Dr. Herbert de Vries under the auspices of U.S.C.’s Gerontology Center.



Clubhouse II guard Mike Anderson was able to build a snowman on March 3, 1976, when Leisure World was visited by some of that white slushy stuff.

Courtesy Leisure World News



Marjorie Jones receiving her Leisure Worlder of the Month honors from Paul Zimmerman at the Rossmoor Sales Office in June, 1979.

In 1968, under this project, 41 “not so athletic” Leisure World oldsters, ranging in age from 52 to 87, were put through an exercise program three times a week. Within six weeks the difference between this group and an unexercised group was profound. Dramatic improvements in physical functions began to appear and blood pressures dropped markedly. Everyone benefited to some extent. It became increasingly clear that, “while exercise might not add years to one’s life, it certainly seemed to add life to one’s years.”

The project continued for almost four years. Toward its conclusion, the residents who had been improved by the program voiced consternation at its end. “We want to continue—to improve,” they maintained and PCM listened and agreed. They hired young, vivacious Diane Edwards, on a part-time basis, to conduct a few classes. The Strenuous Exercise Class, held once a week, had 10 students. There was also one bicycle ergometer, two exercycles and a wall pulley. On Tuesdays, Saddleback Unified School District sent a teacher to conduct another exercise class. When that instructor became pregnant, Diane Edwards took over under her teaching credential. This began Leisure World’s association with the School District.

Diane started a “mild” exercise class with three male students in one corner of the room doing finger, head and neck exercises. Later, water exercises were started and were an instant success.

Diane’s indefatigable energy and her delightful sense of humor attracted many residents to her classes. Word of the physical improvements, the fun and oth-



As coordinator of the Leisure World exercise program, Diane Edwards inspired thousands in the community to a better way of life through the stimulus of exercise. With her infectious personality she also convinced them that feeling better can also be fun.

er benefits spread like wildfire. Soon Diane was working half-time for the School District and half-time for PCM. Then, the decision was made to put Physical Education on a year-round basis by having Diane work full-time for the School District under the title of Exercise Supervisor. In addition, under PCM, she continued classes during vacations and holidays to keep the program continuous.

By July 1976, the program was too large for one person to handle. Billie Nunan was then hired as a teacher's aide. The program continued to grow and in September 1977, Terry Robinson was hired to help. Attendance mushroomed and new classes were added.

Sales

In April, Rossmoor, riding a wave of new sales, announced an escalation in manor construction. During the first quarter of 1976, 105 manors were sold, compared to only 46 during the same period in 1975. June was a good month, Rossmoor sold 76 homes totaling \$5.7 million in a lottery. Another Rossmoor sales lottery on September 11 resulted in a sales record when 131 homes were sold for \$12.5 million in five hours at prices ranging from \$99,500 to \$127,000.

In August, Al Ceresa was named president of Rossmoor Corporation. He succeeded Robert E. Rosenthal, president since 1974, who announced his resignation early in June to return to the practice of law. In November, Ceresa announced that a new national headquarters building for Rossmoor was being built

on a four-acre lot on El Toro Road opposite Gate 7. The 19,650 square foot office building would be connected by a covered walkway and atrium to a parking garage. [Today, this is the site of South County Adult Day Services and the Whispering Fountains.]

Management Study

In August, 1975, several directors of Third Mutual suggested that a management study might be appropriate after 12 years of operations during which the annual operation budget had grown to \$18 million. Just before the Bicentennial overshadowed other local events, corporation directors of GRF and both housing mutuals announced that consulting company Arthur D. Little, Inc., had been hired to study Leisure World's management at a cost of \$42,000 for a 10-week review.

October's Leisure World News printed a summary of the Little Report and as a result of controversy over accessibility, the full report was made available to the public in the administrator's office.

The Little Report

The report recommended several changes in management, but was generally favorable. One recommendation was that a full-time PCM general manager be



Firemen wash spilled fuel from giant grading machine that overturned at construction site inside Gate 10. Officials said the driver, who received minor injuries, elected to tip the machine over instead of running into homes below the construction site after the grader experienced a mechanical failure. Courtesy Leisure World News

hired. At that time, Administrator Robert Price, Controller Russell Disbro, and Director of Operations Robert Mitchell all reported directly to PCM president Edward Olsen. Little recommended that: service requests, inventory control and basic management information be automated; the operations department be divided into smaller, more manageable units; and all community relations related activities be combined into one department under a single director.

The summary report concluded that the services provided by PCM were cost effective and competitive and that, overall, PCM did “an excellent job of managing the community.” It noted that PCM’s resale organization, which has always operated independently from the management portion of the company, was indirectly subsidizing the community because the profits from resales enabled PCM to hold down its management fees. Little said it could find no areas where cost savings could be effected without cutting the level of services, “because of the management’s and the directors’ philosophy of cost consciousness.”

Corporation directors canceled the PCM’s contract just before November 1, when it would have been automatically renewed if not terminated. Negotiations on a new contract continued, with other firms being considered. PCM was awarded a three-year management agreement during the first week of December.

Management Agreement

The new agreement included the provision that PCM would hire a general manager who would be in charge of all Leisure World operations. The salaries of the general manager and Administrator Bob Price were to be paid by PCM from its management fee. The search for a general manager continued through November and December. The contract set the management fee paid to PCM at \$1.00 per manor per month. Half the fee would be paid by GRF and the mutual corporations would pay the remainder.

The contract was similar to a cost plus fixed fee agreement. Services provided by PCM, including landscaping, security, operation of community facilities, plumbing, electricity, and bus service, were furnished to the various Leisure World corporations on a cost reimbursable basis with PCM acting as the agent for the corporations in contracting the services.

Another provision provided that PCM would pay GRF a rental fee for the PCM Resales office in the Administration Building \$150 per unit for each resale up to 300 per year, an increase of \$50. For additional resales above 300, the sum increased until it reached



Ross Cortese presents the official “Hall of Presidents” Bicentennial gold plaque featuring metal sculpture reliefs of all American presidents in 24 kt. gold plating. Receiving the plaque are from left. Administrator Bob Price, GRF President Adm. Roland Smoot and immediate past President Ves Hall standing in front of a replica of the Liberty Bell, donated through the California Club by Harriette P. Bryson. Courtesy Leisure World News

\$250 per unit for all resales over 500 units per year. The additional revenue was to be added to Community Facilities Fund.

PCM Staffing

“Leisure World is staffed by 889 PCM employees,” PCM President Edward L. Olsen told United Laguna Hills Mutual members at their first annual meeting on April 22. At that time there were 466 union members who provided services as gardeners, plumbers, painters, electricians, carpenters and irrigators. PCM also employed another 423 non-union staff members and 300 part-time personnel, which included residents who worked as security guards and bus drivers.

Facilities Agreement

Until 1973 the golf course was the property of the Rossmoor Corporation for which GRF paid a \$16,000 a month use fee. After his election to the presidency of GRF, Dr. Strevey, Leisure World Administrator Robert Price and Cortese worked out what became known as the Community Facilities Agreement. With this agreement, the sale of the golf course was consummated on December 31, 1972, at a price of \$2,97 million for the land and facilities.

Community facilities were given a big boost in July when GRF and Rossmoor signed a new Community Facilities Agreement which was expected to generate \$3 million for additional facilities. Rossmoor was in the last phase of construction. Under the agreement, it provided \$3,878 from the sale of each of the 1,052 manors that remained to be built.



Mini-buses, fueled by natural gas, carried 974,000 passengers during 1975, as an increase of 120,000 over 1974. The buses traveled over 505,000 miles over 10 routes that covered all residential areas every half-hour and took passengers to clubhouses and other facilities, shopping, church and to the medical center.

According to the agreement, the funds were to be used to provide for the following: (a) purchase of 5.2 acres for Clubhouse V and construction of the facility, which was still in the planning stages; (b) purchase and development of 10.7 acres across from Clubhouse II [now Gate 16] for outdoor recreation facilities; (c) purchase of 2.62 acres inside Phase IV for the development of 1.8 miles of equestrian trails; (d) construction of a gatehouse for Phase IV; (e) provision for a nine-hole executive golf course in lieu of the lake originally proposed inside Gate 10; and (e) development of a 450-plot garden center, vehicle storage area, maintenance yard and employee parking area behind the stables.

Facilities

The schedule for the new facilities was dependent on new sales. Sales were booming, and GRF approved the following expenditures:

At their May meeting, GRF appropriated \$110,420 for the purchase of the land for Clubhouse V. In May and June, GRF approved an aggregate of \$183,000 to design and construct a building to house a television headend facility owned by the community. The headend facility, a tall antenna, receives TV signals from Los Angeles and San Diego and transmits them through underground cable to residents' homes.

In August, GRF agreed to place first priority on construction of four tennis courts adjacent to the driving range in the 10.7 acre site. At that time there were two tennis courts adjacent to golf starter building. A study determined that the cost to add additional courts in this location was excessive.

In August, the Drop-In Lounge in Clubhouse I welcomed its 10,000th guest and Clubhouse III reopened after six weeks of remodeling. September brought the promise of additional gardens, when GRF approved \$80,000 for a study of a garden center and vehicle storage area.

Throughout the year, as the number of activities grew, the parking problem at some clubhouses worsened. In November, GRF hired a firm to prepare plans for the expansion of parking at Clubhouse II with the addition of a circular driveway.

Golf Course

On March 15, the Recreation Department, in cooperation with the Golf Course Advisory Committee, implemented a new golf reservation procedure. First, the numbers distributed by the starter to establish priority for reservations was discontinued. Instead, golfers were able to make reservations to play golf Monday through Sunday from 8 a.m. to 5p.m. Golfers were be allowed a maximum of four reservations in any 14-day period including those scheduled for men's or women's day. Individuals who exceeded the four reservations in 14-day limit, lost all of their existing reservations and could not make new reservations for an additional 14-days.

In June, in an effort to reduce crowding, GRF raised golf course guest fees from \$5.00 to \$7.00 for 18-holes



Community Relations Director Jerry Murphy, left, held the mike for TV coverage while GRF President Ernest Billman, Library Board Chair Catherine Wright and Administrator Bob Price cut the ribbon. Both men had encouraged and counseled Wright and her associates throughout their crusade for a permanent, modern library.

Courtesy Leisure World News

and from \$3.00 to \$4.00 for 9-holes. At the same meeting GRF appointed a three-man committee to help plan and develop a 9-hole executive golf course adjacent to the Towers in lieu of the originally planned lake.

In November, GRF approved an \$11,000 feasibility study to determine the future needs of the golf facilities. The GRF Golf Committee had cited inadequacies of the existing facilities. Because of the widespread recognition that good golf facilities enhanced property values, the committee and GRF believed that a study should be made to ensure that Leisure World's facilities remained on a par with those in comparable communities.

Library

In March, GRF appropriated \$210,000 for a new library. To enable construction of the facility, the structure adjacent to the first administration building, originally used as a welcome pavilion for prospective buyers and later as the library, was scrapped. The new 4,000-square-foot, \$267,600 building doubled the size of its predecessor and was designed to house 35,000 books.

About six weeks before opening an additional \$17,000 in donations from residents and clubs was raised by the Panhellenic Club for shelving. The new library building opened November 19 with an official ceremony and reception. Miss Wright reported that 1,600 residents visited the library during the first two days of operation.

Neighbors — *As Leisure World grew, so did the business centers surrounding the community.*

MCAS-El Toro

In December, the county Board of Supervisors voted to increase the residential housing ban in the noisy areas surrounding the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. Although 4,692 existing or proposed Leisure World manors were within the new extended line, the supervisors' decision did not affect future construction in the community because the tract maps for planned areas had already been approved. However the effect on the communities in the landing path are still visible today.

Mortuaries

O'Connor Laguna Hills Mortuary, located on Alicia Parkway near Paseo De Valencia, opened on January 17. At the same time, a major controversy focused on the planned construction of McCormick's Mortuary adjacent to Gate 3.

GRF met with mortuary officials while residents gathered over 1,000 signatures against the business.



News Director Rob Merritt took a sip of hot water from his coffee mug and cleared his throat as he waited for the signal light on Camera 1 to flash on. Seconds later he was addressing the Leisure World viewers, filling them in on events of the day. On a typical morning, the Channel 6 news director may have two to three guests scheduled during his 30-minute news broadcast of Leisure World happenings. Pictured above in 1976, Merritt checks the television monitors in the studio's control room at the end of the day.

Courtesy Leisure World News

Eventually, after the Orange County Board of Supervisors rejected an emergency interim zoning ordinance which would have halted mortuary construction, residents filed a suit seeking a temporary injunction. A court approved the injunction, but the residents were unable to post the required \$100,000 bond, the injunction was dissolved and construction proceeded. On November 21, McCormick's Mortuary opened.

Laguna Hills Medical Arts Center

During November, 1976 the ground breaking ceremony earmarked the beginning of the first phase of construction at the \$5 million Laguna Hills Medical Arts Center, located opposite Gate 4. The project covered four acres with 60,000 square feet of leasable space in three separate two-story medical buildings. The first phase was scheduled for occupancy by early 1977, and included medical and dental suites, a pharmacy and a health spa.

Editor — Bob Ring

Opinions expressed by authors in *The Historian* do not necessarily reflect those of the Historical Society of Laguna Woods.



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