

Laguna Woods History Center  
Community Oral History Project  
Recording Log

NARRATOR: James Thorpe  
INTERVIEWER: Jennifer Keil  
VIDEOGRAPHER: Michael Danciu  
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TRANSCRIPT

**ABSTRACT:** James Thorpe was the mayor of San Juan Capistrano. He later became the mayor of Laguna Woods after it was incorporated in the 1990s. This interview covers his political career and votes to begin in local politics. He shared about his contributions to the development of southern Orange County as he served on the OC Planning Commission. He shared about developing South County infrastructures such as water management. James was instrumental in the formation of Saddleback College in 1968. He taught at the college and served as the Dean of Science, Math, Engineering, and Technology. Thorpe shared about his time as a city planner, his time as mayor, and the creation of Leisure World [Laguna Woods] and not Saddleback City. J

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Thorpe moved from the Bay Area to Saddleback back, and he moved to help start the college. His family was from Gilroy. He moved in with a friend in La Habra and shared a place with 14 people.

**Education** - Bob Price as administrator of Saddleback College

Community colleges at the time were all north of Orange County county. Irvine was all open and had no colleges. UCI was just beginning in the 1960s. Community college was free. There was a small registration fee and a seat tax called [Justictution]. It taxed every student who went there. The vote on the bond issue benefited students. It was the highest yes vote on the bond issue. It did more for James Thorpe's reputation and made his career. He became tenured at Saddleback College. He earned two master's degrees. One in political science and the other in mathematics.

## **Politics**

One of the first issues Jim dealt with was the school bond issue. This large voter group prepared his career in local politics. In 1968, the community voted in early March to April regarding the school bond.

## **Leisure World**

Robert Price, Leisure World politician, ran for trustee of Saddleback College and was in constant communication with Thorpe about the community in community college. He started programs in Leisure World. His wife taught the swimming program for saddleback college. She taught the first 25 years of its existence. Thorpe helped staff the recreation department which also helped him establish more connections with the community. He had a chair on the budget committee later on, and he had supporters because of the bond issue.

## **OC Planning Commissioner**

Outside of Saddleback, he was the OC planning commissioner. He took a sabbatical year. 90% of Irvine district was in his district. Some of the issues he faced were people from north assuming the south county is flat. Drainage is a huge factor, similar to conditions of heavy rain season like 2022-2023. Aliso Creek had the possibility of flooding again. Things that helped him understand development and the environment were aerial flyovers and the Irvine Company put him on as planning commissioner. Lots of Orange County was on unstable land, especially in the hills. It was a major challenge in south county. One of the biggest issues he faced as mayor was floods that would wash away mobile homes in San Juan Capistrano. Another issue he faced was air quality. He put an air quality monitor in San Juan Capistrano. Thorpe learned that there were more smoggy days in San Juan than in Anaheim. Winds would blow north from Santa Ana and bring the smog.

## **Laguna Woods**

James is originally from Ohio. He likes to fish. From 93-95, Thorpe lived in Mammoth to fish. He moved back to Laguna Woods so he could run for city council. Thorpe was recruited to form the first city council in Laguna Woods. Laguna Woods had a reputation for one high-rise

building. The Planning Commission was upset about why it was approved. He did not want high-rise buildings to become a trend.

### **Diversity and Arts**

Theater programs at Saddleback would often put him in an elderly man role. Blue Hair group were big supporters of the college drama department. South OC is more than just a place for elderly people. Dance groups, Hawaiian groups, and other organizations helped create diversity. Area became more international. All kinds of museums in O.C. Varies kinds of rock and roll, ethnic dances, and different attitudes toward things.

### **Olympics**

American [Quadcade]. There were synchronized swimmers in 1968 and tried to get into Olympics over the years. Wife had a major part in that and she also taught swimming. Olympic brought James and his wife together. Jerry Brown would end up cutting extracurricular classes like swimming. Men's sports were put back but not women's sports.

### **City Elections**

Bob Ring was a majority force for cityhood and getting citizens to organize. The plane crashes at El Toro was instrumental to the cityhood argument with the county. They were training over an airspace bank. "City could do things for you" How James Thorpe won his election: Cityhood could do things for you during that time. James won mayor narrowly by 200-300 votes because he was involved in historical and agricultural preservation. Landowners started the city council in San Juan Capistrano. They wanted to build a parks and rec commission. North OC did not see why the south needed the parks. Jim Thorpe won his election by knocking on people's doors during the election. No one had shown up at their door before. He would bike from door to door. He believes that this was key in securing a narrow win in the election.

### **Mayor Role**

Jim listened to people and tried to address needs. He was aware of the floods and kept infrastructure running. Citizen's policy- environmental concerns and historical preservation. Afford to keep houses in historical areas. He also offered tax breaks. James provided low-cost housing to moderate priced housing. Hill policy- Did not want people to build on top of hillside in San Juan Capistrano. This was for safety reasons and to preserve natural beauty. James was sued by Glendale Federal for not letting them build on top of hill [golf course]. In 1978 San Juan

is hit by new people running for council to try and overturn the ordinance. San Juan Capistrano never had a city hall. He became part of the Parks and Recreation commission. One rumor was that Jim resigned. That is inaccurate. He served his original term. Top vote getters got three years and the others got one. The city council wanted to move elections to November. Jim highly opposed this. The city elections were usually held in the spring. Elections were moved to November, extended their terms. Jim Thorpe served the term he was elected for, not the new term limit. By making the elections in November, it made them less relevant to higher ranking elections like governor and president.

Overall, this was only a minor divide not a major divide. Original pay for city council was \$75 a month, and there was nothing extra for major.

### **Saddleback City**

Laguna Hills tried to incorporate Leisure World. Awkward new zoning and odd shaped, it failed. Laguna Hills is a different congressional district than Laguna Woods. Lots of gerrymandering. Much of development was not piecemeal. Irvine company and Mission Viejo company did a lot of the development. Taking away airspace from military in Leisure World was mixed. People did not want to be seen as anti-government. One of the first actions of the city council. 57,000 trees in Laguna Woods. Trees too big caused environmental problems. There are historical trees though. Kept Laguna Woods from becoming Beverly Hills.

### **Sewer Board**

Worked on water issues and sewer issues. Lake Mission Viejo had concerns of overflow downstream. Sensors were built to address this.[Built a pipeline to San Juan Creek. Pumped water back to Lake Mission Viejo]. The problem with all the housing was how to deal with the waste. He shared how you solve one problem another one pops up. Things were much more complicated than what was on the surface. Issues get more complex especially with sewer.

### **San Juan Water District**

[Southeast Regional Authority], plant down in Dana Point. Dealt with issues like how much a farmer could grow with how many people that need water. Water rights were the lifeline from all different places. What Jim Thorpe believes can solve the Water issues: Believes in desalination and it is the future to fixing California. He wants a coastal zone 25 to 100 miles of desalination plants. It will return the water to where it belongs.

## **Cultural Heritage Commission**

He dealt with what to preserve in culture. How to deal with businesses that want to use the land.

Investment in the city, not turn down everyone and run them out of town. James Thorpe's wife served on this board. Talked with older residents and looked for compromises.