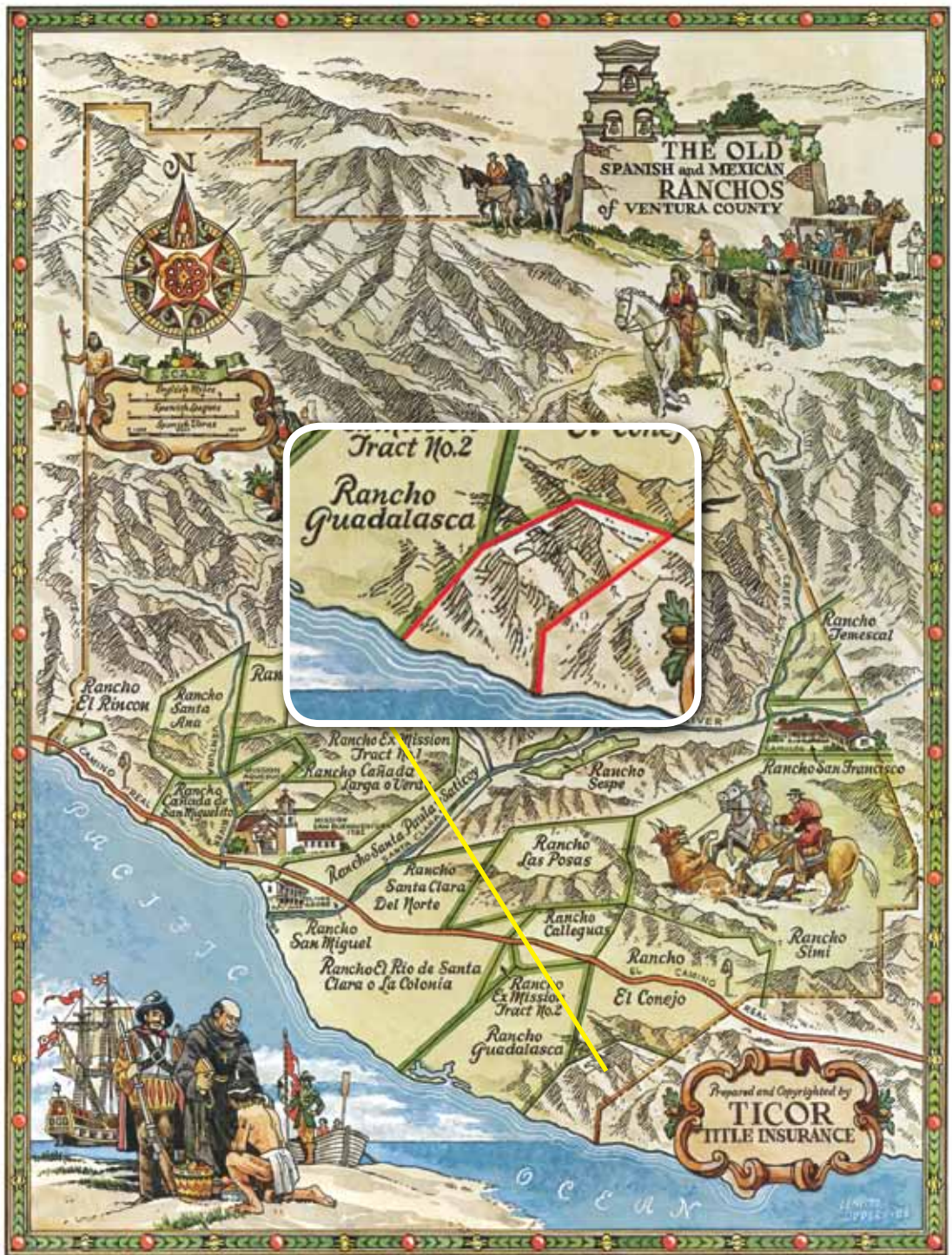


The  
**Journal**  

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of Ventura County History





Rancho map of Ventura County, showing (inset) Public Land between Rancho Guadaluasca to the west and the Ventura/Los Angeles County line on the east, the subject of this issue of the *Journal*.  
 Published by TICOR Title Insurance Co. in 1988, Leavitt Dudley, artist.

— COVER —

Yerba Buena and beyond: looking east from Deer Creek Road to Malibu, 2012. *Courtesy John Keefe*

# “The Big Ranch Fight”

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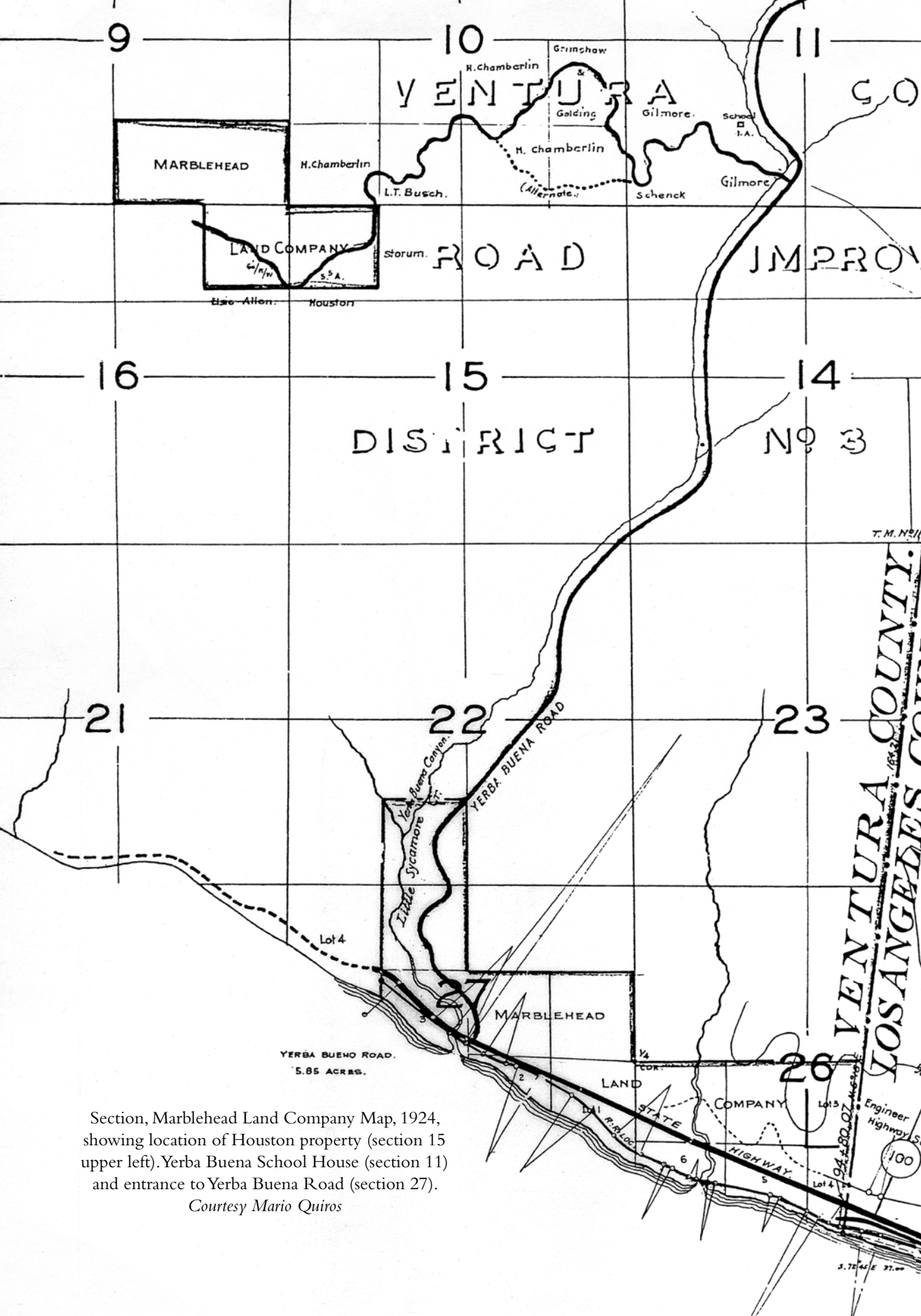
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Section, Marblehead Land Company Map, 1924, showing location of Houston property (section 15 upper left). Yerba Buena School House (section 11) and entrance to Yerba Buena Road (section 27).

*Courtesy Mario Quiros*

“We too are anxious to see those lands settled and improved. It would be far better for us and for everybody else if these disputes had been settled long ago.”

Jerome Madden  
Head of the Southern Pacific Railroad Land Department  
*Ventura Free Press*, January 26, 1900

“My mother who had come from Canada to California to be married, had been raised on a farm in a level country. She always referred to this hill as ‘the Mountain.’ There was no road to it, so she had to go up or come down on horseback.... She consequently felt sorry for anyone who had lived on ‘a mountain.’ In later years, on the ranch where we were raised, there were in the back of us in the Santa Monica Mountains numerous settlers trying to make a living. At one time, during a road dispute, some of these people had no way of getting in or out except with saddle or pack horses. My mother felt great sympathy for them because they lived on ‘the mountain.’”

J.H. Russell  
*Cattle on the Conejo*, 1957

“We don’t have telephones yet and we have to generate our own electricity, but we live a very comfortable life, and wouldn’t trade it for the biggest city on the world. We can tell from television how people in the rest of the world are living. It doesn’t look as though they’re doing so good.”

J. Spurgeon Houston  
*Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1951




“On the Crest of Boney Mountain / Where the parapet breaks / and the world is spread out like a map below.”

## INTRODUCTION

# “The Big Ranch Fight”

## A STORY OF HOMESTEADING IN VENTURA COUNTY

ucked just inside the eastern boundary of Ventura County is a small community nestled in the Santa Monica Mountains inhabited by a hardy and eclectic group of long time residents, movie personalities, ranch hands and even the occasional rock star. Properties here routinely sell in the millions of dollars and are often described as being in “The Malibu.”

But this was not always the case. There was a time—beginning about 1900—when anxious homesteaders, encouraged by favorable governmental legislation and recent court decisions, clambered up the steep terrain in search of a place to put down roots, build a house and cultivate some land; all for the price of the toil it took to improve their property. The area was known as *Yerba Buena*—“Good Herb.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the intent of the Land Act of 1862, passed by a largely Republican congress after the South had seceded from the Union in the Civil War. The earlier spirit of *preemption*—in this case the right to occupy public land first, and pay later (essentially an early form of credit)—was embodied in this act, but with one important twist: if one were willing to file a claim for a piece of surveyed government land, occupy that land, build a house and cultivate a portion of the property—all within five years—that

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the same term for a cove (and later a settlement) in San Francisco Bay, observed by George Vancouver on his visit to the area in 1792. The name is also applied to a land grant in Santa Clara County, and a creek in San Luis Obispo County. See Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 430. Fourth edition revised and enlarged by William Bright.



Madeleine Ruthven, *When Sondelius Came to the Mountain (1934)*. Photograph © Anthony Valois.

property would become yours.<sup>2</sup> Often land patents contained 160 acres, one fourth of a section (a section being one square mile).<sup>3</sup> The Land Act of 1912 reduced the waiting period to three years.

The Land Act of 1862 changed the rate of settlement as the population moved west—especially after the end of the war and with the advent of the continental railroad, completed in 1869—across the Great Plains and to the edge of the continent. By 1934, over 1.6 million homestead applications were processed and more than 270 million acres—10 percent of all U.S. lands—passed into the hands of individuals. The passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 repealed the Homestead Act in the 48 contiguous states,<sup>4</sup> by that time nearly two million people had earned the patent to a piece of land.

Land grants were also made to railroads in the same period, which had a marked impact on potential homestead lands.<sup>5</sup> In 1862 Congress enacted the Pacific Railroad Bill, which empowered the Union Pacific Railroad Company and the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California to “Layout, locate, construct, and maintain railroad and telegraph line and to be the recipients of land grants.” Additionally, this act specified that it did not apply to lands “sold, reserved, or otherwise disposed of by The United States, or to which preemption or homestead claim may have attached

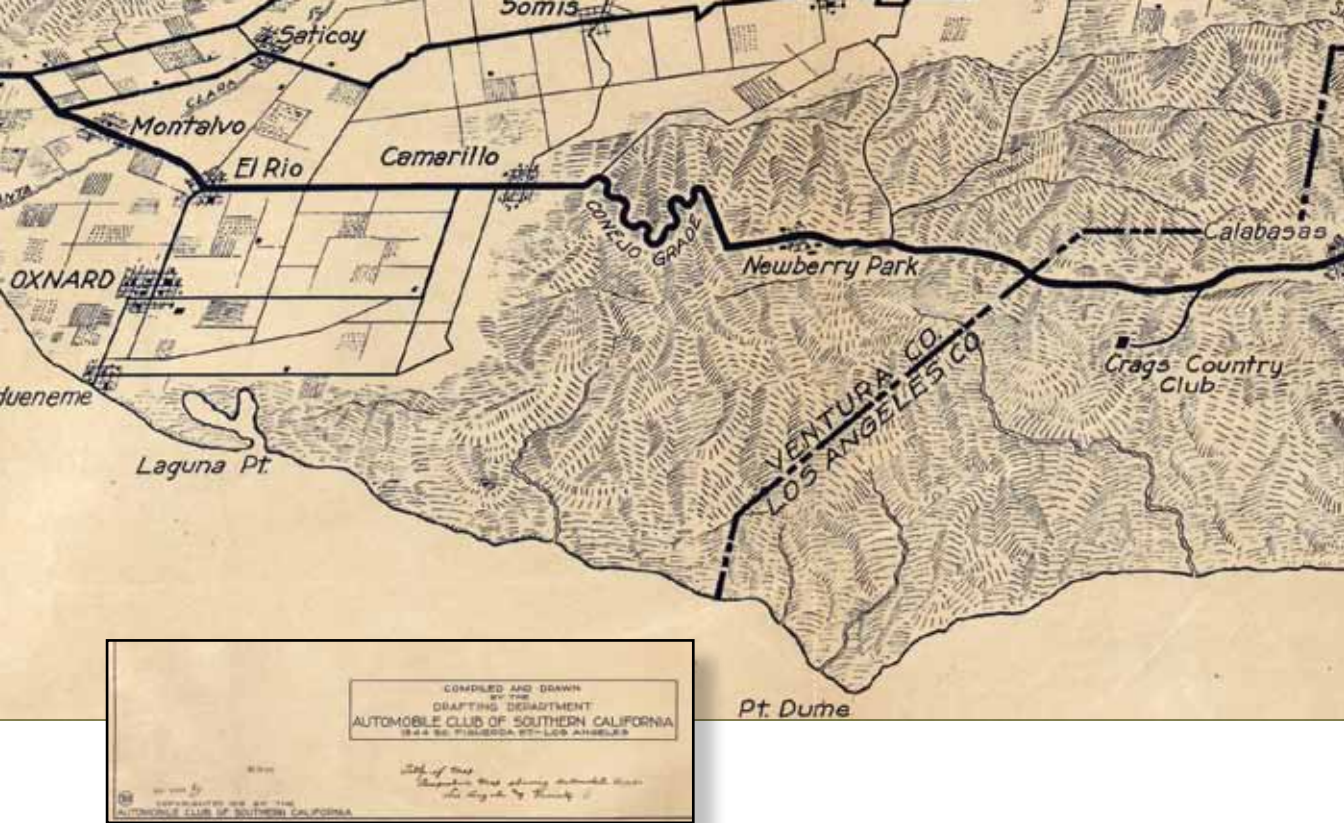
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<sup>2</sup> Lee Ann Potter and Wynell Schamel, “The Homestead Act of 1862,” *Social Education*, vol. 61, no. 6 (October 1997): 359-364.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* A full section was 640 acres; 36 sections formed a township, which was a six-mile square.

<sup>4</sup> Alaska was granted a ten-year extension on land claims. The last individual to take advantage of the Homestead Act was Ken Deardorf, who filed a homestead claim on 80 acres of land on the Stony River in southwestern Alaska. He received his patent in May 1988.

<sup>5</sup> “Land Grants to Railroads,” in W.W. Robinson, *Land in California: The Story of Mission Lands, Ranchos, Squatters, Mining Claims, Railroad Grants, Land Scrip, Homesteads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 147-153.



at the time the line was definitely fixed.”<sup>6</sup> In reality this bill was an impediment to the homesteading of certain public lands on the West Coast.

In the 1880s, prior to any legal authorization to do so, settlers began moving onto government lands west of the Rancho Malibu Topanga Sequit still reserved for the railroads.<sup>7</sup>

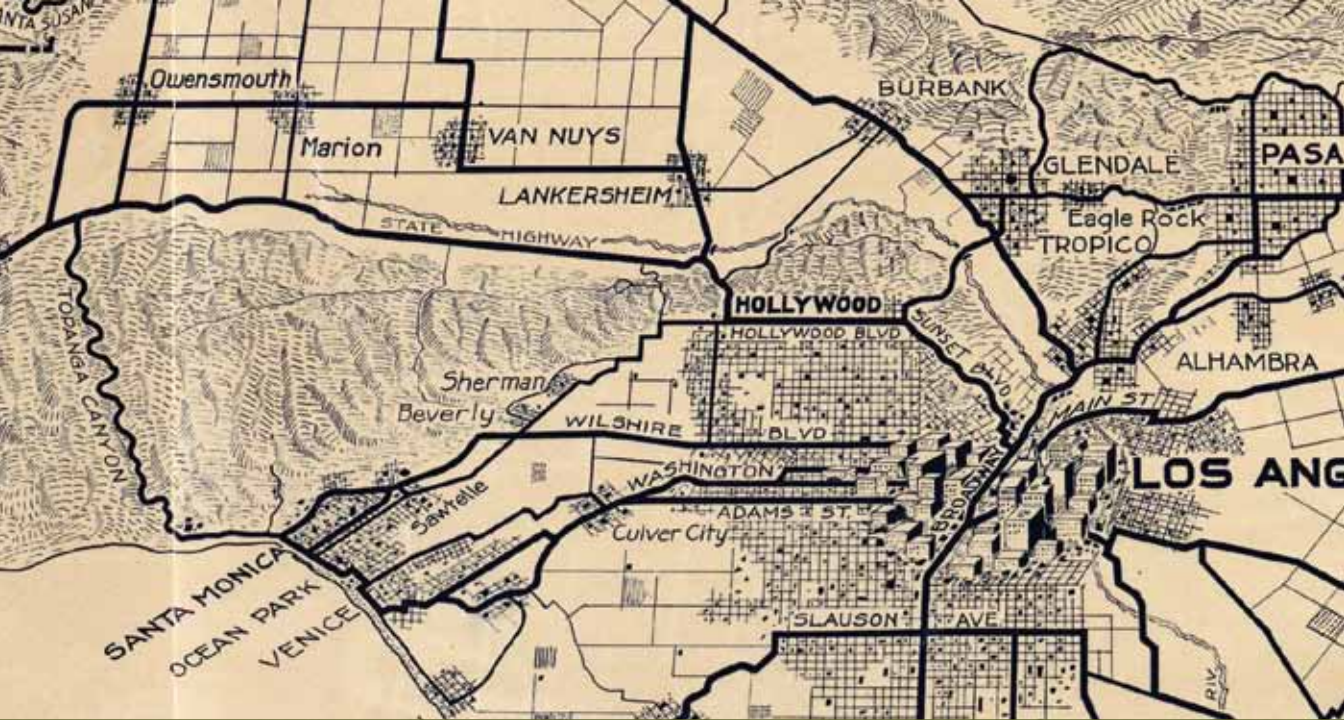
By 1892 four suits—test cases—had been brought against the Southern Pacific Railroad by Joseph H. Call, special council in the United States Circuit Court, Southern District of California “...to determine the title of one and a half million acres of land within the limits of the grant to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company....”<sup>8</sup> In October 1897 the Supreme Court of the United States finally ruled against the Southern Pacific Railroad after years of suits and countersuits, and required the railroad to relinquish title to the land, which by then involved nearly 1,000,000 acres.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>7</sup> Doris Gilliland, “The History of Rancho Malibu.” Master’s Thesis, University of Southern California, 1947, 63. According to the author, the first “settlers” in the area were named Guthrie and Harris. Marion K. Harris would receive patents for land in the area in 1901 and 1904. A resident of Ventura County for over twenty years, he died at the family home in Santa Monica in 1907. See “Passing of a Pioneer,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1907, II8; *Los Angeles Herald*, October 3, 1907, 6.

<sup>8</sup> “Restored Lands,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1892, 8.

<sup>9</sup> “In the Highest Court.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1897, 5.



The road from Alhambra to Yerba Buena, 1915. *Courtesy Automobile Club of Southern California Archives*

In February 1895 Congress had also passed an act that allowed for public lands less than one-quarter section to be made available through the General Land Office for the low rate of \$1.25 per acre.<sup>10</sup>

On December 7, 1898, the Land Office in Los Angeles began to adjudicate titles to land held by claimants, involving a myriad of disputes between purchasers, squatters and homesteaders.<sup>11</sup>

The door to “free” public lands that opened on the West Coast in December 1898 was rapidly closing in the Santa Monica Mountains by the late 1920s. Among the last homesteaders to take advantage of this opportunity were John and Laurretta Houston, who were to carve out their own story under the shadow of Boney Mountain in Ventura County.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “The Poor Man’s Chance,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1895, 11.

<sup>11</sup> “For a Million Acres.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1898, 7.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that homestead land was no longer available in the area did not keep unscrupulous lawyers from offering their services to those hopeful of acquiring property on “Spanish” (most was Mexican) grant land, property *never* included in the Homestead Act. “More than 500 men and women in Southern California have filed upon Spanish grants in Southern California during the last three years. Every application has been rejected. . . approximately \$500,000 has been wrung from gullible ‘investors.’” See “Malibu Ranch ‘Homesteaders’ Tell of Paying Fees for Right to File Claims,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1926, A22. On one particular day, 30 entries prompted by “professional land locators” were filed for property already owned by Mrs. Rindge. See “Homestead Claimants Raid Ranch,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1926, 16.

## “THE BIG RANCH FIGHT”

In 1955 the Historical Society of Southern California published an article by historian Jo Hindman<sup>13</sup> entitled “The Big Ranch Fight,” based on interviews with Laretta Houston conducted by Mrs. Hindman during the years 1952–1955.<sup>14</sup>

Ostensibly “The Big Ranch Fight” is about the owners of Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, May Knight Rindge and her husband Frederick Hastings Rindge, and their struggle to maintain control over their property despite the efforts of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the California Department of Highways and an increasingly curious and aggressive public. Mr. and Mrs. Rindge did, after all, own twenty-six miles of pristine beachfront property in Southern California.<sup>15</sup>

But it is also a story of remarkable courage and endurance by a young couple from Alhambra who left the relative luxury of a growing Southern California town<sup>16</sup> for an extremely challenging chance at a better life on public lands in the westernmost section of the Santa Monica Mountains—in Ventura County.

Ms. Hindman’s article was “rediscovered” by Research Library staff at the Museum of Ventura County while working on background material for an article about the Hueneme, Malibu & Port Los Angeles Railway by historian David Myrick entitled “The Determined Mrs. Rindge and Her Legendary Railroad,” published by the Ventura County Historical Society in 1996.<sup>17</sup> For some time the idea of reprinting this important article for a new generation of readers had been under consideration. Prompted by a recent visit to

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<sup>13</sup> Josephine Long Hindman, b. November 19, 1910, d. January 1989, Powell Butte, Crook County, Oregon. From the 1930s–1950s the author lived in Inglewood, California with her husband, Edward E. Hindman (1903–1979).

<sup>14</sup> Jo Hindman, “The Big Ranch Fight,” *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly*, vol. XXXVII, no. 1 (March 1955): 56–68. Hindman authored at least two additional articles for the Society between the years 1954–1956 under her own name: the first entitled “Tweedy,” about a desert mountain rancho in northern Los Angeles County homesteaded by Robert Tweedy, published in vol. XXXVI, no. 3 (September 1954): 214–224; and a second entitled “Grace Freeman Howland,” concerning the daughter of Daniel Freeman and her association with Rancho Centinela, Los Angeles County, published in vol. XXXVIII, no. 3 (September 1956): 255–262. A third article entitled “Daniel Freeman” was authored by one “Flint Hindman,” perhaps a *nom de plume*, published in vol. XXXIII, no. 3: 197–212. All three articles share the common theme of the right and benefits of private property ownership. Author Hindman also wrote numerous articles and several books about the “dangers” of urban development and the use of eminent domain.

<sup>15</sup> As this article is about to go to press we learn of the death of Rhoda–May Adamson Dallas, daughter of Rhoda Agatha Rindge and Merritt Adamson, and granddaughter to Frederick H. Rindge and May Rindge, pioneer Malibu family who had purchased the rancho in 1892. She was 94. See *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 2011, AA5.

<sup>16</sup> The City of Alhambra was incorporated July 11, 1903, but the town had been laid out in 1874 for founder Benjamin D. “Don Benito” Wilson. See: Gudde, *California Place Names*, 8; Leonard and Dale Pitt, *Los Angeles A to Z: An Encyclopedia of the City and County* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>17</sup> David Myrick, “The Determined Mrs. Rindge and Her Legendary Railroad,” *Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3 (spring 1996): 9–37. A highly esteemed Western railroad historian and author of 17 books and approximately 140 articles, Mr. Myrick passed away on September 24, 2011 in Santa Barbara, age 93. See *Santa Barbara News Press*, September 28, 2011.

the area, enquiries were sent to the original publisher, and we are delighted the Historical Society of Southern California has generously granted permission to reprint “The Big Ranch Fight.” For this privilege we offer our sincere thanks.

### ABOUT THE TEXT

The body of the original article is here presented as it first appeared, word for word. We have, however, added information to the notes section where it was deemed appropriate. Jo Hindman’s original article contained three notes; these comments have been identified as “author’s note,” to differentiate from the newer additions. Also, the original article appeared without illustration. On pages opposite the text we have added photographs and maps contemporary to the text, some of which have only come to light in the last few months. In her Afterword, Linda Valois describes ongoing efforts by the National Park Service, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, to preserve the history of the Yerba Buena District. To supplement Mrs. Hindman’s article, we have added an Appendix that lists every person who lived in the Yerba Buena District in 1920 as represented in the U.S. Federal Census—the year John and Laretta Houston were finally granted their land patent. For each of the individuals on this list, who are gathered together in “enumeration” households, we have attempted to determine four pieces of additional information, contained in [brackets]: birth date and location, marriage date, date(s) of land patent(s) in the Yerba Buena District; death date and location. Wherever possible we have cited the source of our findings. In this way we have attempted to give an historical “snapshot” of the mountain community where the Houstons resided. Finally, we have included an Epilogue found in a book of poetry, *Sondelius Came to the Mountains*, written by Madeleine Ruthven as an homage to the area in 1934.

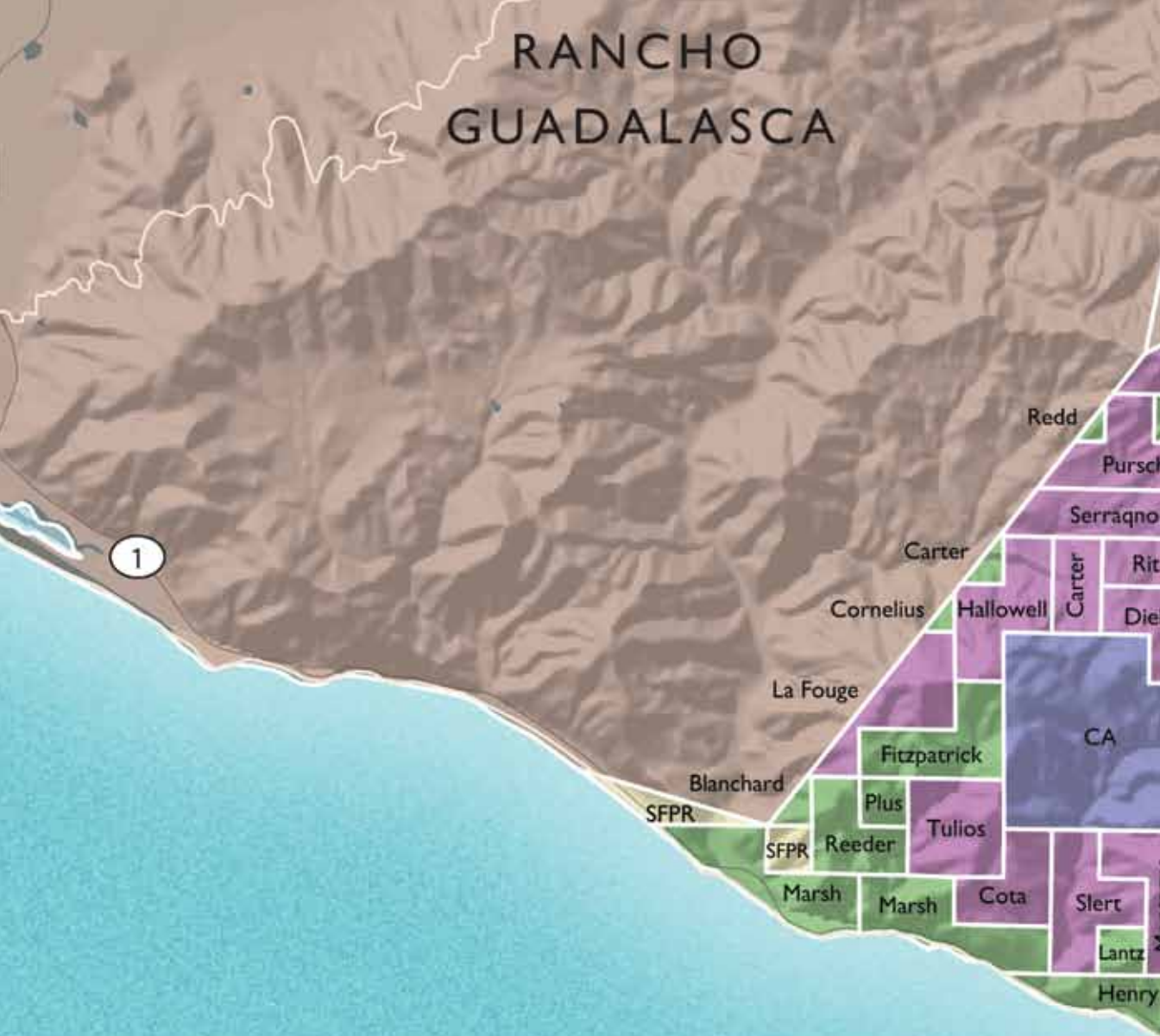
Not only did John and Laretta Houston complete the arduous task of establishing a successful homestead in the mountains, they stayed long enough to raise two children, build two homes and leave a story well worth the retelling.

Charles N. Johnson  
Chair, Editorial Committee  
*Journal of Ventura County History*



Aerial view of Point Mugu and Boney Ridge (upper left), looking east, 1970 (pn 33182).

# RANCHO GUADALASCA



*Section, Original Land Patents Poster: Historic Land Patents of the Santa Monica Mountains and Vicinity. Courtesy National Park Service*

North





March, 1955  
Vol. XXXVII — No. 1

*The*  
*Historical Society of Southern California*  
**QUARTERLY**

**The City's Honored Guest**



**GENERAL OF THE ARMY DOUGLAS MACARTHUR**  
See "Los Angeles Pays Tribute to General Douglas MacArthur"—Page 3

Cover of the March 1955 issue of the *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* containing Jo Hindman's article "The Big Ranch Fight."

# The Big Ranch Fight<sup>18</sup>

By Jo Hindman



LONG THE COAST HIGHWAY where fences and boundary lines are still touchy matters, they call it “the big ranch fight.” Outbursts of friction between owners of the big ranch, Topanga Malibu Sequit, and homesteaders of smaller ranches adjacent have passed into the tranquility of Southern California history. But to a slim athletically erect grandmother still resident in the Malibu country, the trouble is recalled as vividly as the day she arrived in the middle of it.

Lauretta Houston, city girl, cuddled her two-month-old baby<sup>19</sup> a few miles off El Camino Real near Triunfo<sup>20</sup> in 1917 and gazed at the towering island slopes of the Santa Monica mountains, also known as the Malibu mountains, that would be their future home. Her young husband, Spurgeon, was saddling the two horses for the last leg of the journey that had begun the day before yesterday out of Alhambra in the San Gabriel valley.

The three of them had set out by wagon, an umbrella perched over the baby’s basket to shade the infant’s eyes from bright October sunlight. First night, they camped at Calabasas, a small outpost community; second night on the Johnson<sup>21</sup> ranch near Triunfo, and now the last lap of the trip to be finished over steep trails on horseback would carry them across Bony Ridge into the lofty heart of the Malibu Mountains.

In that early day, the mountainous area was already filled with pioneer homesteaders and no land parcels were available through homesteading. For some time, the young Houston couple had been searching for land and now felt fortunate in having obtained a homestead by transfer at the Los Angeles land office. The forty acre plot was yielded by another couple who could not endure the rough mountain life that at times was almost unbearable, especially by women.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Based in part on interviews during 1952-55 with the pioneer Malibu ranch-homesteader, Mrs. Lauretta Houston. Author’s note.

<sup>19</sup> Geneva Martha Houston, b. 2 July 1917, Los Angeles County.

<sup>20</sup> Approximately two miles SE of Thousand Oaks; originally the site was named *El Triunfo de Jesus* (The Triumph of Jesus) by Juan Crespi, a member of the Portolá expedition of 1770. The area is now known as Russell Valley. By the 1850s the name had been shortened to *EL Triunfo*. See Gudde, *California Place Names*, 400. A post office was established on April 27, 1915 with the name as *Triunfo*, but the name was changed to *Triunfo* by the time the Houstons arrived in the fall of 1917. See Ventura County Historical Society *Quarterly*, vol. XVII, no. 2 (winter 1972): “Triunfo.”

<sup>21</sup> Almost certainly the ranch of Benjamin F. Johnson (he received his land patent in 1919), near present day intersection of Highway 101 and Highway 23 south (Westlake Blvd.).

<sup>22</sup> The original homesteaders were Albert Lee Kidd and wife (name unknown). They lasted only two years on the property, but did build a house, for which Spurgeon Houston purportedly paid him \$100 when he moved in; this was the original “homestead” house. The Houstons would live in this house until 1924, when they moved into a new house they had built nearby. After World War II, materials from a barracks at Hueneme were added to the original cabin. See Thomas J. Maxwell, G.V. Pesce & Associates, “Interview With Lauretta Houston And Her Son Larry: March 27, 1992.” Mr. Kidd appears only once in the Ventura County Directory, for 1916. A draft registration card for one Albert Lee Kidd living in the Yerba Buena District of Ventura County was submitted in 1917, indicating he was a native of Wisconsin, b. 1892. See *World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* database at Ancestry.com.



Main Street in Alhambra looking west, Los Angeles, 1903,  
a scene familiar to the Houstons before they moved to the mountains.  
*Courtesy USC Libraries Special Collections, Doheny Memorial Library, Los Angeles*



View of Main Street in Alhambra looking east during winter, Los Angeles, 1903.  
*Courtesy USC Libraries Special Collections, Doheny Memorial Library, Los Angeles*

The Houstons were confident. Spurgeon's father<sup>23</sup> and brother, Robert, had settled in the Malibu in 1910 and Spurgeon knew the mountains first-hand. Laretta knew them from a strictly transient point of view, her only visit to the family ranch on the Ventura County side having been accomplished in comparative ease over the private road on the ocean-facing Rindge property known as Ranch Topanga Malibu.

The most direct route from Alhambra was inland over El Camino Real to the trail crossing Bony Ridge. By innumerable pack trips over this trail, young Spurgeon Houston had carried baby chicks, gangly calves, home-canned fruits and provisions to lay the groundwork for their new venture in mountain ranching. Now, Laretta and the baby were the last load.

By coming into the mountains in October, the young couple planned to beat the rains. The chicks and calves had gotten a good start on pasturage on the outskirts of Alhambra, and four childhood years on a farm had taught Laretta a thing or two. She was confident and starry-eyed as she mounted the saddle horse, carefully shielding the baby's tender skin from the mountain sun.

The towering Malibu peaks hug the coastline between Santa Monica and Point Mugu and once on top, Laretta was told by her husband, you didn't come down except on rare occasions. At the time, there were only three open routes out of the mountains: over the Broome ranch to Oxnard, over the Lewis ranch to Camarillo, and over Bony Ridge into the Johnson ranch near Triunfo on El Camino Real, known later as the Ventura-Hollywood route. The Rindge ranch road had been closed to the public on the very day the Houstons signed for their homestead.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the route to Santa Monica depended on the ocean tides because homesteaders, although prohibited from trespassing on Rindge property, were free to make their way along the surf.

After hours on horseback with the baby daughter in her arms, Laretta was struck with foreboding of the rugged life ahead, for in spite of her shading hand, the baby's tender face was reddening with sunburn. At one of the stops, a sympathetic farm woman, pitying the infant's plight, climbed on a chair in her cabin, bringing from its hiding place on a splintery beam a dab of cold cream. Obviously hoarded for some previous occasion, it was nevertheless handed over for the baby's relief. Everywhere along the way, through well-tilled ranches perched on high meadows, past solitary little homes, people were rushing out to greet them with good wishes and arms outstretched to hold the tiny baby. Warm-heartedness such as this later was to help the young Houstons through.

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<sup>23</sup> William Houston and his wife Martha received their homestead patent for property in Yerba Buena in April 1917; Robert Houston, apparently, never applied for a land patent in the area.

<sup>24</sup> On April 5, 1902 Frederick H. Rindge purchased two pieces of property, both owned by some of the earliest homesteaders in the area, Marion K. Harris—(1901, see footnote no. 7)—and Jasper and Nellie Thomason (1902). Together these purchases extended the western border of the Marblehead Land Company's real estate holdings to include access to Little Sycamore Canyon and Yerba Buena Road. (See County of Ventura, *Deed Book 83*, pages 86 (Harris) and 84 (Thomason). Ownership of these two parcels would later allow Mrs. Rindge to restrict access to Yerba Buena from the coast.



Yerba Buena surveyors. *Courtesy National Park Service, Marlene Spykerman Collection*



Yerba Buena Road, 1929. *Courtesy E.P. Foster Library, Ventura*

They had their troubles at once. “It seemed as though we were being tried,” Mrs. Houston recalls. “It didn’t rain until February, and water and crops were absolute necessities that figured in our plans. We lost nearly everything. All but two of our calves died. Later, people told us that they had given the ‘Houstons just three months.’ But we were determined to stick it out and we did.”

The plucky newcomers won themselves a place in the Malibu among the older homesteaders by demonstrating such veteran talents as shoeing horses, ploughing a deep furrow, canning fruit, churning butter and making light bread.

The need to earn money drove the men of the Malibu into the cities for work. They left the mountains after the dry-farm crops were put in; the women and children remained to care for the stock and run the farms. Commenting upon the similarity of her pioneer experiences with those of older homesteaders, Mrs. Houston said, “We were probably the poorest. We were the last ones in as homesteaders, and not so well fixed.<sup>25</sup> The older pioneers were fairly comfortable having hauled furniture and heavier articles to their homes over the private Rindge road, the road that was closed before we came in. But even so, for a long time, I was the only woman who had water piped to the house. The rest carried theirs in buckets. Even when we lived in our first cabin—it was just a 10 x 12 ft. room—I had water piped from the spring.”

The Houstons built their second ranch home with their own hands. They dragged native stone for the massive fireplace and laid a spring-to-house water system. Water was pumped from a spring to two storage tanks, running to the house by gravity flow. “It strikes me oddly now, but we never had a sink in the first cabin. We were probably so busy getting the ranch on its feet that we didn’t have time to think of such a convenience.”

Later, the Houstons bought 160 acres of Dell Flats<sup>26</sup> bearing the name of a former owner and called their property Marblehead Ranch because of an outcropping of native stone.<sup>27</sup> The cattle association registered their brand as the Half-Circle-H.

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<sup>25</sup> There is some question as to who was actually “last in” as a homesteader in the Santa Monica Mountains. If the newspapers of the period are to be believed, the last homestead, 120 acres in all, was registered to Mrs. Mary La Fougé. See “Mountain Land All Taken: Last Homestead in Santa Monica Range to Be Proved This Year, Records Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1925, A8. The location of this homestead was identified as “Goat Buttes,” which is in Los Angeles County. See Kate A. Hall, “Beauties Seen by Hikers,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1920, V114. Federal land patent records indicate the last homesteader in the Yerba Buena area may have actually been one Albert R. Cornelius, 1928 (see Epilogue note for poet Madeleine Ruthven’s veiled literary homage to Cornelius); or in the general area, one R.C. Ray in 1931 and 1935.

<sup>26</sup> This probably refers to property owned by Frank Diehl, one of the earliest homesteaders in the district, who arrived prior to 1900. This same area is also identified on some maps as “Deals Flat.”

<sup>27</sup> It is highly unlikely that the Houstons actually named their property Marblehead Ranch, as this was the name of the company established in 1921 by Frederick Rindge, owner of the neighboring Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, to operate his ranch, and named after Marblehead, Mass. where the Rindge family had a vacation home, that is unless this name was applied *informally*, mocking their wealthy neighbors to the east. See Luanne Pfeiler, ed., *The Malibu Story*. . . (Malibu: The Malibu Lagoon Museum, 1985), 22. In addition to owning property that allowed and/or denied coastal access to Yerba Buena, the Marblehead Land Company also held property just north of the Houston property. See *Map of the Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit and Other Properties of the Marblehead Land Company, Los Angeles County, Calif.*, 1924.



Rare photograph of Laurretta and John Houston seated next to their fireplace, original homestead house.

*Courtesy Luanne Houston*



The young Houston children and friend L-R: unidentified, Lawrence Houston, Geneva Houston c1927.

*Courtesy Luanne Houston*

Malibu homesteaders first used open hearth log fires, wood stoves and ranges. After the roads came in, butane was the next type of fuel. Electricity came last. Free-flowing springs gave way to deep wells that insured irrigation for the crops.

By law of the Homestead Act, a homesteader was required to live on the land at least seven months out of every year. One hundred sixty acres were allowed to each couple. For every forty acres claimed, a homesteader was obliged to clear five acres. The time limit on the improvement had been dropped from five years to three years at the time the Houstons began homesteading. When all requirements were met, the homesteader “proved up” by posting a legal advertisement in an official newspaper and by appearing with a witness to testify before the proper land authorities. Absolute honesty was the rule. In case of misrepresentation, the homesteader was subject to contest that might lead to total loss of his land and property rights.

### ***Philosophy of the Homesteaders***

It was the accepted attitude that whoever worked the hardest had the most. One family worked seven days a week and was the most prosperous. Another family head was shiftless and easy-going; his wife and children suffered. Yet, if one’s chickens were laying better than the neighbors, you sent over your surplus eggs. Same with the butter. “It was the only way we people could have survived in the mountains,” said Mrs. Houston. “Absolute self-reliance was an essential, yet when circumstances caused anyone bad luck, the rest of us were there with immediate help.”

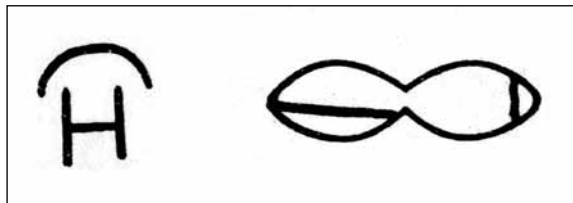
Lauretta Houston was determined that her family of four—Geneva and Laurence were the children—would not “go seedy.” Sunday remained a day of rest, not a work day. Although she was the first woman to “bob” her hair and to wear khaki breeches and leggings while riding horseback, and was frowned upon by the older women for so doing, she did not allow her daughter to run around in overalls all the time, as many of the mountain girls did. “However,” she said, “I tried not to insist on my ideas to the point of working a hardship on my family.”

### ***Entertainment***

Four neighbor women paid a welcoming call on young Lauretta Houston the first week, inviting the new couple to the Friday night dance at the one-room schoolhouse in Little Sycamore Canyon. The Houstons had given up dancing when they joined their church in Alhambra, but pondering upon the women’s invitation, Lauretta reconsidered. “They told me dancing helped them forget their troubles,” she recalled. “Of which there were many. So Spurgeon and I talked it over and decided that we couldn’t live among them and set ourselves apart with a holier-than-thou attitude.” A vivacious pose of hands folded on breast accompanied Mrs. Houston’s remark. “We went to that first dance and continued going to all of them. Sometimes we took our phonograph and records for the ‘round’ dances. Other times, we had fiddle and guitar, especially for the quadrilles and square dances. Cakes, sandwiches, and coffee were served. We left a supply of cups in the schoolhouse.”



Spurgeon Houston (right) chats with neighbor Maarten Dewitt west of Houston Road; behind, area known as “Deals flat.” *Courtesy Luanne Sullivan*



Earmark and brand, “Half-Circle-H” registered to John S. Houston.

## **Education**

Largest attendance of pupils recorded at the Yerba Buena school was thirty-two, but attendance once dropped to just a single pupil. The teacher usually boarded at Mrs. Nora Mundell's, sometimes at the Richter place. Children either had to walk or ride horses to school. The distance was too far for little Geneva Houston to accomplish alone at kindergarten age, and the distance so far, that Laretta took the two children to Sonoma where they remained until her son was in the first grade. After returning to the Malibu, Laretta looked into the future, saw that at high school age her children would be "out on a limb" because the school was not annexed to a high school district.

Daughter of a school teacher herself,<sup>28</sup> Laretta was determined that her children would have the education available to all California children. She initiated and led the successful crusade that resulted in a union high school district and a school bus to bring the mountain children in to school.<sup>29</sup> Geneva and Larry Houston were the first children from the Malibu mountains to attend high school in Oxnard, Ventura County, nineteen miles away.<sup>30</sup> Formerly, mountain children simply quit school after the eighth grade and went to work on the farms.

## **Health**

"That was the most marvelous thing," exclaimed Mrs. Houston in reflecting upon the lack of need for medical attention among the mountain folk. "Nothing serious happened among us. Even the dreaded 'flu' of the first World War passed us by. The one big worry, though, was the rattlesnake bite. Yet in my entire time in the Malibu, I have heard of only three bites and one fatality, and that one was unnecessary."

Here she related the story of a hiker who, with companions that also had been drinking heavily, came across a coiled rattler. "Watch and I'll show you how to kill a snake," boasted the drunk. He took a running leap, jumped on the reptile and attempted to stomp it to death. There was a hole worn in the man's shoe sole. Whether the snake actually bit him, or whether he crushed the poison-bearing fangs is not certain. It is a fact that he died.

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<sup>28</sup> Laretta Houston, one of eight children, was the daughter of Marguerite (nee Becker, b. February 1867, Wisconsin) and Harlow Walling (b. 1847, New York). See 1900 U.S. Federal Census.

<sup>29</sup> While Laretta Houston was undeniably involved in the education of Yerba Buena children, a school district was already in place by 1914-1915. See *Ventura Free Press*, April 24, 1914: "A new school district has been found, or rather has found itself, or is trying to do so, or would like to be found. The new district has named itself Yerba Buena. It might be described as a thousand miles from nowhere...." The Yerba Buena School district united with Ocean View School District in 1936, with the latter assuming all debts and responsibilities of the mountain school. Because it failed to maintain an average of five or more pupils, it was "absorbed" by the Ocean View School District in 1941. In 1952 the school was sold to the A.F. Gillmore Company, and the "Yerba Buena School was no more." See Ralph Alamillo, "A Historical Study of Ocean View School District," Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1960; *Ventura County Book of Deeds*, Bk. 66, pg. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Geneva Houston graduated from Oxnard Union High School in 1935, and her brother Lawrence followed in 1939. See *Oxnard Daily Courier*, June 14, 1935, p. 1 (Geneva), *Cardinal and Gold*, Oxnard Union High School, vol. 39 (June 7, 1939): 22 (Lawrence).



The combined student body of Yerba Buena School, 1915. 1st row, L-R: Margaret Mundell, Hazel Mundell, Antoinette Hoffman, Gladys Richter, Wallace Richter; 2nd row, L-R: Marion Mundell, Agatha Venneman, Johnny Fitzpatrick, Hattie Richter, Frances Richter; 3rd row: Buddy Mundell. *Courtesy National Park Service, Marlene Spykerman Collection*



Yerba Buena School in 1918. Students, L-R: 1. Frances Richter, 2. Hattie Richter, 3. Buddy Mundell, 4. Dora Mepham, 5. Marion Mundell, 6. Edrie Tanner, 7. Fay Tanner, 8. Bessie Tanner, 9. Mildred Fitzpatrick, 10. Johnny Fitzpatrick, 11. Madeline Tanner, 12. R.M. Kincher (teacher), 13. Kathleen Parks, 14. Elma West Hill, 15. Hazel Mundell, 16. Wallace Richter. *Courtesy National Park Service, Marlene Spykerman Collection*

**OFFICE SEEKERS  
WILL TAKE  
NOTICE**

**New Isolated School District  
In County Makes an Ap-  
peal for Help—Many  
Pupils and Voters**

County Superintendent of Schools Reynolds has a problem on his hands and when the office-seekers hear of it they, too, will get busy and no doubt try and help the superintendent solve it.

A new school district has been found, or rather has found itself, or is trying to do so, or would like to be found.

The new district has named itself "Yerba Buena." It might be described as a thousand miles from nowhere, but it is not. Still it is a long way from the center of things in this county. So far away is it that there is no way of getting to it except by way of another county, and its postoffice is at Sawtelle. The only road into the district is by way of that place.

The district is in the extreme south-eastern corner of this county and not far removed from the Malibu ranch and joining on to the Conejo and the Guadaluces.

It embraces a stretch of country in that section used largely as a range for stock. There are said to be fifty people in there and not a one has as yet been registered, though all are voters. Just think of such a virgin field for the office-seeker.

There is no road in by way of this county and the postoffice is, as has been said, in another county. But the people there want a school for their children and they want a teacher. The other day they got together and held an election and selected trustees, but it was not legal because no one was

A new school district is established "...a thousand miles from nowhere." *Ventura Free-Press*, April 24, 1914.

## News

The county library served the area. A librarian who was met at an appointed time and place was brought into the mountains once every three months furnishing books that were ordered, or bringing those she thought would appeal.

The first radio, a Gilfillan battery set, was brought into the Malibu mountains by the Houstons in 1924.

Anyone who hiked through the mountains brought news to the homesteads he touched and from there it was passed along. But letters remained the most important means of communication. Mrs. Houston estimates that she corresponded with forty or fifty people during the early years. The letters were big and fat, contained detailed accounts of happenings in the “outer” world, and newspaper clippings, as well, for newspapers did not come to the mailboxes at the post office in Triunfo.

Lauretta Houston volunteered more often than any other woman to take the monthly horseback trip to Triunfo for the mail. Medicine, candy for the children, needles, thread, yeast cakes, tobacco, and small articles that would fit into saddle bags were brought back by riders on this trip for the mail. It was made by horseback, one day out, one day back, with primitive camping equipment, including blanket and bed rolls, for there was no shelter unless you stopped in the little house that a man named Johnson made available to travelers crossing his ranch.

The yearly trip to Camarillo and Oxnard for the “big buy” was made through the Jack Broome ranch in the Point Mugu area to the northwest. According to legend, Point Mugu got its name from the Indians who imitated in their dialect the sob and moan of waves splashing in and out of the caves beneath the point. In turn, the Indians of the area were known as the Mugu tribe.

Archaeological finds in 1932 disclosed the Broome ranch as a former favorite Indian camping area. Workers of the Los Angeles Museum<sup>31</sup> uncovered an Indian campsite, credited to a Chumash tribe, that dates back to Cabrillo’s time. The largest and most elaborate of the pottery bowls unearthed (about twenty inches across) were decorated with shells and hard stones imbedded in asphalt, indicating a rather advanced type of Indian civilization. Across these buried artifacts in the early 1900s rode the Malibu mountain homesteaders on their yearly trip to town.

Bringing their prized mountain pink beans,<sup>32</sup> a yearly harvest, they also descended by trail to the inland outlet of Big Sycamore canyon on the Lewis ranch (present site of Camarillo State Hospital)<sup>33</sup> where their wagons—spring wagons, stone-boats, and buckboards—remained parked the year round in the “wagon yard.” The Malibu mountain beans, because of their better-cooking properties and delicious flavor sold

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<sup>31</sup> Now known as the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Archaeologist Dr. R.F. Van Vaulkenburgen oversaw excavation on the Broome Ranch for seven months before turning his attention to Santa Cruz Island. See “Party to Seek Chumash Data,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1932, 10.

<sup>32</sup> According to Linda Valois, National Park Service, Santa Monica Recreation Area, local resident Ernie Serrano recalled they grew Pinto beans in the mountains. Email correspondence January 30, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Now California State University, Channel Islands, which opened fall 2002. See “Opening Day,” *Ventura Star Free-Press*, August 16, 2002.



Above and below: Students in front of the second Yerba Buena School House, 1929. Students who attended the school that year were: Walter M. Partridge (8th Grade); Bernice Houston, Robert K. Etz, Violet Meek (7th Grade); Geneva Houston (6th Grade); Kenneth Houston, Thelma Meek (5th Grade); Lawrence Houston (4th Grade); Mildred Meek (3rd Grade); Inez H. Beavers, teacher. *Courtesy E.P. Foster Library, Ventura*



quickly to merchants in Oxnard and Camarillo. Murphy & Weil,<sup>34</sup> storekeepers of Oxnard, always stocked these beans, the major product of the mountain farms.

To round out the succulent mountaineer diet of wild deer, quail and dove, the homesteaders bought a year's supply of the heavier staples including flour, coffee and sugar. To "dress up and go out for a visit, or to the dentist," occurred only on these "big buy" visits or one other special time during the year. Otherwise, the homesteaders remained at home in the mountains.

Becoming acquainted as she delivered the monthly mail, Laretta Houston talked with people disturbed by the smouldering ranch fight that was whipping into open conflict. A contributing factor was the quarantine blocking egress to Santa Monica over the Rindge ranch along the coastline. On August 13, 1917, at midnight, the owners of Rancho Malibu had clamped down restrictions concerning right-of-way over their rangeland and sent out riders with shotguns to enforce the order.

At Rocky Point, boulders jugged into the sea. If the tide was out,<sup>35</sup> homesteaders could get their wagons by without trespassing. If the tide was in, they had to wait, sometimes camp overnight on the beach and not get home until a day later. Elsewhere they were met with roads closed by wired gates and posted with "no trespassing" signs. Tempers flared on both sides.

Rancho Malibu, in its pristine state, was granted under the seal of the King of Spain, to José Bartolome Tapia in 1804. Heirs of Tapia owned the wave-washed rancho until January 24, 1848, when for \$200 cash, they released its numerous canyons, peaks, meadows, and free-flowing springs to vineyardist Leon Victor Prudhomme of Los Angeles and Cucamonga. Added consideration in the Tapia price was \$200 payable in groceries and wines. Terms of the sale described the ranch as bounded by the high mountains on the north, "on the south by the Pacific Ocean, on the east by Rancho Santa Monica, and on the west by the mouth of the River San Buenaventura."<sup>36</sup> In all, 13,315 acres. At the time of the "ranch fight," the Rindge Rancho Malibu ended northwest at Little Sycamore Canyon, down-coast from Point Mugu.

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<sup>34</sup> Proprietors C.J. Murphy and Samuel Weill offered "groceries, kitchenware and men's furnishings" from their place of business at 121-127 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Oxnard, near the intersection of Saviers Road (Oxnard Blvd.) and Fifth Street. See Ventura County Directory for 1931, 394; Sanborn Fire Insurance map, Oxnard, October 1929, sheet 15.

<sup>35</sup> Reminiscent of the barrier tides, but not related to the "ranch fight," is the recollection of Mrs. Anna Begue de Packman, secretary of the Historical Society [of Southern California], who remembers that one of her aunts acquired title to a "sobrante" in the Santa Monica mountains. "Sobrante" is the term that described the small, title-less patches of land that resulted from U. S. Land Patent surveys correcting the sometimes less accurate Mexican-early-California measurements made by *reatas* that often stretched or shrank. Mrs. De Packman's aunt, "if the tides allowed" brought out of the mountain ranch to her relatives in Los Angeles the first watermelons of the season, as well as other sun-ripened farm produce. Author's note.

<sup>36</sup> *The Romance of the Ranchos*, Palmer Conner, Title Insurance and Trust Company, Los Angeles. Author's note.



*Cardinal and Gold*, Oxnard Union  
High School, 1939

**HOUSTON, LAURENCE SPURGEON**  
Ontario, California, July 12, 1919. Football 4.



Ocean View School c1918 (pn 29206)

In the nineteenth century while the big ranch was passing from Prudhomme to Don Mateo Keller,<sup>37</sup> and from Keller to May K. and Frederick H. Rindge,<sup>38</sup> the adjacent public domain lay virtually unnoticed. At the turn of the century, homesteaders began moving in, filing and claiming title to certain sections of the mountainous area adjacent to Rancho Malibu.<sup>39</sup> The “ranch fight” began brewing.

For years, the Rindge ranch and the vast Broome ranch had been grazing cattle on the public lands. Tensions formed as the lands were gradually removed from free public use by land-holding rights of the homesteaders.

Mrs. Houston has pointed out the distinction between the terms “homesteader” and “settler” as used colloquially in the Malibu section. A homesteader, by fulfilling certain requirements contingent to the Homestead Act, legally acquired title to his land. A settler, or “squatter,” attempted to appropriate land by usage or tenancy alone, without advancing any sort of consideration. Except for a feeble attempt or two by unidentified persons who attempted to “squat” on a fringe of the Mugu coastland, there were no “squatters” in the Malibu mountains, according to Mrs. Houston.

The Rindge family suffered disappointment in 1915 by decision of a riparian rights suit, *May K. Rindge vs. Craig's Land Company*, concerning waters of Malibu creek. Based on the premise that no land is entitled to double use as riparian and appropriation, the judge ruled that the Rindges never acquired any appropriator's right to the use of any water in Malibu creek.

Meanwhile, relations between the Rindges and some of their homesteading neighbors continued to grow more strained, heightened by misunderstandings and annoyances on both sides that failed peaceful settlement. The Rindges who had for some time allowed the hemmed-in homesteaders to use their ranch roads, complained that the privilege was abused and cited nuisances such as brush fires, cattle and sheep rustling. The homesteaders answered that they were unjustly accused.

After the Rindges clamped down on their roads, the homesteaders secured an injunction. The gates were torn open by county authorities under instruction of the court, but were immediately shut by the Rindges. The homesteaders, willing to build their own road, petitioned.

The year 1916 ushered in twin lawsuits. *Rindges vs. F.W. Joyner*, road commissioner, was filed in Los Angeles County to restrain “him” from entering upon the road from La Chuza Canyon to the Ventura County line, and *People vs. Rindge* echoed the friction between the Rindge family and the homesteaders in Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Keller (c1811-1881) purchased the property from Prudhomme on November 5, 1857 for \$1,400, or roughly ten cents an acre. See W.W. Robinson and Lawrence Clark Powell, *The Malibu: Southern California's Famous Rancho: Its Romantic History and Present Charm* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1958), 16.

<sup>38</sup> The Rindges purchased the property in 1891-1892 in two conveyances from Henry W. Keller, Matthew's son: in 1891 May K. Rindge purchased 1,856.75 acres in the eastern portion of the rancho. Mr. Rindge purchased the remaining acreage of the rancho on April 19, 1892. The total purchase price was approximately \$300,000. See Gilliland, “The History of Malibu Rancho,” 1947, 44.

<sup>39</sup> The first homesteader in the Yerba Buena District appears to have been Frank Diehl, whose land patent was recorded May 1901.



Above and below: photographs taken by the Ventura County Bookmobile librarian.  
*Courtesy E.P. Foster Library, Ventura*



Objections to a county road being cut through the Rindge property were set forth by Mrs. May K. Rindge in a formal statement issued through the *Los Angeles Times*, dated May 14, 1916: “There is constant danger of brush fires—a menace heightened by the presence of campers. One such fire in 1903 caused \$100,000 damage.”<sup>40</sup>

Years later, Mrs. Rindge’s apprehension concerning the vulnerability of the brush-covered Malibu to fire was borne out when the biggest burn in history started on the Ventura boulevard side on Hallowe’en Eve, 1933, and swept across peaks to the sea.

Lauretta Houston remembers the late Mrs. May K. Rindge as rather stocky, “on the heavy side,” and sensibly dressed in serviceable clothes when she rode her ranges in automobile. Heavy khaki skirts (sometimes the divided culotte type), khaki shirt and a bolero with leather or buckskin fringe was her typical range outfit. Her long hair was combed up under a soft, floppy felt hat. Her eyes were brown and steady and there was “no backing down when she made up her mind.” She wore a brace of revolvers in a holster and although brusque in manner at times, Mrs. Rindge was often pleasant and friendly.

On one occasion, the grown son of a homesteader was bringing his baby into the mountains to visit the grandparents. He had driven his wagon to the county line and stopped, for at that time although Mrs. Rindge was allowing homesteaders to walk across her property, she would not allow vehicles to pass. The ranch-woman, who was riding her range, stopped to admire the baby and inquire about the well-being of the young man’s parents.

The Rindge family occupied a majestic castle-like home sprawled on a hilltop overlooking the sea. Their pride for the magnificent property that they tried to keep intact is sympathetically understood by many people. The Santa Monica public library contains a book written by Frederick Rindge poetically describing the untouched beauty of the fog-cloaked, sea-washed ranch empire both he and his wife so deeply loved.<sup>41</sup>

Of exceptionable ability, May K. Rindge at one time was the only California woman president of a railroad, and one of three women so listed nationally up to 1916. The railway company she headed was incorporated about 1901, laid fifteen miles of track on Rancho Malibu and acquired right-of-way for a remaining forty miles of rail necessary to connect the Pacific Electric at Port Los Angeles, north of Santa Monica, with the Ventura County Railway Company at Hueneme in Ventura County. Facing reorganization because of failure to comply with the original plans of construction filed with the State Railroad Commission, the private railroad stated in its application, “Since 1908 it has been wholly impracticable for said corporation to raise sufficient funds to complete and put in full operation at least five additional miles of road each year.” The entire venture finally collapsed, and even today, there is no railway along that portion of the California coast.

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<sup>40</sup> “Rindge Estate Defines Stand.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1916, II2.

<sup>41</sup> *Happy Days in Southern California* (Cambridge, Mass. and Los Angeles: The Author, 1898).

During the “ranch fight,” Mrs. Rindge tried to explain her desire to protect her property by writing in an open letter to The Los Angeles Times: “It has been no uncommon thing for us to lose thirty per cent to fifty per cent of our increase of stock in a season. Moreover, the persons thus turned loose upon us by the pendency of that injunction did not stop at mere thievery, but often shocked us by their wanton cruelty.

“On one occasion, near one of the favorite camping places on our property used by those thus passing to and fro, our *vaqueros* heard a cow bawling for her calf. Search was made and the calf, only two weeks old, was found tied with a baling wire to our line fence, and before tying it, the wanton miscreants had cut its ears close to its head, pierced both eyes and cut off its tail.

“It is against such an act as this, and many like it, that we wish to guard our sensibilities as well as our property.”<sup>42</sup>

Mrs. Rindge then tallied the disappearance of 250 head of cattle during a period from an April rodeo until an October round-up; “inside of two months, 400 pigs vanished from out of our alfalfa fields near our Suma (Zuma) Canyon headquarters without leaving a trace . . . In conclusion,” wrote Mrs. Rindge, “I may say that it has always been a mystery to me why these Ventura County settlers should seek this more than forty miles outlet from their claims, when the County of Ventura, at very much less expense, could give them good roads by which they could reach towns and cities of that county in from one-third to one-half of the distance they are compelled to travel when they cross our ranch.

“As to the settlers in Los Angeles county, their lands lie between the Malibu rancho on the south and the State highway on the north (now Ventura-Hollywood, U.S. Highway 101) giving them a shorter route out.”

This letter indicates that provocations of a serious nature were occurring on Rindge property. Homesteaders, being owners of livestock and acreage themselves, would be the persons most likely to respect the property rights of a neighbor. As to the butchering of the calf, Laretta Houston said she honestly didn’t know any of the homesteaders who would have done it. She believes that the homesteaders were accused of a lot of mischief they did not do. Transient campers often roamed the property of the Rindges and the homesteaders too, according to Mrs. Houston.

However, it was common knowledge that a certain homesteader allowed his horses to feed off Rindge haystacks; when he ran into trouble, it was conceded generally by the homesteaders that he had it coming.

The Houston family had no “differences” with the Rindges but were always on good terms. “Grandpa Houston’s property adjoined the Rindge ranch near the present Yerba Buena road,” Mrs. Houston remarked.

Eventually, the homesteaders on the Ventura County side put up money for construction of a dirt road. The County subsequently took over the road and improved it.

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<sup>42</sup> “Rindge Estate Defines Stand.” Los Angeles *Times*, May 14, 1916, II2.

The final legal pill offered to the pioneer Rindge family occurred in 1929 when approximately twenty miles of Alternate State Highway 101, commonly known as the “Coast” highway, was cut through Rancho Malibu and thrown open to the public. The magnificent Rindge home, today operated as Serra Retreat by the Franciscan order, is visible from the highway crossing at Malibu Creek. The prolonged legal fight ended finally as a victory for the *right of eminent domain*. In a final indomitable gesture, Mrs. Rindge erected a little green frame house at the junction of Yerba Buena Road and the highway in which she stationed an elderly couple as caretakers to see that no one trespassed from the highway on to her rangeland.

Today, the little shack, repainted, stands adjacent to a small café at the mouth of Little Sycamore canyon.<sup>43</sup> A waitress in the café who lived in the little house in 1952 relates that old-timers told her that, if she looked closely, she’d find bullet holes in the wooden framework behind the plywood walls. Such as it is, there is no recorded instance of an actual death in the bitterly worded, vividly remembered “ranch fight.”

Now, almost a half century later, paved roads lead into the fog-shrouded heights where homesteaders once followed paths beaten out of antelope and deer trails. Illumination from kerosene lamps and warmth from hand-laid native stone hearths have been substituted by quicker butane and electricity. The Houston’s [sic] radio, itself a pioneer, is now outmoded and replaced by more powerful sets and by television.

Parts of vast Rancho Malibu, kept intact longer than most of the Spanish land grants, are being sold in lot-sized parcels as seaside business and residential sites. An expansion boom is shaping in Malibu village on the highway. Most of the hard-won homesteads have likewise changed hands—the Henry Mundel property is now owned by Earl Gilmore,<sup>44</sup> the oil man, and John Fitzpatrick’s hilltop place was bought by Bill Boyd of Hopalong Cassidy fame who built a tile-topped ranch palace only to sell it

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<sup>43</sup> This site is now occupied by Neptune’s Net, a popular restaurant. This business was originally established in the mid 1950s as a Texaco gas station and adjoining restaurant by Eastman Nixon Jacobs (b. July 19, 1902, Colorado–d. June 21, 1987, Ventura), a brilliant aerodynamicist who worked for NASA’s Langley Research Center in Virginia from the 1920s until he retired at the age of 42 in 1944. After retiring, Jacobs settled down on the Malibu ranch with his mother, Alice Nixon Jacobs, who had purchased the property the same year. Although Jacobs named the business *Panorama Pacific*, it was known by locals as “Jake’s Diner.” After a confrontation with an armed patron at the restaurant, Jacobs became disenchanted with the business and instead turned his attention to building airplanes, steam engines, boats and telescopes. He leased the business to a succession of individuals, including Betty Jean Beeson, then wife of Lawrence Houston, in the 1960s. Dolly Seay bought the business in 1974, and sold to Michelle and Chong Lee in 1991. From interviews with Eastman Jacobs’ son, John S. Jacobs, December 9, 2011 at Neptune’s Net, and Luanne Sullivan, daughter of Lawrence Houston, at her home on December 2, 2011. See also Veronique de Turenne, “Roadside Fish Joint Offers the Flavor of Beachside Lore,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Earl Bell (“E.B.”) Gillmore (1897–1964), grandson of Arthur Fremont Gillmore (1850–1918)—founder of A.F. Gillmore Company—took over the company in 1921, and is credited with “inventing the self-serve gas station by creating ‘Gas-A-Terra’ at 3<sup>rd</sup> & Fairfax” in Los Angeles. The firm is also credited with creation of the Farmers Market (1934), Pan Pacific Auditorium (1935), Gillmore Drive-In movie theatre (1948), and Gillmore Commercial Savings Bank (1955). See Leonard Pitt, *Los Angeles A to Z*, 174.

to the Morrisons.<sup>45</sup> The stone house and windmill of the Richters are the property of Ann Creamer, daughter of the pioneer Chamberlains.<sup>46</sup> Many pioneer names, like La Fouge<sup>47</sup> and the Lanes<sup>48</sup> of Circle X,<sup>49</sup> have been erased from the mailboxes that came as an improvement over the monthly horseback trip for mail. Some names, like Decker<sup>50</sup> for whom Decker road and canyon is [sic] named, and Cotharin,<sup>51</sup> a road name, have obtained extended existence.

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<sup>45</sup> Boyd purchased a 40-acre parcel in Yerba Buena Canyon in January 1933 from William A. and Frances Steeb, who operated the Malibu Trading Post at Trancas Beach, and who had purchased the property only two years earlier. Boyd sold his ranch in the 1940s to raise “needed funds” for his own film company. After a series of short-term ownerships, the property was purchased by film and television actor Duncan Renaldo in 1956. In 1961 Renaldo sold the property to Arnold and Genevieve “Jerry” Johnson, then owners of the Lazy J summer camp in Canoga Park. The camp was moved to the Malibu property in 1964. Arnold Johnson died in 1983; the camp operated until 2009, the year after the death of Jerry Johnson. See *Historic Resources Report*, [address omitted] *Cotharin Road, Malibu, CA* (Santa Paula: San Buenaventura Research Associates, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Los Angeles industrialist Henry Chamberlain (b. June 4, 1889, Goshen, Va.) served as the chairman of the board of Los Angeles Steel Casting Co., until he retired in 1946. After the death of his first wife, Catherine Smith Chamberlain, he made his home in the California Club in Los Angeles; he later married Irene Armor. He later lived in the Yerba Buena District. Mrs. Ann Creamer was a daughter from his marriage to Catherine Smith Chamberlain. He died October 9, 1954 in Oxnard. See obituary *Oxnard Press-Courier*, October 11, 1954: 3.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph and Mary La Fouge.

<sup>48</sup> Leroy and Olive Lane.

<sup>49</sup> In 1949 the Exchange Club of Los Angeles created the Circle X Ranch Foundation to purchase land on Yerba Buena Road to build a camp for children. In 1951 the Boy Scouts of America obtained a 99-year lease from the Circle X Ranch Foundation. In 1979 the property was officially deeded to the Boy Scouts of America. The property was sold to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority in 1987. The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area obtained ownership in 1989. Owners of the property before the Circle X Ranch Foundation were: Leroy and Olive Lane, who received their land patent in June 1919; Julia Brown Strode (1927, see below); Henry and Catherine S. Chamberlain and Charles R. and Elizabeth Parker Baird in 1928; Gilbert D. Ballantine in 1930; Roger S. Watson in 1939; actor Donald Crisp and screen writer Jane Murfin in 1939; and Frank E. and Elise M. Dine and Newton A. and Carolyn D. Abrahams in 1945. The Lanes possibly lost their land to the California Bank since there was an Assignment of Mortgage in 1927, executed by Julia Brown Strode. See Keith Monroe, *Near and Different: The Story of Circle X Ranch* (S.l.: Circle X Foundation, 1976?) 10–15, 38. See U.S. Land Patent no. 686059 (Lane); County of Ventura, *Deed Book* Instrument no. 870029348 (MRCA); no. 89169609 (SMMNRA); *Deed Book* 205, pg. 435 (Baird/Chamberlain); *Deed Book* 317, pg. 57 (Ballantine); *Deed Book* 601, pg. 609 (Watson); *Deed Book* 603, pg. 594 (Crisp/Murfin); *Deed Book* 605, pg. 270 (Crisp/Murfin); *Deed Book* 714, pg. 294 (Dine/Abrahams); *Deed Book* 155, pg. 215 (Lane).

<sup>50</sup> Members of the Decker family had settled in Encinal Canyon by 1885. See Gilliland, “The History of Malibu,” 1947, 68. Later, land patents in the area (all Los Angeles County) were issued to: Charles M. Decker, 1901, 1908; Marion Decker 1901, 1904; Ernest F. Decker, 1910; James A. Decker, 1912.

<sup>51</sup> On November 7, 1931 Mary La Fouge sold property in the Yerba Buena District to Edith E. Cotharin, a native of Michigan. Edith Cotharin, b. September 22, 1871, died in Los Angeles County on June 2, 1959, age 87. On December 3, 1931 an Assignment of Right of Way agreement was provided to Edith’s husband, Frank E. Cotharin & Et ux. The 1930 Federal Census finds Edith and Frank, and their two children, Norma and Jack, in Los Angeles. In 1936 Jack Cotharin graduated from Fairfax High School in Los Angeles.

Spurgeon and Laretta Houston are moving into their third ranch home that commands a peerless two-toned view of blue sky and sea massively framed by sheer-dropping cliffs. The plucky determination of their youth has, and still is bringing satisfying returns. Through circumstances of time, selling, and passing of older neighbors, these two—once the “last in”—are now the last of the Malibu homesteaders, on the Ventura County side, remaining. They occupy the gratifying position of being still “in.”

### ***About the Author:***

Jo Hindman is a native Californian, nationally known as a writer, editor, syndicated columnist, and as the former West Coast Editor of *The American Mercury* (New York). A graduate in business administration, University of Southern California, a student at U.S.C.'s Graduate School of Business Administration, a member of professional and honorary organizations, a holder of responsible positions in business and industry, Jo Hindman maintains a keen interest in civic and national affairs and steadfastly upholds the principles of American competitive private enterprise.

She is the recipient of the Betsy Ross Award (1964), conferred by the Freedom Club of Los Angeles; secretary, national executive committee of The Liberty Amendment Committee, U.S.A.; commentator, “Plain Talk,” Radio KTYM Inglewood, a program sponsored by Southern California Friends of SCORPA (Statewide Committee on Regional Plan Areas), a group that resists Metro regional government. She is nationally known as a syndicated newspaper columnist and as the author of *Terrible 1313 Revisited*.

Written with a bold and accurate pen, Jo Hindman's articles have appeared in a score of national magazines including *The Freeman*, *Christian Economics*, *Human Events*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *National Republic*, and *Vital Speeches*. Additionally, she has contributed to the *Quarterly* of the Historical Society of Southern California and to the *Journal of the West*.

Of pioneer stock established generations ago by forebears who sought freedom in the young America, Jo Hindman believes that the keystone of abundance is the right of every person to own and control private property and the fruits of his labor. To destroy this right in the United States by any method is to reduce America to economic and spiritual rubble.

Jo Hindman believes that truth is immutable and eternal, that the brilliant concept of limited government which forbids encroachments upon human freedom is critically endangered by the creeping controls of collectivistic World Government Law and its national component, Metropolitan Government, the domesticated version of United Nations Treaty Law, and that loyal Americans will give place to no power—domestic or foreign—that would destroy the sovereign United States of America.

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Biographical information about author Jo Hindman as found on the dust jacket of one of her books. *Courtesy Caxton Printers*



Ernest Serrano being interviewed by Linda Valois, November 2004; Serrano Valley in background. *Courtesy National Park Service*



Mildred (Meek) Decker and Lawrence Houston beneath Boney Ridge, April 2002. *Courtesy National Park Service*

Jo Hindman captured not only the struggles of the Rindge family but also the story of homesteaders like Lauretta and Spurgeon Houston of the Yerba Buena District. Lauretta and Spurgeon remained in the mountains until their house burned down in 1957 because of a propane leak.<sup>52</sup> They moved to Oxnard and joined the list of those that had left the mountains. What happened to the other homesteaders? Who were the Lanes, the La Fougues or the Cotharins? Why did they come? Why did they leave? What was their life like in the mountains?

Since 1978, when the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area was established to protect the natural and cultural resources in the mountains, cultural resources staff and volunteers have been interviewing descendents of homesteaders and settlers of the Santa Monica Mountains. Homestead patents and legal documents are easy to acquire, but these documents do not tell the story of the challenges the homesteaders faced like extreme weather, water shortages, loneliness, emergencies, interactions with wild animals, and communication and transportation limitations. Capturing and preserving the history of these mountain dwellers is limited by the difficulty of locating people to interview. Most of the families that homesteaded sold their properties and moved off the mountains.

For the history of the Yerba Buena District, National Park Service staff interviewed Larry Houston, Mildred [Meek] Decker, Ernie Serrano, Louis Sanchez, Rock West, Fred Venneman, Deanne Joy, Mary Martin and Duke Martin to capture their stories and experiences. Mary Botsford Taylor, Edward La Fougue, Bonnie Etz, Catherine [Silveira] Rivers, Charleen Botsford, and Marlene Spykerman shared photographs and information regarding family members. Through these interviews we learned more about these homesteaders. Fred Venneman recalled that Olive and Roy Lanes were producing whisky from corn mash when they lived in the mountains, but eventually moved to Orange County where Roy worked in the orchard industry. The Vennemans moved from Yerba Buena District to Topanga and stayed there for many years.

One of the many challenges of living in such a remote area was handling emergencies due to the distance from medical services. Fred Venneman remembered an incident where his father raced on horseback over the Broome Ranch to Ventura with little Bobby Colclessor because a fuse had blown up in Bobby's hand. Mildred Decker recalled when a young boy named Billy was bitten by a rattlesnake. Her grandfather rushed the boy down the hill to where the Yerba Buena Road construction crew was working and someone from the crew drove Billy to a hospital.

Oral interviews highlight characteristics of people that written documents could never convey. Larry Houston mentioned one teacher coming to school covered with blood from skinning the animals he trapped before classes. Larry remembers Mary La Fougue riding everywhere in the mountains on an ass. Catherine Rivers shared that her brother Robert Silveira was a very close friend with Larry Houston, and enjoyed hunting and dancing at the weekly dances at the Yerba Buena District School.

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<sup>52</sup> According to Luanne Sullivan, the Houston family celebrated Christmas in the new house in 1956, and the house burned down shortly thereafter.

Before the days of paved roads, homesteaders traveled by horseback, wagons or sleds. In a video interview with Larry Houston and Mildred Decker, we heard stories of how Larry's parents traveled across the Broome Ranch into Serrano Valley by wagon, then parked the wagon and transferred their supplies onto a horse-drawn sled to climb out of Serrano Valley. Larry showed us exactly where these sled roads scaled the sides of the valley. Mildred had a similar story of her father hauling building supplies through Carlisle Canyon by wagon and then horse-drawn sled to rise out of the canyon.

These interview tapes are stored at the park's research museum and are available by appointment for researchers to review. Some tapes have been transcribed, but there are many that are only available on audiotape. The park hopes there are many more people who remember either living in the mountains as children or hearing stories from their parents. We hope people have passed on their stories and photographs of their years in the mountains or else another layer of California history will have been lost. Park staff identified 457 homesteads within its boundaries. If anyone has stories, photographs, letters, diaries or other information relating to early homesteaders or settlers from the Santa Monica Mountains please call (805) 370-2301 to share these stories so they can be preserved and passed on to future generations.

Linda Valois  
National Park Service  
Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area



Linda Valois, Mildred (Meek) Decker and Lawrence Houston overlooking Serrano Valley, April 2002. *Courtesy National Park Service*



Eastman Nixon Jacobs stands proudly in front of his Panorama Pacific gas station and restaurant in the 1950s, later to be known as Neptune's Net.

*Courtesy John S. Jacobs*



Dan Sykerman working at Texaco station, 1957, current location of Neptune's Net.

*Courtesy National Park Service, Marlene Sykerman Collection*



## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance in the creation of this issue of the *Journal*. It did, in fact, take a village.

Special thanks go to: **Luanne Sullivan**, daughter of Laurence Houston and granddaughter of Laretta and John S. Houston, for sharing her family photographs, personal recollections and for calling to our attention the video of the 2003 Reunion of the Yerba Buena School at the Circle X Ranch; **Linda Valois**, National Park Service, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, for generously sharing information about Yerba Buena collected over the past decade; and **Tony Valois**, National Park Service, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, for sharing his remarkable image of Boney Ridge.

We are also indebted to the following: **John Foster**, archaeologist, for sharing his insight into the remarkable history of the Yerba Buena property once owned by Tony Duquette; **Linsey Gonzales**, publishing assistant, Caxton Press, Caldwell, Idaho for supplying bibliographical and biographical information about the elusive author Jo Hindman; **Suzanne Guldemann**, *Malibu Surfside News*, for her enthusiastic support of this project, and for rekindling interest in Madeleine Ruthven in her column; **John S. Jacobs**, Tehachapi, son of Eastman Nixon Jacobs, founder of Panorama Pacific, later known as Neptune's Net, for sharing family records and photographs, and for helping us to get it right. **Dennis Munoz**, for providing valuable information about the Mephram family; **Bernice Ortega**, vice president, Alhambra Historical Society, Inc. for her assistance in locating information about Laretta and John Houston prior to their arrival in the Yerba Buena District; **Megan Peters**, museum intern, for her help in reconfiguring database information about homesteaders in the Yerba Buena District to determine the order of their arrival; **Diane Sambrano**, president, Centinela Valley Historical Society for her help in locating information about Jo Hindman; **Mitch Stone** and **Judy Triem**, principals, San Buenaventura Research Associates, for sharing their research on the Fitzpatrick/Schenck/Steeb/Boyd/Reynaldo/Johnson property on Cotharin Road.

And of course the staff of the Museum Research Library, notably **John Keefe**, **Cheri Brant**, **Deedee Busch**, **Barbara Dupree**, **Jim Holden**, **Harriet McNamara**, **Betty Matson**, **Teddi Morris**, **Colin Pitt**, **Barbara Topping** and **Janice Turner**, for efforts truly above and beyond the call; also Museum Docents **Alberta Word** and **Dotty Wheeler** for locating and sharing photographs of the Yerba Buena School, 1929, taken by librarians who drove the Ventura County Bookmobile to the far reaches of the County.

## Yerba Buena District in 1920

### The United States Federal Census<sup>53</sup>

**Fred L. Carter:** 43, b. [March 13, 1876] Minnesota [homestead patents August 5, 1920, March 1, 1922; d. May 21, 1963, Los Angeles County]<sup>54</sup>

**[John] Spurgeon Houston**<sup>55</sup> (Lauretta): 23, b. [February 17, 1893, Chino] Calif. [m. Lauretta December 13, 1917, Alhambra; homestead patents, December 15, 1920, September 19, 1923; d. April 27, 1971, Oxnard]<sup>56</sup>

**Lauretta [Florine] [Walling] Houston (Spurgeon):** 22, b. [August 24, 1897, Garner] Iowa [d. May 30, 1994, Oxnard, age 96]<sup>57</sup>

**Geneva A[ddie Martha] Houston [later Canton]** (daughter): 2 3/12, b. [July 21, 1917] Calif. [d. February 27, 2008, Thurston, Washington State]

**Lawrence Spurgeon Houston** (son): 3/12, b. [July 12, 1919, Ontario] Calif. [graduated Oxnard Union High School, June 7, 1939; m. Betty Jean Beeson June 5, 1940; d. February 11, 2004]<sup>58</sup>

**Robert E. Houston** (Belle): 32, b. [c1888] Calif. [d. December 1976]<sup>59</sup>

**Belle A. Houston** (Robert): 28, b. [c1892] Ohio

**Bernice Houston** (daughter): 5 7/12, b. [c1915] Calif.

**Kenneth Houston** (son): 3 1/12, b. [c1917] Calif.

**William Houston** (Martha): 73 [or 69] b. [March 27, 1851, Red River Texas, homestead patent April 9, 1917; d. April 3, 1925, Alhambra, Calif., age 74]<sup>60</sup>

**Martha S. Houston** (William): 63, b. [c1857] Arkansas [d. August 17, 1937]<sup>61</sup>

**Joseph La Fougé**<sup>62</sup> (Mary): 44, b. [c1876] Kansas [homestead patent February 18, 1922 (with Mary); d. October 3, 1921, Santa Monica]<sup>63</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Order of names as found in the original federal census of 1920. Information in [brackets] not found in census, but located elsewhere; birth, marriage and death dates not in original census, but obtained from a variety of (sometimes conflicting) online and print sources here cited.

<sup>54</sup> California Death Index, 1940-1997.

<sup>55</sup> Listed as "Lawrence E. Huston" in 1920 U.S. Federal Census.

<sup>56</sup> Obituary, Oxnard *Press-Courier*, April 28, 1971.

<sup>57</sup> Obituary, Ventura County *Star-Free Press*, June 2, 1994, A4. Mrs. Houston was, among a number of associations, a member of the Ventura County Historical Society.

<sup>58</sup> Obituary, Ventura County *Star-Free Press*, February 26, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Ancestry.com, per Olsen Johnson.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Listed in the census as "Latouge." Land patent records confirm "La Fougé."

<sup>63</sup> Mary La Fougé, *Final Certificate of Homestead*, file no. 033311, November 10, 1921.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

FOURTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES

STATE California COUNTY Yerba Buena TOWNSHIP OR OTHER DIVISION OF COUNTY Yerba Buena Precinct NAME OF INSTITUTION X

[Insert name of institution, if any, and address the lives on which the census was made. See instructions.]

PLACE OF ABODE	NAME of each person whose place of abode on January 1, 1920, was in this family. Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any. Exclude every person living on January 1, 1920. Omit children born since January 1, 1920.				RELATION.	SEX	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION				CITIZENSHIP.			EDUCATION.				Race
							Color or race.	Age at last birth.	Single, married, widowed, or divorced.	Year of immigration, if foreign born.	Registered or alien.	If naturalized, date of naturalization.	Attended school within year, whether regular or irregular.	Washer able to read and write.	Washer able to write.			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	X	1	1	Carter Fred E.	Head	M	W	43	S									W
2	FM	2	2	Houston Lawrence	Head	M	W	24	M									Cal
3				- Lauretta	wife	F	W	22	M									Cal
4				- Geneva A.	daughter	F	W	2 1/2	S									Cal
5				- Lawrence E.	son	M	W	4 1/2	S									Cal
6	FM	3	3	Houston Robert E.	Head	M	W	32	M									Cal
7				- Belle A.	wife	F	W	29	M									Cal
8				- Bernice	daughter	F	W	5 1/2	S									Cal
9				- Kenneth	son	M	W	3 1/2	S									Cal
10	FM	4	4	Houston William	Head	M	W	73	M									US
11				- Martha	wife	F	W	63	M									US
12																		
13	RM	5	5	La Touche Joseph	Head	M	W	46	M									Can
14				- Mary	wife	F	W	46	M									Cal
15				- Fernandina	daughter	F	W	12	S									Cal
16				- Edward	son	M	W	2 1/2	S									Cal
17				- Place Howard	labor	M	W	24	S									Cal
18	FM	6	6	Richter Jacob H.	Head	M	W	57	M									Cal
19				- Kate	wife	F	W	45	M									Cal
20				- Henry D.	son	M	W	24	S									Cal
21				- Wallace	son	M	W	17	S									Cal
22				- Helene	daughter	F	W	13	S									Cal
23				- Frances	daughter	F	W	12	S									Cal
24	FM	7	7	Richter Charles	Head	M	W	30	M									Cal
25				- Annie A.	wife	F	W	29	M									Cal
26	FM	8	8	Laway Alexander	Head	M	W	39	S									Cal
27	FM	9	9	Fitzpatrick John	Head	M	W	38	M									Cal
28				- Anna	wife	F	W	36	M									Cal
29				- John Jr.	son	M	W	10	S									Cal
30				- Mildred	daughter	F	W	8	S									Cal
31				- Cecilia	daughter	F	W	6	S									Cal
32				- Lawrence	son	M	W	5 1/2	S									Cal
33				- David P.	son	M	W	2 1/2	S									Cal
34	EM	10	10	Mundell John H.	Head	M	W	40	M									Cal
35				- Nora	wife	F	W	36	M									Cal
36				- Hazel V.	daughter	F	W	17	S									Cal
37				- Henry	son	M	W	14	S									Cal
38				- Mariah H.	daughter	F	W	10	S									Cal
39				- Margaret	daughter	F	W	6	S									Cal
40	FM	11	11	Chen Mike	Head	M	W	30	S									Cal
41	FM	12	12	Lane Leroy E.	Head	M	W	39	M									Cal
42				- Elsie R.	wife	F	W	43	M									Cal
43	FM	13	13	Leipzig Annony	Head	M	W	57	S	1886 PA 1916								Cal
44				- Hoffman Pearl	wife	F	W	58	M	1865 PA 1892								Cal
45				- Richter John	Head	M	W	49	S	1861 PA 1903								Cal
46	FM	14	14	Merham Albert E.	Head	M	W	47	M									Cal
47				- Flora C.	wife	F	W	43	M									Cal
48				- Charles E.	son	M	W	22	S									Cal
49				- Albert	son	M	W	17	S									Cal
50				- Vera	daughter	F	W	11	S									Cal

First page of 1920 U.S. Federal Census for the Yerba Buena District, organized by enumeration household.

- Mary [Howlett] La Fouge** (Joseph): 46, b. [c1874] Illinois [homestead patents August 4, 1917, June 27, 1927, February 18, 1922 (as widow of Joseph), d. June 21, 1948, Los Angeles, age 83]<sup>64</sup>  
**Hermogena La Fouge** (daughter): 12, b. [c1908] Calif.  
**Edward La Fouge** (son): 2 3/12, b. [c1918] Calif.  
**Howard Place** (lab.): 24, b. [c1896] Calif. [d. March 29, 1986, Los Angeles]<sup>65</sup>
- Jacob H. Richter** (Kate): 57, b. [June 7, 1862] New York [homestead patents September 19, 1912, March 7, 1922; d. February 3, 1945, Solano County, Calif.]<sup>66</sup>
- Kate [Woodhouse] Richter** (Jacob): 48, b. [August 12, 1869] England [d. May 7, 1942, Solano County, Calif.]<sup>67</sup>  
**Henry D. Richter** (son): 24, b. [September 18, 1894] Calif. [d. October 2, 1983]<sup>68</sup>  
**Wallace Richter** (son): 17, b. [May 28, 1903, d. February 19, 1978, Paradise, Butte County, Calif.]<sup>69</sup>  
**Hattie Richter** (daughter): 13, b. [c1907] Calif.  
**Frances Richter** (daughter): 12, b. [c1908] Calif.
- Charles [H.]<sup>70</sup> Richter** (Annie A.): 30, b. [April 6, 1889] New York [homestead patent January 6, 1919; (probable) d. Tehama County, Calif., December 16, 1956, age 67]
- Annie A. Richter** (Charles): 29, b. [c1891] New York [d. February 1, 1960, Yolo County, Calif., age 68]<sup>71</sup>
- Alexander Lawaz [Leivaz]:** 39 [b. c1881] Calif.<sup>72</sup>
- John Fitzpatrick** (Anna): 38, b. [c1882] Kansas [homestead patents November 11, 1914, July 1, 1919]
- Anna [D.] Fitzpatrick** (John): 36, b. [February 2, 1882] Kansas [homestead patent October 20, 1921; d. October 28, 1960, Shasta County]<sup>73</sup>  
**John Fitzpatrick, Jr.** (son): 10, b. [c1910] Calif.  
**Mildred Fitzpatrick** (daughter): 8, b. [c1912] Calif.  
**Cecilia Fitzpatrick** (daughter): 6, b. [c1914] Calif.

<sup>64</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>65</sup> Social Security Death Index.

<sup>66</sup> California Death Index, 1940-1997.

<sup>67</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Middle initial from homestead patent.

<sup>71</sup> California Death Index, 1940-1997.

<sup>72</sup> "Alex Leivaz, farmer PO Triunfo." See Ventura County Directory 1918-1919.

<sup>73</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

**Lawrence Fitzpatrick** (son): 5 3/12, b. [c1915] Calif.

**David P. Fitzpatrick** (son): 2 11/12, b. [c1918] Calif.

**John Henry Mundell** (Nora): 40, b. [March 21, 1879, Burbank] Calif. [homestead patent March 14, 1912, d. April 26, 1949, Oxnard, age 70]<sup>74</sup>

**Nora H. [Marine] Mundell** (John H.): 36, b. [November 7, 1883, Oregon City] Ore. [d. October 23, 1971, Oxnard, age 87]<sup>75</sup>

**Hazel V. Mundell** [later **Browne**] (daughter): 17, b. [November 26, 1902] Calif. [d. January 3, 1984, Oxnard, age 81]

**Henry [L. “Bud”] Mundell** (son): 14, b. [March 8, 1905] Calif. [d. September 28, 1987, Santa Barbara, age 82]<sup>76</sup>

**Marian M[arine] Mundell** [later **Taylor**] (daughter): 10, b. [September 16, 1909] Calif. [d. February 3, 1959, Ventura County, age 49]<sup>77</sup>

**Margaret [Monica] Mundell** [later **Garrett**] (daughter): 6, b. [April 4, 1913] Calif. [d. August 18, 1981, Oxnard, age 68]<sup>78</sup>

**Mike Plus:** 30, b. [c1889] Austria [homestead patents, May 26, 1920, January 3, 1923; d. June 3, 1952, Los Angeles County, age 63]<sup>79</sup>

**Leroy E[lbert] Lane** (Olive R.): 39, b. [January 22, 1881] Texas [d. November 22, 1952, Los Angeles County, age 71]<sup>80</sup>

**Olive R. Lane** (Leroy E.): 45, b. [c1875] Ohio [homestead patent June 13, 1919]

**Emory Lerzajak** (sp.?): 51, b. [c1869] Austria [homestead patent (as Emery Leszajak), October 21, 1915, April 4, 1922]

**Jacob [E.]<sup>81</sup> Hoffman:** 58, b. [(possible) March 5, 1862] Germany [homestead patent September 9, 1914; d. (possible), Los Angeles County, February 4, 1944, age 81]<sup>82</sup>

**John [H.]<sup>83</sup> Richter:** 49, b. [c1871] Germany [homestead patent November 17, 1922]

<sup>74</sup> Obituary, Ventura County *Star-Free Press*, April 28, 1949.

<sup>75</sup> Obituary, Ventura County *Star-Free Press*, October 25, 1971; obituary, Oxnard *Press-Courier*, October 25, 1971, p. 2, col. 2.

<sup>76</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Middle initial from land patent index for Ventura County.

<sup>82</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>83</sup> Middle initial from land patent index for Ventura County.

**Albert J. Mephani [Mepham]** (Flora C.): 47, b. [c1873] Missouri [homestead patent June 17, 1919, m. Flora C. Maine 1896, d. June 3, 1930, age 58]<sup>84</sup>

**Flora C. [Marine] Maphani [Mepham]** (Albert J.): 43, b. [February 11, 1876] Calif. [d. November 12, 1940, Ventura County, age 63 (sister of Nora Mundell)]<sup>85</sup>

**Charles E. Mepahni [Mepham]** (son): 22, b. [March 18, 1897] Calif. [d. February 11, 1972, Torrance, Calif., age 74]<sup>86</sup>

**Albert Mephani [Mepham]** (son): 17, b. [c1903] Calif., d. June 30, 1929, age 26.<sup>87</sup>

**Dora Mephani [Mepham]** (niece): 11, b. [c1909] Calif.<sup>88</sup>

**O[rville] P. Edwards** (Iva): 42, b. [c1878] Calif. [homestead patent February 2, 1920]

**Iva Edwards** (O.P.): 40, b. [c1880] Calif. [d. September 9, 1960]<sup>89</sup>

**Charles R. Edwards** (son): 9, b [c1911] Calif.

**Joseph S. Edwards** (son): 4 9/12, b. [c1915] Calif.

**Benjamin Serrano** [Seraqno]: 24, b. [August 8, 1895] Calif. [homestead patent November 24, 1905,<sup>90</sup> d. May 9, 1982, Oxnard, age 86]<sup>91</sup>

#### **NOT LISTED ON 1920 CENSUS, but included in BLM Land Patent Index**

**Mark [A] Venneman**: 43, b. c1877, Kansas,<sup>92</sup> homestead patent October 15, 1918, d. February 12, 1940, Los Angeles County<sup>93</sup>

**May Calder**: 28, b. July 12, 1892, New York, homestead patent October 23, 1919, d. July 17, 1980, Tehama County, Calif., age 88 (daughter of Jacob & Kate Richter)<sup>94</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Albert Joseph Mepham was killed instantly when struck by an automobile while crossing Ventura Avenue. See Ventura County *Star*, June 4, 1930.

<sup>85</sup> See Ventura County *Star*, November 12, 1940.

<sup>86</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>87</sup> Albert "Irwin" Mepham, from email correspondence from Dennis Munoz, January 24, 2012.

<sup>88</sup> "Little Dora was in an orphanage when she was young and [her brother] Bill lived at a home for orphaned newsboys in LA when he was a boy. Things had to be so hard back then." Quoted in email correspondence from Dennis Munoz, January 24, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Land patent originally issued to Jose de Jesus Serrano.

<sup>91</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>; obituary, Ventura County *Star Free-Press*, May 10, 1982, B-7.

<sup>92</sup> United States Federal Census, 1920, Santa Monica.

<sup>93</sup> California Death Records online, <http://vitals.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ca/search.cgi>

<sup>94</sup> California Death Index, 1940-1997.

## EPILOGUE

After visiting Yerba Buena, probably in September 1932,<sup>95</sup> Hollywood screenwriter Madeleine Ruthven wrote a series of poems about her experiences in the Santa Monica Mountains.<sup>96</sup> These poems first appeared in a Beverly Hills magazine entitled Rob Wagner's *Script*.<sup>97</sup> Shortly thereafter her poems were gathered together in book form, printed by Ward Ritchie and published in 1934 by the Primavera Press of Los Angeles in a limited edition of 200 copies.<sup>98</sup> The title was *Sondelius Came to the Mountains*.

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<sup>95</sup> One of the poems, "Mountain Fire," describes a fire the author saw "Sixty miles away...in Santa Barbara and Ojai" from the crest of Boney Mountain. There was, in fact, such a fire—the largest of its kind to date—that began in the backcountry north of Ojai on September 7, 1932; the fire consumed more than 219,000 acres and lasted twelve days. See Rick Dower, "Matilija fire of 1932 was largest in California's history," *Ventura County Star Free-Press*, July 15, 1983. The poet continues, "Two years ago the fire came here...it leaped the great parapet of Boney Mountain and swept the slopes below." Such a fire occurred on October 30, 1930, beginning in Thousand Oaks, but also sweeping the "Yerba Buena District." See *Malibu Mountain Fire Perils Summer Colony*, *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1930, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Madeleine Skinner Ruthven, b. October 20, 1893 Sioux City, Iowa, later Harris, Texas, was considered "the most promising young woman writer in the city" of Los Angeles in 1922. (See Jim Tully, "Story Writer's of Los Angeles" *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1922, III41). In 1925 she is listed as "one of the women behind the scenes" as assistant to Harry Rapf at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios (see "Executives and Entertainers in Women's Realm," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1925, D9). Her first book of poetry, *Summer Denial and Other Poems*, was published by the Primavera Press in 1932. In 1933 her portrait was taken by Edward Weston. Although she was involved with some aspect of at least 16 screenplays between 1923 and 1936, she is perhaps best remembered for her screen treatment of the 1934 mystery *Dangerous Corner*. In 1938 Ruthven was hired by publisher W.W. Norton to work on a manuscript by Thomas Collins, manager of a farm labor camp in Arvin, Calif., and "chief source... of accurate migrant information" to author John Steinbeck as he worked on his *Grapes of Wrath*; Collins' book was never published. (See John Steinbeck, *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath 1938-1941*, New York: Viking Press, 1989.) About 1945 she married Rueben W. Borough (1883-1970), the Independent Progressive Party candidate for the U.S. Senate in 1952. Her political views caused her to be blacklisted in the 1950s. She died in Los Angeles on February 20, 1978, age 84; See Suzanne Guldimmann, "Poet Captured the Wild Spirit of Malibu's Westernmost Backcountry," *Malibu Surfside News*, September 8, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> In 1929, he founded Rob Wagner's *Beverly Hills Script*, which later became simply Rob Wagner's *Script*. The magazine featured comment and features on film, art and literature, and included Ruthven's poems over several issues. Wagner never paid his writers, but offered celebrities a forum for their views. Among Southern California's elite contributing to *Script* were Charles Chaplin, Upton Sinclair, Will Rogers, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Max Brand, Louis L'Amour, Ray Bradbury and artist Leo Politi. An ardent Socialist, Wagner opened his magazine to explore political issues. In 1942, Wagner died of a heart attack in Santa Barbara. His son, Leicester, took over the magazine for a short period. His widow continued publishing *Script* until 1947, when it was sold to Robert L. Smith, general manager of the *Los Angeles Daily News*. The magazine ceased publication 1949. See <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0906080/bio>

<sup>98</sup> Printer Ward Ritchie recalled, "Madeleine Ruthven had published a sequence of narrative poems about people who lived in the mountain area northwest of Malibu...I did a title page for the book and worked in some red initials to enliven the publication-set type." See "The Primavera Press" in *Influences on California Printing by James D. Hart and Ward Ritchie* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Library, 1970), 55.

According to Ruthven, Dagon Sondelius was one who lived in solitude. He “Staked out a homestead there / And little by little he added acres to it / Until he owned the whole crest—a section of land, more than six hundred acres.” He lived, according to the poet, “On the crest of Boney Mountain / Where the parapet breaks / And the world is spread like a map below.”<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps keeping with a literary technique of the time, Ruthven was mentioning real people, but altering their names. One local theory has it that Dagon Sondelius was, in reality, Albert R. Cornelius,<sup>100</sup> whose homestead of three parcels—all patented in July 1928—included contiguous sections of the ridge above Yerba Buena, about the time Ruthven could have first reasonably visited the area—the coast highway opened June 1929. However, in 1916, an area resident named Olaf Sondalius was questioned during court proceedings about travel across Rindge property, so the matter remains unresolved.<sup>101</sup>

### *Yerba Buena: Epilogue*

**T**HIS was the summer when I came  
to know,  
After long years,  
My love for these brown hills,  
And learned the peace  
Their stony harshness brings,  
And felt their beauty singing in my  
blood.

Now in October, warm and dusty-  
hazed,  
I wait serenely for the winter rains  
To fill the parched and stony waterways,  
Knowing that Spring will follow  
In a blaze—  
Green fire of grass,  
Blue flame of lupin bloom,  
And poppies burning on the bare hill-  
sides.

<sup>99</sup> “Ruthven, *Sondelius*, 9.”

<sup>100</sup> A native of Colorado (b. c.1895), Albert Cornelius is listed as living in Santa Monica in 1920. See U.S. Federal Census 1920. He applied for a land patent in an area described as “mountainous, covered with boulders and underbrush. Poor grazing land” on April 10, 1922. See Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Favorable Report, December 22, 1927, serial no. 034856.

<sup>101</sup> In the Superior court of the State of California in and for the county of Los Angeles the case *Rindge Company vs. F.H. Joyner, et al.*, 1916. Olaf Sondalius is listed on pages 2526, 4034, 4254. In *Happy Days in Southern California* (1898), Frederick Hastings Rindge mentions a ranch hand named “Olof” twice (91, 96-97), and in both the 1910 and 1920 Federal Census, one “Olaf Sandelin” is listed as gardener in the Rindge household. Other names mentioned in Ruthven’s *Sondelius* have been deciphered: “Mary La Touche” is early homesteader Mary La Fougé; “Walter Haines” refers to Walter Hull, “Hubert” is probably Henry Chamberlain, because he employed “Salvador,” and “Salvador” is Salvador Sanchez. Identifications provided by Linda Valois, gleaned from interviews with local residents.

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2011 — 2012

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The origins of the Museum of Ventura County can be traced back to the incorporation of The Society of Ventura County Pioneers on September 19, 1891. Published by the Museum of Ventura County, the *Quarterly* has continuously been issued by the Ventura County Historical Society since November 1955. Beginning in 2008, the *Quarterly* became the *Journal of Ventura County History* and is now produced under the auspices of the Museum and Moorpark College, under the direction of the *Journal Editorial Committee*.

An index to articles included in the *Quarterly* through 1985 has been compiled by Yette Hendricks and Jean McAlary, in the *Index to the Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly: Volumes 1-30 (1955-1985)*. This subject index has been revised and reformed by Merle Oberg, and is available on the Museum's web page at

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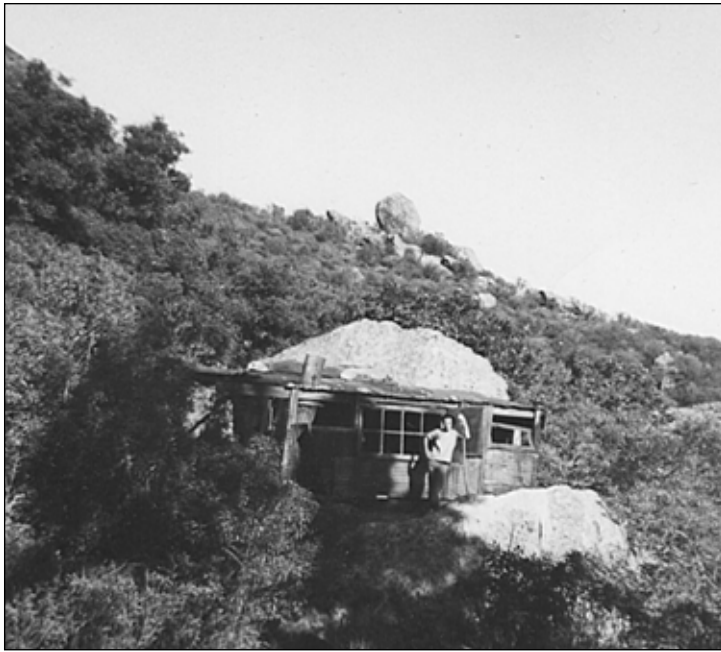
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The Museum of Ventura County assumes no responsibility for statements or opinions expressed by the author in this issue of the *Journal*.

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Mountain shack on Boney Mountain similar to that inhabited by Madeleine Ruthven's poetical "Dagon Sondelius." Roy Botsford in front of shack on Boney Mountain, photograph undated.  
*Courtesy Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Mary Botsford Taylor Collection*



Construction of coast highway, looking east from Point Mugu c1924. Dewey C. Alderson Album, MVC

— BACK COVER —

Looking south from Deer Creek Road (a road built by Lawrence Houston), overlooking Pacific Coast Highway, 2012. *Courtesy Charles N. Johnson*

