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Van Nuys played key role in development of the Valley 100 years ago

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Article Last Updated: 11/05/2007 09:03:14 PM PST

While several communities had already sprouted in the San Fernando Valley long before the turn of the 20th century, it was Van Nuys that played a key role in the area's growth nearly 100 years ago.

Named after Isaac Newton Van Nuys, a landowner who founded the San Fernando Valley Homestead Association, Van Nuys was born Feb. 22, 1911, with the sale of several parcels in a land auction.

The area had previously been considered an arid prairie, but construction of an aqueduct ensured that the area could be developed and farmed.

Bill Carpenter, curator at the San Fernando Valley Museum, credits the successful development of the area to William Paul Whitsett.

"He's the forgotten hero of the San Fernando Valley," Carpenter said.

Whitsett, a coal miner from Pennsylvania, was

sales manager for Suburban Homes Co. The entrepreneur had purchased a half interest in the town site of Van Nuys and hoped to sell the area and spark growth, Carpenter said.

By Dec. 16, 1911, Van Nuys was booming with activity, with installment of the Pacific Electric Railway enabling Valley residents to more easily get to and from their new suburban homes to other places of work, play and worship.

Whitsett also helped start the first bank in the Valley - the Bank of Van Nuys - and he started the chamber of commerce in the area.

In 1932, City Hall was erected in Van Nuys, creating what was then the center of Valley government, according to Kevin Roderick, author of "The Valley Observed."

City Hall later gave way to an entire civic center in Van Nuys that included federal, state, county and city offices; a public library; a police station; and a municipal court.

But many historians argue that the most significant gain for the community was obtaining an airport within its boundaries.

"The most important thing for Van Nuys was the airport, as far as economic growth and shaping were concerned," said Robert G. Marshall, archivist for the Valley History digital library at California State University, Northridge.

The airport brought jobs and prestige to the Valley community - for the veritable bargain of

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\$1 paid to the federal government in 1949.

The airport continues to be the region's only general-aviation airport and houses a mix of corporate jets, propeller planes and helicopters.

Marshall, who is a labor expert, said a pivotal point in Van Nuys history also occurred in 1992 when the longtime General Motors plant closed.

"That ended the era of Van Nuys growth," Marshall said.

"At that point, the boulevard changed dramatically. It forced many other small businesses to close and all of a sudden there was no economic strength."