THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

America's Suburb

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BOOKS

CHAPTER 11

The Valley Myth

E.T. found the San Fernando Valley an odd yet friendly place to visit, but the cinema's favorite extraterrestrial made it clear that he wished to go home.

"If you had brain one in that huge melon on top of your neck you'd be living the sweet life out in Southern California's beautiful San Fernando Valley!"

Actor Bill Murray to movie monster in *Ghostbusters II.*

The San Fernando Valley is remarkably well known for a place that doesn't exist in any official sense. A mythical image of the place has permeated American culture, largely due to the proximity of Bing Crosby and later generations of showbiz folk. They have lived and played there famously. They still make their movies at studios there. And sometimes they fashion those movies—or their songs—to be about the Valley itself. Writers and authors, many of them locals too, have contributed by taking surroundings familiar to them as the settings of their stories. Outside of fiction, the Valley's image has been shaped by big news events, most notably catastrophic earthquakes and heinous crimes. The global explosion in reportage on the lives of celebrities has also given form to the myth, since so many stars of the gossip pages—among them Kevin Spacey, Jennifer Aniston and Michael Jackson—either hail from the Valley or live there now.

Just what the prevailing image is at any given moment has evolved through time. In the early 1900s the Valley was typically described as a rural haven where a hard-working family could raise peaches or white leghorns, yet still enjoy some of the perks of being close to the city. By World War II, the Valley was a famed refuge of movie stars. After the war, it became a defining American suburb, known for—and usually praised for—its comfortable, if somewhat boring, clean-cut style. But the suburbs also conjured up pictures of ugly sprawl and numbing cultural sameness, and the Valley became the occasional butt of jokes. On TV, the popular late 1960s comedy hour "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In"—and its late-night partner on NBC, Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show"—spoofed the dubious qualities of "beautiful downtown Burbank." "The Brady Bunch" series made sugary fun of family life in a split-level, ranch-style, obviously Valley home.

Then came Valley Girls, the intelligence-challenged teenagers who shared a grating lingo and a compulsive need to shop. The stereotype of Valley Girls as bimbos in the making—and the Valley as the kind of lame place that would nurture them—swept the country in the 1980s and has never quite faded. In the end-of-century sex scandal involving President Bill Clinton, the Valley Girl label was casually applied to Oval Office plaything Monica Lewinsky, even though she was actually a product of Beverly Hills.

But gratuitous swipes at the Valley never seem out of favor. This seemed especially true in movies released in the late 1990s, a low point in the Valley's standing in American culture. In the comedy *Clueless,* Alicia Silverstone's cheerful Beverly Hills ditz Cher Horowitz is forced to spend a painful and socially humiliating night deep in the Valley. Silverstone was back again, with Brendan Fraser, in *Blast from the Past,* a romantic Cold War farce in which the Valley transforms from a Wonder Bread suburb into a "post-apocalyptic hellspace of dirt, decay and debauchery," as one reviewer put it. In *Go,* streetwise city girl Sarah Polley warns her whiny girlfriend, "Don't get 818 on me," and audiences get the area code put-down. In

His infamous beating at the hands of Los Angeles police in Lake View Terrace made Rodney King a household name.

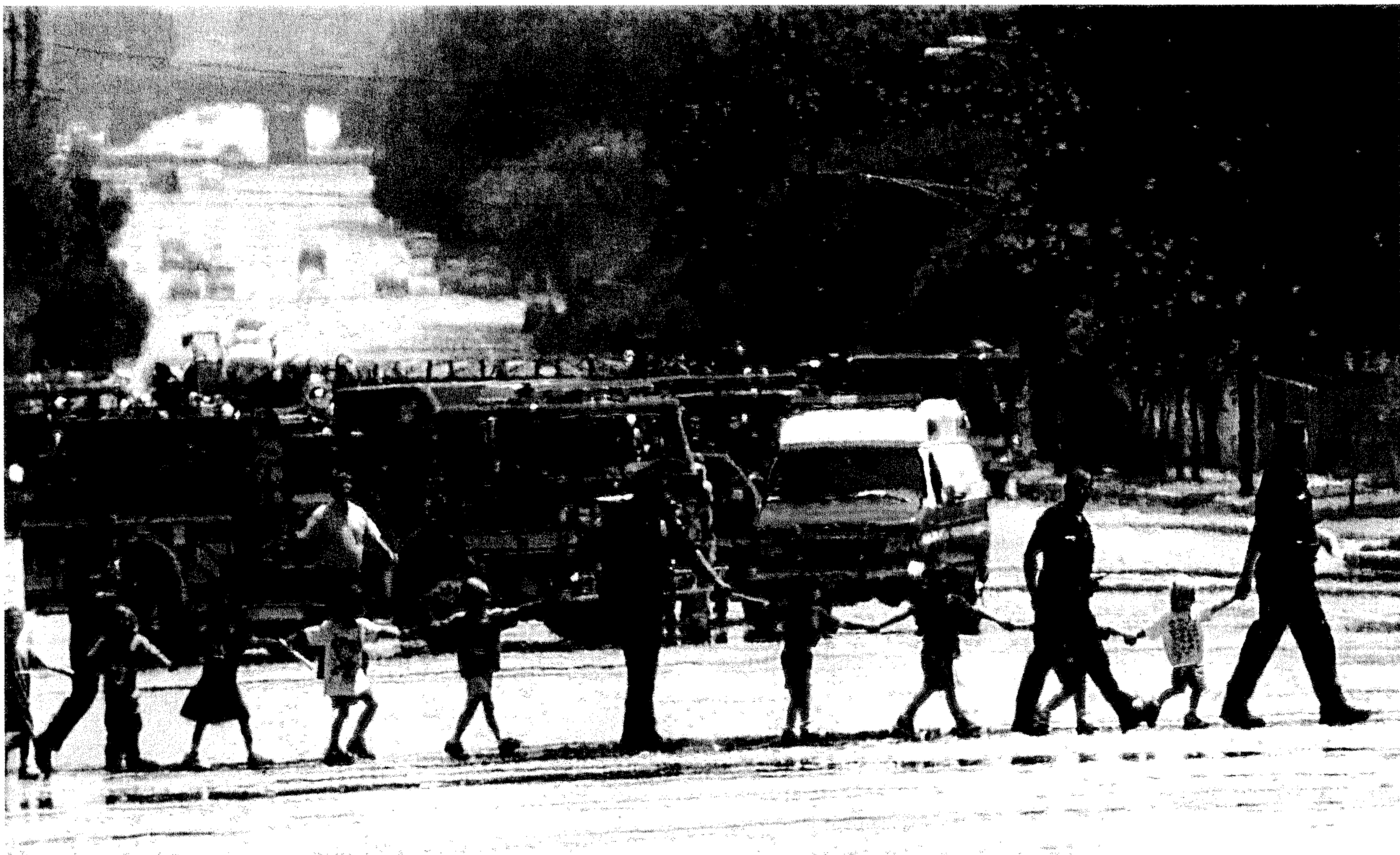
his films *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia,* native director Paul Thomas Anderson makes the Valley out to be a not very desirable place filled with people you probably wouldn't want to know.

The Valley even took a light ribbing in a 1999 novel satirizing New York media culture, *Turn of the Century* by Kurt Andersen. The narrator, on a West Coast business trip, drives to a television studio built on the site of a failed pornographic video company in Burbank: "Because the Valley is inherently dispiriting, the drizzle and the gray improve it in some relativistic way—the lousy weather and the Valley are in synch on a day such as this. Burbank seems less like a failed paradise manque, and more like Cleveland."

Indeed, the Valley is rarely associated anymore with the cheery suburban optimism of "The Brady Bunch" or the blockbuster *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial,* which never mentioned the Valley but was filmed in neighborhoods there and played on its idealized sense of place. More often now the Valley is featured as a spoiled, even menacing landscape. A good example is *187,* in which Samuel L. Jackson—who in real life is local to Encino—portrays a New York school teacher brutalized by his students. He moves west, expecting the San Fernando Valley will be a haven from urban insanity, but instead he encounters gangs that are even more murderous. This dark turn in the cinematic image probably reflects the presence of so many writers, directors and producers in and around the Valley. Living and working there, they know that the old postwar suburb has lost much of its earlier innocence. They are just showing what they know.

The Valley is no longer the pastoral outpost of 120,000 people who went the entire Labor Day weekend of 1936 without reporting a single crime. For anyone who follows the news, it is more likely to be thought of now as a crowded place with its own urban ills, ravaged by gang wars, multiple murders or some other high-profile calamity. It was on a dark street in Sun Valley where an unrepentant gun advocate, William Masters, shot a tagger in the back and bragged about it, vowing that no jury would convict him. It was in Lake View Terrace where Los Angeles

After a lengthy battle with police, this gunman's hood came off before he died on a North Hollywood street.



Children were led to safety in Granada Hills after automatic weapons fire raked their Jewish Community Center day-care facility. No one was killed in the attack.

police officers stomped Rodney King, the first in the chain of troubling events that led to the 1992 Los Angeles (and Valley) riots. In North Hollywood, live TV showed hooded bank robbers in body armor brazenly battling the cops with automatic weapons, then bleeding to death on the street. In Granada Hills, a hateful maniac opened fire on Jewish children in a day-care center, then slaughtered a postal carrier. It was even in the Valley, from a friend's hilltop home in Encino, where Orenthal James Simpson sped off in a white Ford Bronco and became—for a few sensational hours in June 1994—the nation's most famous fugitive from justice.

News coverage has helped stoke the emerging less-than-idyllic reputation, but the root of the Valley's image problem is the perception, especially strong in other sections of Los Angeles, that the Valley is simply not a very hip address. So what else is new: "When we moved to the Valley, I felt like I was being tossed into quicksand," Robert Redford, recalling his teenage days in Van Nuys in the 1950s, once told the *Times*. "There was no culture. It was very oppressive." He got out as soon as he could.

Other Angelenos, not surprisingly, can be the Valley's harshest critics. "Like, the Valley's Not a Joke Anymore!" a 1990 headline screamed in Los Angeles magazine. The article was mostly positive, yet characterized the Valley as "the strange land over the hill" and quoted a longtime resident saying "it still lacks a real personality… It's like a giant bowl of oatmeal." Even the locals are tough on themselves. When the *Times'* Valley staff invited readers to suggest witty ideas for a municipal name should the Valley secede and become a city, nominations included Minimallia, McValley, Beige-Air, Valle de Nada and Ranchos de los Ranchos. The winner by acclamation: Twenty-nine Malls.

"L.A. is surrounded by valleys, but there's only one Valley, and to everybody who lives on the other side of the hill from it, it's a standing joke," novelist Peter Israel wrote in *Hush Money*. Though not necessarily based in fact, the feeling runs deep, according to Sandra Tsing Loh, a writer, humorist and performance artist who should know. She lives in Van Nuys and wrote a monthly column on her life in the Valley for the late Buzz magazine that described the nub of the problem: "There are some L.A. addresses so unfashionable that people actually recoil in horror when you admit you live there. And of course, no basin puts people off as much as the San Fernando Valley. The feeling is absolute. The same people who'll drive from Santa Monica to Pasadena (25 miles) without blinking find lunch in Reseda (16 miles) much too far."

In her collection of essays called *Depth Takes a*

Strange doings

Space aliens in Big Tujunga Canyon? Yes, according to two young women who said they were sleeping in an isolated cabin on March 22, 1953, when lights suddenly illuminated the canyon and surrounded their house, after which time seemed to stand still. When they finally fled, one said, she saw a filmy apparition of a longhaired man.

Their account is in a 1989 book, *The Tujunga Canyon Contacts*, by Ann Druffel of the UFO investigation group SkyNet and D. Scott Rogo. Other strange phenomena reported in the canyon include soundless black helicopters, daylight flying disks and sightings of misty gray figures called "light people" by schoolchildren on camping trips.

Of more recent vintage, *UFOs Over Topanga* by Preston Dennett chronicles reported sightings in Topanga Canyon during the 1990s. On the World Wide Web, UFO watchers were especially intrigued by claims in 1996 that a huge burning ball had descended from the sky near Rocketdyne's rocket testing lab in the Santa Susana Mountains.

The Loh life

Sandra Tsing Loh's 1997 novel, *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home By Now,* treats readers to the angst of a Gen X couple who try to earn their bohemian credentials by eschewing L.A. for a rented three-bedroom in Tujunga:

"Don't you see? Being out here is so Lancaster Desert, so Frank Zappa-esque. It's like living in Los Angeles but refusing to be a part of it. Like starting our own tribe. Denying the whole fou-fou trendy La Brea/Melrose/giving over to the style-weasels thing."

But Bronwyn, the heroine of the book, isn't buying it:

"No, 23511 Colton Place was more David Lynch than Frank Zappa. It was the sort of place where a querulous old woman with an eye patch would live with her inbred adult son, Hank, clad in a big old diaper. It was the kind of place you saw featured on 'A Current Affair.'"

Later she recoils in horror when a real estate agent sizes up her net worth and suggests that her best hope of owning a home is—"No. No. Absolutely not. Not the Valley."

Holiday, Loh put her own spin on the Valley's new face. She called it the "home of a hundred King Bear Auto Centers, a thousand Yoshinoya Beef Bowls, and ten thousand yard sales." As for the blossoming of tiny ethnic restaurants run by newly arrived immigrants, she has her favorites but wonders how some of them survive: "What inspires some folks to relocate halfway around the world to the San Fernando Valley in order to feed bad food on paper plates to their own people?"

The Valley canon

The 1.7 million souls who do live in the Valley, most of them by choice—because *they* like it—can choose from a library of books and films set in or about their hometown. The body of work runs from *Don Sagasto's Daughter,* a 1911 novel by Paul Harcourt Blades, about a proud *Californio* whose *rancho* was near Mission San Fernando, to potboiler detective mysteries.

At the top of any serious reading list should be the nonfiction works so rich with insight or direct reportage that they are quoted, by necessity, elsewhere in this book. These include *The Owensmouth Baby* and *Calabasas Girls* by Catherine Mulholland; colorful accounts of Pacoima barrio family life by Mary Helen Ponce in *Hoyt Street* and *Taking Control;* and Earl Anthony's *The Time of the Furnaces,* chronicling the 1968 black student rebellion at Valley State College. Though it is difficult to find, a true aficionado would enjoy the 1924 history of the Valley compiled by the San Fernando chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, whose best sources were the somewhat gilded memories of the group's own members.

The Valley received its first serious literary treatment at the hands of a local in the 1930s in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice.* Cain wrote in a rented two-bedroom Craftsman on Bel Aire Drive in the Burbank hills and apparently sensed an air of criminal-erotic desperation in the rural corners and roadside cafes he visited on long drives in his Ford roadster. *Postman,* regarded by some as the first modern American bestseller, was set in the general area of Agoura, in just such a gas station-cafe run by Nick Papadakis and his steamy wife Nora. She is terminally bored, both with Nick and with waiting on the motorists who pull off the highway for lunch. Into the cafe one day comes drifter Frank Chambers, who senses Nora's simmering needs and falls hard for her. The amorous couple, using an Encino rabbit breeder as their alibi, kill Nick and then fake a car accident on Malibu Lake Road in an (unsuccessful) effort to cover up the deed. In the 1946 film, starring John Garfield as Frank and Lana Turner as Nora, the Papadakis name was dropped as too ethnic—Nick and Nora became Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

Cain's second novel, *Double Indemnity,* continued on the theme of lust-begets-homicide and was set in Glendale. Adapted to the screen by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, the film starred Fred MacMurray

as an unassuming insurance agent who falls for Barbara Stanwyck, a scheming housewife. In Cain's story the conspirators talk themselves into killing her husband and running off with his insurance policy, confident their tracks are covered. But a dogged investigator, played by Edward G. Robinson, suspects them of foul play and makes the case. Stanwyck, who knew the Valley well from her days as a Northridge horse breeder, later played the murderous female side of a Valley married couple in *Crime of Passion*. Her character was a smart newspaper advice columnist who gives up her job to marry, then can't abide her boring existence as a homemaker. She resorts to murder to help her police officer-husband's career.

More recent crime novelists seem to like the Valley's spoiled suburbs as a locale for dastardly deeds and retrograde characters. *Fatal Convictions* by Shari P. Geller involves a serial killer exacting his own justice on Valley child molesters and is set partly at Tommy's Burgers on Roscoe Boulevard—"the only true landmark in the San Fernando Valley." Vic Daniel, the private detective in a series of books by David M. Pierce, is based in "that scurvy part of California known as the San Fernando Valley" where the smog settles in "like cheap hairspray on a home permanent." The *Ritual Bath* by Faye Kellerman involves a rape at a local yeshiva, tapping into the Valley's history of strong Jewish communities; in Barbara Seranella's *No Human Involved*, Munch Mancini is a waifish street junkie and ace car mechanic whose run from the law takes her as far as a garage at the corner of Sepulveda and Ventura. She kicks her heroin habit at Narcotics Anonymous meetings at Reseda High School.

Some writers, especially those without strong local ties, have ascribed an apocalyptic edge to the Valley. J. G. Ballard, in *Hello America*, spun a fantasy set a century in the future with soldiers loyal to President Charles Manson digging through the ruins of the old Lockheed plant in Burbank in search of nuclear weapons to launch against Las Vegas. Ugliness reached an extreme in *The Turner Diaries*, the underground racist diatribe in which white supremacists launch their own Holocaust on Los Angeles from a secret command post in the Valley. They summarily execute Jews and anyone of mixed race, exile seven million blacks and Latinos to the desert, and hang 60,000 white "race traitors" from trees and power poles. But not all the fantasy fiction that visits the Valley is so malevolent. The futuristic Valley portrayed in *Snow Crash*, the cyber-fiction standard by Neal Stephenson, has devolved into a crazy quilt of turfs, or "burbclaves," each ruled by militias, religious cults, global corporations or the Mafia. Everything, including freeways, is privately controlled, requiring diplomacy and daredevil driving by the Deliverator, a pizza delivery boy for the Cosa Nostra. "All the people who run Cosa Nostra pizza franchises in this part of the Valley are Abkhazian immigrants," he observes. The Valley also shows up in Ed Wood's *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, called by many the worst sci-fi movie ever made. The plot involves alien grave-robbers who take over a cemetery in the Valley.

Often, as in *Plan 9*, the Valley merely provides a convenient locale. But in some works, the Valley itself plays a key role in the story. This was certainly true in *Chinatown*, the 1974 film directed by Roman Polanski. Jack Nicholson stars as Jake Gittes, a private eye in 1920s Los Angeles who looks into the homicide of the city' s water czar, Hollis Mulwray. That name is meant to evoke the memory of William Mulholland, and the story intends to echo the Valley's past as an El Dorado for water-fueled real estate speculators, but the plot details are strictly fiction. What the film lacks in historic accuracy it makes up for with twists and styling more compelling than the reality.

Gittes deciphers an elaborate conspiracy by hidden downtown powers who, at the peak of a fierce drought, dump the city's reservoir into the ocean in order to create a water shortage in the Valley. Squeezing ranchers to sell their withering orchards at distress prices is the motive; Gittes stumbles onto land deeds recorded under phony names. "Most of the Valley has been sold in the last few months," he tells Mulwray's widow, played by Faye Dunaway. The Robert Towne script oozes with intrigue. In one of the most intense scenes, Gittes is pursued through a maze of west Valley orange trees and roughed up by gun-toting country boys on horseback.

In a 1990 sequel that Nicholson directed, *The Two Jakes*, the setting flashes forward to the early postwar boom years. The orange groves are being

Walter Brennan got his Oscar before he played Amos McCoy, a comical San Fernando Valley rancher.

torn out for suburban cul-de-sacs, just as in real life. Gittes is older and mellower but allows himself to become embroiled in a murder case that turns on oil, rather than water, and on the real estate ambitions of the other Jake, the developer of "El Rancho San Fernando," played by Harvey Keitel.

The Valley's part was briefer, but explicit, in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction,* which roamed though many districts of Los Angeles. Gangsters Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) are driving along a main boulevard when Vega accidentally blows the head off an associate in crime riding in the backseat. They need to get off the street, since as the bad guys observe, even in the Valley cops tend to notice cars with blood-smeared windows. But where to? As Jules says, "I ain't got no partners in the 818."

Vincent: "Take it to a friendly place, that's all."

Jules: "We're in the Valley, Vincent! Marcellus ain't got no friendly places in the Valley."

Vincent: "What you doin'?"

Jules: "I'm calling my partner in Toluca Lake."

Vincent: "Where's Toluca Lake?"

Jules: "Just over the hill here, over by Burbank Studios."

Murder worked as black comedy in the offbeat *Two Days in the Valley,* in which James Spader played a sociopath-hit man and Paul Mazursky an aging film director. Director John Herzfeld called the Valley an uncredited character in the story about people who need second chances to succeed: an Olympic skier who has yet to win her medal, a detective trying to make the homicide squad, a bumbling killer working at a Domino's Pizza on Ventura Boulevard. "The movie is about a lot of people who either never achieved their goals, or screwed up their lives, or dropped the football the first time it was thrown to them," Herzfeld said in the *Times.* The funniest line comes from an older man who hears a violent fight in the upstairs apartment and quips to his wife: "Maybe that's how they make love in Tarzana." The essential Valleyness of the film was too much for French audiences. There, the title was translated as *Two Days in Los Angeles.*

Television sitcoms set in the Valley have, not surprisingly, taken a more cheerful view. "The Adventures of the Real McCoys" was the first, about a West Virginia hillbilly family that inherits money and drives a rickety truck across country to their new farm amid the San Fernando Valley suburbs. Sponsors hated the concept, but after the show aired in 1957—as Americans by the thousands were making the same migration across Route 66—it became a hit. Viewers loved the domestic predicaments that Grandpa Amos McCoy, played by Oscar-winning actor and real-life Valley rancher Walter Brennan, found himself in each week. As an added bit of authenticity, the McCoys even had a Latino yard hand, Pepino Garcia. The show ran for seven years and spawned an imitator in "The Beverly Hillbillies."

Authors with something to say about suburban life have found the Valley fertile ground. Theodore Pratt's *Valley Boy* is a 1946 novel about an 11-year-old lad who finds the affection he lacks at home in a matronly next-door neighbor and a trained sea lion. The San Fernando Valley in the book is an odd place with odd inhabitants and establishments, "a fey gash

in the surface of the earth that bred and molded its own brand of people and ways." There is a restaurant named Dyspeptic Bill's, a store called The House of a Good Egg, and a girl who dresses in shorts and a full-length fur coat. Pratt's Valley is an eccentric and optimistic slice of suburbia: "There was nothing else like it."

The commentary was edgier in Michael Crichton's 1996 thriller, *Airframe*. It is set in the Burbank factory of the mythical Norton Aircraft Co., a maker of wide-body airliners that mysteriously fall out of the sky. The novel's heroine, Casey Singleton, is a quality assurance vice president with a personal life not unfamiliar in the real-life Valley. She has weathered numerous layoffs in the aerospace industry and divorce from a drunk. She lives on a Glendale street where, in modern suburban fashion, she hears the pop of gunfire in her sleep and frets about sending her daughter to a school system where 50 languages are spoken. The mirage of the perfect suburban lifestyle also came in for jabs in the *The Dreyfus Affair: A Love Story*, a lighter Peter Lefcourt novel that gives the Valley an American League baseball team after the TV networks decreed, "Phoenix didn't have the demographics that the San Fernando Valley did." The Vikings play in a 125,000-seat stadium in the Sepulveda Dam basin. Their star is Randy Dreyfus, the ultimate suburban fantasy jock: the best young shortstop in the sport, "the fastest white guy in the league," and happily married to a blond Rose Queen. But Randy endures a long slump, is distracted on the field and surly at home in their gated community. He can only blame it on one thing: he is secretly in love with the Vikings' black second baseman.

Suburbia's comforts and travails were explored in perceptive detail in a pair of novels that critiqued the Valley's vaunted postwar years through the sobering eyes of teenage girls. *Wet Paint*, by Gwynn Popovac, exposed the loneliness and disillusionment that infected some family relationships in the monotonous tracts of nearly identical new houses. Her Flora Jackson attends a thinly disguised Birmingham High and is ready to burst at the strictures placed on her desires for love and adventure in the postwar Valley. Her relief comes in her fantasies about the slightly dark, slightly troubled boy from the hills south of Ventura Boulevard who shares her easel in art class. Their bohemian art teacher lets the students hang out in the studio at lunch and consummate their crushes in the supply room. The book is filled with insight into teenage pain, tracking Flora's emotional spikes as she tries to make her way socially and sexually, and portraying parents more concerned with dichondra and harsh discipline than listening and love.

My Sister from the Black Lagoon, published in 1998, covers somewhat similar ground. Author Laurie Fox bares the frigid dysfunction of a middle-class Valley family in the postwar rush, and the impact on a sensitive and aware teenager like Lorna Person. After a difficult childhood with parents who don't understand her, Lorna must change high schools when her family moves from Burbank to Tarzana. The differences between the two communities are shown as stark, and the move upsets her already lonely life. But the new school and new friends ultimately give Lorna the fresh start that she needs.

The frustrations of adolescence in the culturally deprived expanses of the Valley also inspired *Foxes*, a 1980 film directed by Adrian Lyne that follows four bored girls from the burbs who go on night-life adventures in Hollywood. Jodie Foster played the wise one who watched out for her wilder friends. The girl played by Cherie Currie, who in real life was a singer with the band the Runaways, pays dearly for her fascination with seeking out ever higher highs, while the other girls grapple with being overweight or oversexed. Another take on growing up in the Valley was presented in *La Bamba*, the 1987 film that told the Ritchie Valens story in part by fictionalizing his family relationships. In recent years, films by two young directors who have spent some of their years living in the Valley gave the most layered portrayals, depicting it as both desirable and repulsive. In *Safe*, Todd Haynes' suburbs are so smothering as to be toxic. Julianne Moore starred as a west Valley stepmother who lives behind closed gates where the new streets meet the chaparral. She seems content with a life that is attractive but numbingly empty, consumed by ordering furniture, overseeing her maid and going to aerobics classes and the hair salon. After she drives behind a smoking truck on Ventura Boulevard and breathes in fumes, she is besieged by

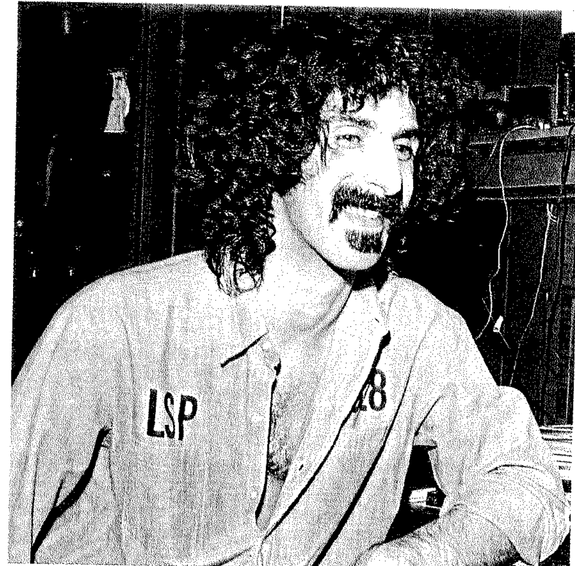
Julianne Moore has starred in three films where the Valley itself was the main character.

allergies and toxic reactions to the suburban environment.

Moore also starred in *Boogie Nights,* which takes place almost entirely within the dark clubs, secluded backyards and otherwise tacky milieu of the Valley's home-brewed pornography industry circa 1980. As directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, the storefronts and quiet tract neighborhoods hide secrets and disappointments. Moore serves as the mother figure to an extended family of fading porn players, wannabes and hangers-on who pine for better lives while they put on sophisticated airs at the pool and cocktail parties they hold between filming triple-XXX footage. Burt Reynolds plays the porn king of Reseda, Valley native Heather Graham is a teen porn actress who never removes her roller skates, and Mark Wahlberg is the pimply dishwasher who becomes the legendarily studly Dirk Diggler, loosely a reference to the late porn star John Holmes. Modern-day Sherman Way is the backdrop for several brutal scenes, including a robbery that turns bloody inside a doughnut shop, the stomping of a college boy by Rollergirl, and the pummeling of a destitute Diggler by gay bashers. Many in the cast, including Moore, returned to the Valley with Anderson in *Magnolia,* which portrayed a place riven with dysfunctional relationships and hit with a plague of frogs from the sky.

Any festival of Valley cinema would need to make room for at least one porn video. The Valley has been the world capital of porn production for decades, due to the ready availability of secluded backyards and post-production facilities, skilled crew members needing work and talent willing to have sex on screen. The industry also has something of a sense of local humor. One porn actress uses the screen name Tarzana, and in a film called *San Fernando Valley Girls,* rivals set up a competition to decide who deserves the title "Valley Girl." If you guessed what the competition involves, you'd be right.

Perhaps the greatest shaper of the Valley's popular image since Bing Crosby sang "San Fernando Valley" to homesick GIs was a spoof record by musician Frank Zappa and his daughter, Moon Unit. "Valley Girls" was satire, inspired by Moon's dinner table mocking of her schoolmates' syntax and incessant shopping at the Sherman Oaks Galleria. On the



Frank Zappa was a rocker of some repute in 1972, before he became the father of Valley Girls.

record she portrays Ondrya, a girl whose ultimate goal is to be popular ("otherwise people might not like you"). She whines about her mother ("like a total space cadet"), her braces ("like a total bummer") and her English teacher's homosexuality ("It's like barf me out."). The song popularized phrases like "fer shur," "gag me with a spoon" and "grody to the max."

The impact was stunning, both on the public's perception of the Valley and for the Zappas. The song zoomed to national popularity in the summer of 1982 and sold more records than any of Frank Zappa's work as a solo artist or as the leader of the avant garde 1960s band the Mothers of Invention. "I did it to amuse myself, my family and friends," Moon Zappa told Newsweek magazine. "And it was just so bizarre to have the whole world in on a joke."

Time magazine reported that from Tarzana to Tarrytown, every parent with a teenaged daughter spent that summer fretting: Is she one? The answer was yes for millions of girls who aspired to the style and sensibility of a few San Fernando Valley teenagers. Teen magazine declared that the Valley Girl style was a trendsetter in schools and shopping malls. The style was "cute:" mini-skirts, headbands, anklets and ruffles, feathered haircuts, waxed legs and manicured nails. The phenomenon had enough power that, even though the look faded long ago, the reputation of Valley Girls as airheads lives on. Not surprisingly, the put-down is not appreciated in the place where it all started.

At the height of the phenomenon, a film called *Valley Girl,* directed by Martha Coolidge, sought to cash in on the buzz. In fact, the story and characters bore no resemblance to the girls in the song. Deborah Foreman played a popular high school girl who goes against her Valley friends and dates Nicolas Cage, who portrays a bad-news dude from Over the Hill. She takes him on a tour of a few local landmarks—DuPars coffee shop, Casa Vega restaurant, Encino Bowl, Mulholland Drive. The film's advertising tagline was "She's cool. He's hot. She's from the Valley. He's not." Although that film did not slight the Valley, it was followed by a torrent of film references designed to poke fun. In *Encino Man,* Brendan Fraser played an icebound caveman thawed out by nerdy Valley boys and taught how to party. A spin-off, "Encino Woman," aired on network TV. The comic high point of the genre might have been *Earth Girls Are Easy,* in which three extraterrestrial aliens splash to Earth in the pool of a giddy Valley manicurist, played by Geena Davis. "As if things weren't bad enough," she whines, "now I've been abducted by aliens."

Suburbia No More

In one of many clashes between the suburbs and the old Valley, Van Nuys homemakers in the 1950s went to the city to protest flies from nearby chicken farms.

"It is never calm in the San Fernando Valley. At any given moment, kamikaze activists are raising hell over a pot full of issues that include but are not limited to: crime, sex, billboards, barking dogs and whether or not God favors a new church in Chatsworth."

Los Angeles Times columnist Al Martinez

In and around Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley has a reputation as a rebellious place that often complains about perceived grievances and slights. The image is largely deserved. The Valley's neighborhoods have fought battles over quality-of-life issues ranging from noisy jets and noxious garbage dumps to smelly backyard chicken coops and adult bookstores. Even churches have at times proven controversial. "Hymn singing would interfere with the peace and quiet of the neighborhood," a Wilbur Avenue man complained in the 1960s when the congregation of Northridge Missionary Church wanted to worship temporarily in a home near his.

Fevered debates over hot-button topics like oak tree preservation, the timing of traffic lights and where to install stop signs have sundered friendships and shattered neighborhood harmony. The president of the Encino Homeowners Association was physically assaulted by agitated Tarzana residents at a community meeting that exuded hostility. Los Angeles city councilman Marvin Braude, who also was jostled, complained: "I've been in public life for 25 years and this is the first time I've been pushed." The incendiary topic: Whether to extend Reseda Boulevard through the Santa Monica Mountains.

Sometimes the scraps have been more like epic uprisings. The Valley's suburbs rose up in anger in the 1970s to resist mandatory school busing for desegregation and to propel the state's historic tax-cutting measure Proposition 13 to victory. In 2002, the idea of escaping the municipal clutches of Los Angeles by seceding to form a separate city came to a public vote after being discussed off and on for decades. The election amounted to a referendum on the Valley's place in the culture of Los Angeles—and the results reflected how much the modern San Fernando Valley has changed.

Sticking up for the valley

Leaders have periodically tried to coax the communities of the Valley to put aside parochial concerns and work together on behalf of the whole. Often the intent was to help the Valley deal with Los Angeles from a position of strength.

In 1914, delegates from the towns of Burbank, Lankershim, Chatsworth Park, Zelzah, Monte Vista, the Little Landers colony in Tujunga and the new towns of Van Nuys and Owensmouth met in San Fernando. They organized themselves as the San Fernando Valley Federated Commercial Bodies and agreed to cooperate for the good of the region. The group named as its chairman John T. Wilson, a respected elder and the foreman of George K. Porter's ranches and subdivisions.

Rivalries quickly undermined the effort. In truth, the Valley's scattered towns were in competition to lure new businesses and lot buyers. They had to look out for their own interests over the grand idea of a united San Fernando Valley. Lankershim and Owensmouth, for instance, stayed behind

in 1915 while most of the Valley voted to join the City of Los Angeles. (Both towns later agreed to be annexed too). Another dispute arose over the motor traffic that came through Newhall Pass and crossed the Valley headed into Los Angeles. Businesses along San Fernando Road—the main north-south highway through the orange groves and ranches—objected when Van Nuys merchants cooked up a scheme to divert southbound motorists and their wallets off the road. They did it by posting an electric sign beside the highway that redirected drivers out of their way and into Van Nuys, a detour that added several miles to the trip. Under pressure from service station operators and the towns along San Fernando Road, the Van Nuys group agreed to alter the sign—by changing the wording so that it grabbed travelers destined for UCLA, which had just opened in Westwood.

Working together also proved to be an elusive goal after the end of World War II, when the government offered Van Nuys Army Airfield to the city for the token price of one dollar. Neighbors and chambers of commerce could not agree that a civilian airport was a good idea in the center of the nation's fastest growing suburbia. Some residents preferred that the city scrap the old Metropolitan Airport and reopen Saticoy Street, which had extended across the entire Valley before being blocked at either side of the airport so the wartime runway could be lengthened. The offer was ultimately accepted, but not before the proposed

She said no—for as long as she could—but there was no stopping the Golden State Freeway from gobbling up this property owner's home in 1958. Battles over eminent domain condemnations were common.

Tales of Forest Lawn

- The original Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale inspired the British novelist Evelyn Waugh to write *The Loved One,* his satirical take on California's funerary culture.
- Hours after the Los Angeles city council in 1948 gave conditional approval to open the new Forest Lawn in Hollywood Hills, the operators moved swiftly to bury six bodies obtained from the downtown General Hospital. The maneuver, under state law, automatically dedicated the land as a permanent cemetery—cutting off any chance the council might have to change its mind.

name—San Fernando Valley Airport—caused more hard feelings. The city of San Fernando had its own small airport and protested that the name could prove confusing. Finally, everyone settled on christening the field Van Nuys Airport.

Some of the fiercest postwar clashes broke out in defense of the Valley's new rural-suburban lifestyle. The first heated land-use battle came over plans by Forest Lawn, the celebrated memorial park in Glendale, to open a second cemetery adjacent to Griffith Park. The site was a landmark in Valley history, the locale where D.W. Griffith filmed *The Birth of a Nation*. The fight was not over history, but rather about keeping the land as open space. Anti–Forest Lawn rhetoric included wild assertions that contamination from the graves would seep into the Los Angeles River. Despite an ad campaign that screamed "Study This and Shudder!" the land was rezoned for cemetery use.

Bulldozers clearing routes for freeways ignited many skirmishes over neighborhood preservation and condemnation of private property. The defining quality-of-life controversies in the 1940s and 50s, though, were over how to develop the open acreage between towns. Growth boosters sought to encourage factories and plants so that residents could work near home and not have to commute into Hollywood or Los Angeles. Ranches with white-rail fences and expansive citrus groves still covered the west end of the Valley, but by the 1940s many developers and business leaders gleefully foresaw a future population of one or two million.

A new power, the Industrial Association of the San Fernando Valley, formed in 1949 to push for industrial zoning. Its leadership came from banks and savings and loans, real estate brokers, newspapers and the city Department of Water and Power—interests that all stood to gain if factories replaced pastures and orchards. The association wanted the city to designate a swath of West Valley land along the Southern Pacific tracks for future industry before suburbia claimed the prime acreage.

Opposition came from the newly formed West Valley Homeowners Protection Association. The group held rallies, testified before city committees and filed lawsuits—tactics that would become common tools of slow-growth homeowner groups. New subur-

Sprawl Happens

A city planning consultant warned in 1956 that the suburban character of the Valley was already endangered: "The valley is neither as livable nor as efficient as it might have been." Not enough land had been set aside for parks and public spaces to help form cohesive communities, and the practice of lining boulevards with strip shopping was "not only inefficient in that it strangles traffic movement, but is violently ugly and blighting to the residential areas fringing it."

More serious, the consultant concluded, suburbia had been allowed to "sprawl uniformly over mile after mile, with little variation in density or dwelling type, making for monotony not only of view but of inhabitants."

Sam Yorty of Studio City became the first beneficiary of Valley political power.

banites and holdover ranchers alike treasured the space to ride horses and raise a few peacocks or chickens, while still living within driving distance of jobs in the city. Industry won: in the mid-1950s more than 7,000 acres were zoned industrial, mostly along the tracks in Canoga Park, Northridge and Chatsworth.

If anything, the prospect of manufacturing jobs encouraged the building of more tract neighborhoods. As the Valley filled with people, political clout grew. A major coup was the state's decision in 1954 to place a coveted four-year college in the Valley. Proposed sites were adjacent to the Sepulveda veteran's hospital, at the former Birmingham Army Hospital—not yet a high school—and near Hansen Dam. Ultimately, 165 acres of squash fields and orange groves in Northridge were selected. The bill to create San Fernando Valley State College was carried by local assemblyman Julian Beck, a former teacher at San Fernando High School. The deal was sealed when Valley lobbyists picked up the check at a secret dinner for 23 lawmakers at the Brown Derby restaurant in Los Angeles.

In 1961, the Valley flexed its political muscle again to provide the vote margin that elected the mayor of Los Angeles. Residents annoyed by a city ordinance requiring them to separate cans and bottles from other home trash made Sam Yorty of Studio City the first—and so far only—Valley inhabitant to occupy the mayor's office.

This emerging clout came in handy during the Cold War when defense contracts became the local economic lifeblood. James Corman, a Los Angeles city councilman elected to Congress from Van Nuys, rose to power in the Democratic majority and helped to funnel work to the plants—Lockheed, Litton, Bendix, Rocketdyne—that employed so many Valley residents. While Corman wielded influence in Washington, another Democrat from Van Nuys, Robert Moretti, in 1971 became the speaker of the state Assembly, a post second only to the governor in statehouse power. (The speakership would again go to a Democrat from the Valley—Robert Hertzberg—in 2000).

By the mid 1970s, voters statewide had become anxious over a new issue. As real estate rose in value, property tax bills soared. Homeowners feared they might be forced to sell and move, since the tax levy did not respect whether a person's income was rising or falling—the tax was keyed solely to the home's market value. This hit especially hard for people who hoped to retire in their suburban castles. They may have bought their homes for $29,995 after the war and long since paid off the mortgage, but now they had to scrape together the cash to pay taxes on a the-

Homeowners packed the North Hollywood High auditorium in 1954 to protest rising property taxes.

oretical market price of $200,000 or more.

With an army of stirred-up suburbanites primed to revolt, Howard Jarvis, a pugnacious activist on the periphery of local Republican circles, came to the Valley to mobilize support for an initiative to roll back property taxes. Jarvis had tried and failed before, but this time he partnered with a Sacramento-area activist, Paul Gann. The Jarvis–Gann initiative, Proposition 13, passed on the June 1978 ballot and dramatically lowered taxes, altering the method by which way local government pays for itself. The Valley's reputation as a political force to be reckoned with swelled. Paul Priolo, a Republican assemblyman from Woodland Hills, became his party's leader in Sacramento.

After spending years on the political fringe, Howard Jarvis led his tax cutting revolt to victory in 1978.

At about the same time, a more homegrown movement erupted. Under legal pressure to desegregate classrooms, the Los Angeles Board of Education fashioned plans to bus thousands of students to distant schools. In response, many parents in the Valley moved their children to private schools or left for smaller suburban enclaves that had their own school systems. Others became politically active for the first time. Parents at Lanai Road Elementary, a secluded campus in the Encino hills, were among the first to organize. From their ranks emerged Bobbi Fiedler, a mother and tireless activist who roused parents across the Valley to pack raucous meetings, carry protest signs and circulate petitions at shopping centers. Fiedler and another hillside parent, Roberta Weintraub, were elected to the school board as anti-busing reformers.

Bobbi Fiedler rode the busing issue all the way to Congress but lost her bid for the Senate in 1986.

A court ordered the buses to roll in 1978, but the whole idea ran counter to a basic truth of the suburbs. Geographic isolation was no accident; rather, it was strongly preferred by most parents in the Valley, and only in part due to racial fears. Many knew Los Angeles only as a vaguely foreign place and dreaded sending their children over the hill, or even across the Valley to areas they viewed as less safe. The anti-busing cause morphed into a local political machine with Fiedler at the helm and ultimately defeated busing. In 1980, she took on Jim Corman, the Valley's most influential voice in Congress, and beat him by 752 votes out of 153,770 cast. Fiedler served six years before leaving to pursue unsuccessfully the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate.

Secession Fever

The notion that the Valley should separate from the City of Los Angeles has a long history. Northridge ranchers—seeking more home rule—pushed a secession bill in the Legislature in 1941, but it stalled. The west Valley's city councilman, Pat McGee, in 1960 advocated a borough system, but it died for lack of interest. Same for a 3 1/2–year push to promote secession in the early 1960s by an organization called the

Valleywide Better Government Committee, although the group's main agitator, Reseda mortician Donald Lorenzen, was elected to the City Council.

In the mid-1970s, with Los Angeles city hall occupied by a liberal mayor, Tom Bradley, whose focus was south of the hills, the Valley's conservative-dominated chambers of commerce actively encouraged secession. Their leaders had connections in Sacramento and made the idea sound feasible enough that Los Angeles lobbied hard to win veto power over any breakaway. That change in the rules, and a lack of public passion for the issue, killed the effort for the moment—although once again a prime secession mover, Northridge retailer Hal Bernson, parlayed the issue into a seat on the City Council. He remained for 24 years.

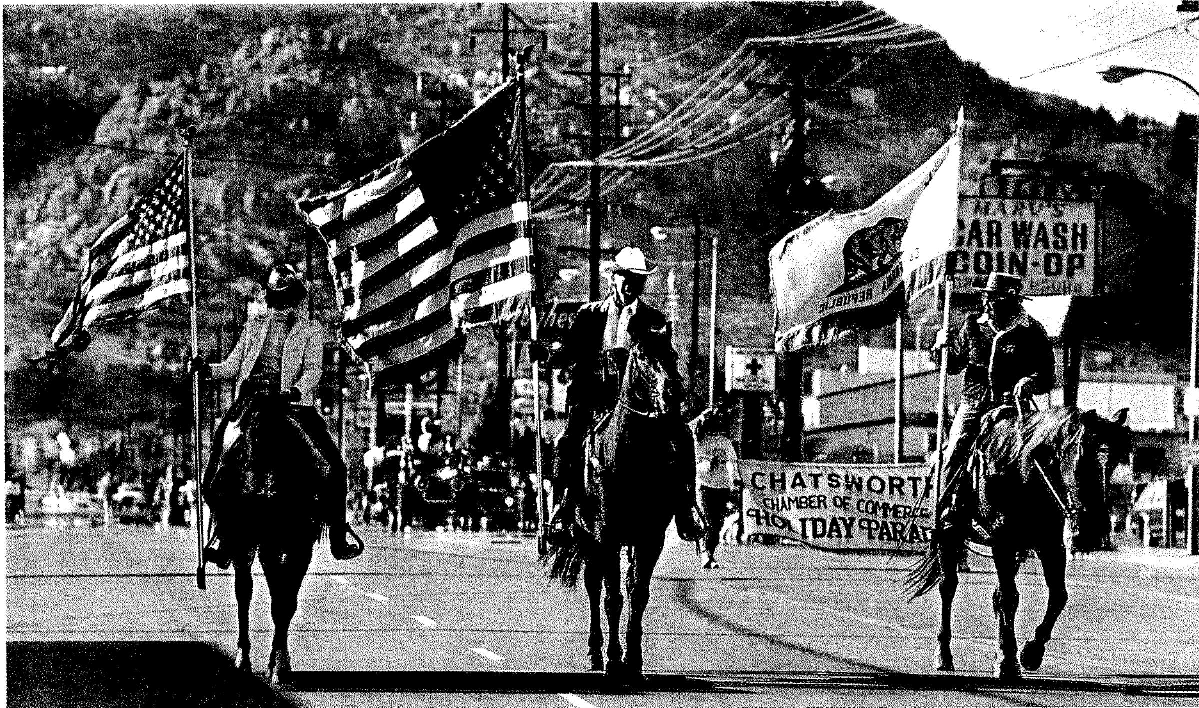
Talk of secession is a logical extension of the Valley's ingrained separateness. At its core is the belief that the Valley is a superior place to live, certainly preferable to Los Angeles. Add to this the resentment among some Valleyites that their taxes go over the hill to support a distant city bureaucracy—city hall is 20 miles from some Valley neighborhoods. The poor communities they see as drains on city resources, places like Watts and South-Central Los Angeles, are so far away that many Valley inhabitants can say they have never set eyes on them.

Serious discussion of quitting Los Angeles re-emerged in the 1990s—and this time attracted wider interest. The London news weekly *The Economist*, calling the Valley "its own world, the quintessential suburban enclave," noted that secession movements are usually prompted by oppression. But, the weekly observed, in the Valley it was the bourgeois who were trying to escape from what they saw as a withering city. Secession even got laughs on late-night television. Jay Leno, host of NBC's "Tonight Show," did a bit about possible new names for a liberated Valley, and proffered a tongue-in-cheek list that stung some local sensibilities: Off-Ramp Acres. Asphalt-By-The-Sea. Smogadena. Pornadelphia. Newer Jersey. Unknown Actorville. Little Appalachia. Bobbi Fiedler, by then a vocal secession advocate, retorted in the *Times* that "Jay Leno could have his chin in Los Angeles and his (backside) in Chatsworth and not know the difference."

What gave the movement more seriousness this time around was a broader base of support than just the business chambers. The Valley's most influential neighborhood group, the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, played a key role. Its president, Richard Close, a veteran of the Proposition 13 movement, helped direct Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment (Valley VOTE), which elevated the secession issue further than it had previously gone. The group's volunteers, taken from other homeowner groups, collected the signatures of 130,000 voters to force a formal study of secession's feasibility.

The cause also enjoyed the mostly enthusiastic cheerleading—and more—of the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the successor to the old *Van Nuys Call* and the *Valley News and Green Sheet*. The owner, Denver-based newspaper mogul Dean Singleton, stayed clear of the issue, but the paper's Woodland Hills–based publisher and its managing editor got involved. In 1998, the paper was forced to disclose that it was the secret financial angel of the then-fledgling secession movement, having contributed $60,000. The paper also made Valley autonomy a front-page crusade, turning stories that other media thought minor into big issues. Its editorial page urged residents to sign

Since 1962, when this sign went up, communities in the Valley have enjoyed quasi-official status at city hall.



The annual Chatsworth holiday parade and others like it promote community pride. Reflecting the area's rural roots, equestrians are prominent in most of the Valley's local parades.

secession petitions and likened secessionists to the American colonists who went to war to break free of England: "What did those 13 puny colonies want? A little respect. A little recognition. A lot of services for their money."

Its main competitor in the Valley, the *Los Angeles Times*, took almost the opposite approach. The *Times* editorial page strenuously opposed secession early and often, and the publisher put up a $40,000 membership in a downtown business group that planned to fight the break-up move. The *Times* news coverage was more muted than the *Daily News*, which fits the differing styles of the two papers. Some secession fans believe the *Times* slanted its stories and headlines as much as the *Daily News* did, but the most frequent criticism of the *Times* was that it did not take secession's prospects seriously.

There was ample reason to be skeptical, given the history of the secession movement. Little demand for revolt against Los Angeles could be heard rising out of the Valley's neighborhoods—certainly nothing like the passions that ignited Proposition 13 or the anti-busing movement. At the first public hearing on secession downtown, no public showed up. Leaders blamed the embarrassment on inconvenient timing—9 A.M. on a weekday—but that seemed a lame excuse. That summer, hundreds of residents lined up their cars before dawn to buy Krispy Kreme doughnuts when an outlet opened in Van Nuys.

In fact, the former hotbed of suburban discontent had been steadily losing its political steam. Even when the chance came to send a message of protest over the hill—the most sweeping reform of city government in decades, on the 1999 ballot—voter turnout was abysmal. It was no aberration.

A more fundamental obstacle for secession was that every year the Valley becomes a bit more like Los Angeles. People in the Valley are more likely now to shop at the same stores and be fans of the same celebrity chefs as trendsetters in the city—and those chefs have now opened sister restaurants along Ventura Boulevard. Brand names that once connoted the Valley—local favorites like Bob's Big Boy, DuPar's coffee shops, Baskin-Robbins ice cream, Gelson's markets, KGIL radio—either stopped emphasizing their roots or faded away entirely.

It goes much deeper than that. Secession suffered from an image as a concern mainly of interest to the "old Valley," the suburban, mostly white and now

older residents who longed for simpler times. This hurt because the Valley was changing. A San Fernando Valley city would be a paradox—the whitest big city in America due to the lack of an urban core of African Americans, but it would contain a stewpot of tongues and sensibilities and aspirations, possibly a richer ethnic mix than even Los Angeles.

On the main suburban thoroughfares like Reseda Boulevard, there are store signs in Farsi, Arabic, Armenian, Spanish and Korean. In Panorama City, the first planned suburb of the postwar boom, the shopping crowds are mostly Latino. They flock to La Curacao, a Mayan and Aztec-themed department store where the clerks can speak Spanish and purchases may be picked up by family members back home at one of the retailer's outlets in Latin America.

Another sign of the New Valley was a *Times* study that found of all the campuses in the huge Los Angeles school system, the one where the most languages were spoken in 1998 was Granada Hills High School. A generation earlier, in 1970, when Granada met San Fernando High for the city football championship, the game was a symbolic showdown between the old and the emerging Valley: Granada's student body was almost all white and all-American, while San Fernando's team was led by black and Latino players. In front of 16,000 charged-up fans at Birmingham High School, Granada won 38-28; a melee in the stands ended the contest early. Now Granada High had become a symbol of the Valley's diversity. Its students spoke 28 native languages other than English: Spanish, Korean and Cantonese the most frequent, but also Punjabi, Tagalog, Greek, Hebrew, Croatian and Gujarati. Thirteen of the 20 campuses in the school system with the most languages were in the Valley. In a twist, the least diverse schools were in the Valley's traditional minority enclaves. Pacoima elementary schools such as Haddon Street and Telfair Avenue featured just one non-English language: *Espanol*.

The trend is unmistakable. In 1980 the U.S. Census found that a quarter of the Valley's population was foreign born. That share had grown to a third in the 1990 count, and crept toward 40% in the 2000 census. The Valley has become a prime settling area for middle-class immigrants drawn from around the world. Miles and miles of economically built and rapidly aging—and thus more affordable—tract homes and apartments provide places for new arrivals to live in a semblance of the fabled American suburbia.

Signs of the Valley's globalization are everywhere: More than 3,000 Armenian-American athletes compete in the annual Navasartian Games at Birmingham High. A cricket match in Sepulveda Basin is broadcast to England, Singapore, Australia and Pakistan. When war rages in Kosovo, Albanian refugees make their way to the Valley to wait out the terror with countrymen. Evidence of the new, more complicated demographic face is readily visible in Valley institutions. At Cal State Northridge, a survey of student enrollment showed 38% white, 22% Latino, 14% Asian, 8% black and the remaining 18% "other," including some few American Indians. A few blocks from campus, the Lutheran church built by Norwegian settlers in the farming outpost of Zelzah in 1917, still perfectly preserved, houses the Korean Los Angeles Antioch Church.

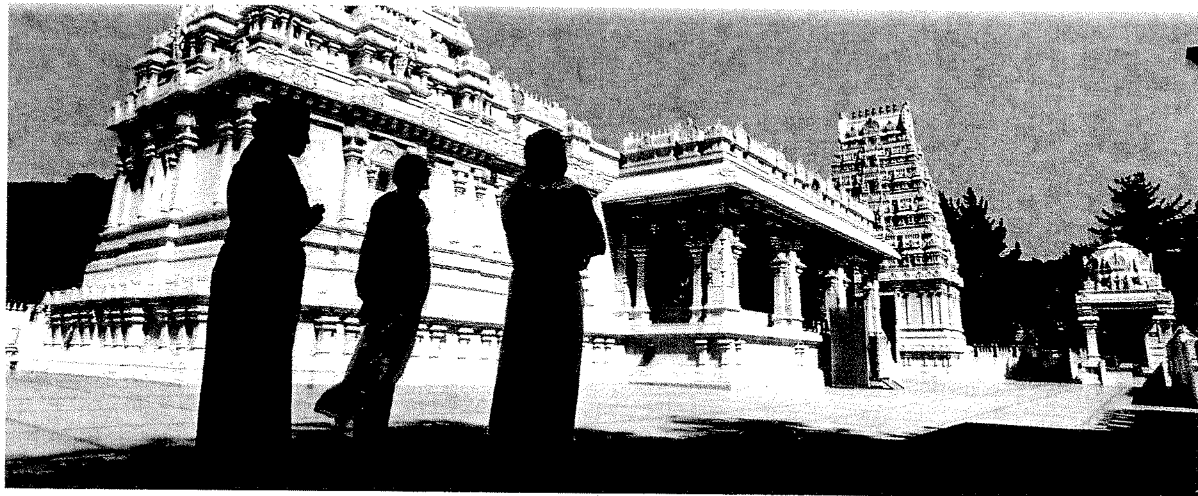
With demographic shifts like this, tensions happen. The Valley, not that far removed from its image as a whites-only haven, seems sometimes to seethe with barely concealed anger. After the First Presbyterian Church of Van Nuys, a fixture on Friar Street for 85 years, chose to close because the English-speaking membership had dwindled, the longtime church secretary admitted to the *Times*: "It's been very hard to take, a lot of people do resent it." Sandy Banks, a *Times* columnist in the Valley and an African American, wrote about apartment vacancies vanishing when she knocked on the door. One landlord welcomed her then confided, "We don't rent to the Mexicans." She also admitted her own struggles to accept a Korean family in her close-knit Porter Ranch cul-de-sac.

It's not surprising, then, that the last issue before secession to stir real Valley passion was Proposition 187, an initiative on the California ballot intended to bar illegal immigrants from schools and other public services. The 1994 measure served in many minds as a referendum on the demographic changes that have transformed the Valley.

On one side, supporters turned out in big numbers and shouted angry rhetoric at meetings and election forums. On the other, protesting students

walked out of high schools and marched through Van Nuys, Chatsworth and other communities. Some old-line Valley organizations found their members badly divided. The United Chambers of Commerce, normally a conservative body, split into camps and finally voted 15-10 to endorse the measure. "People are saying, 'I don't like this Third World takeover.' It is literally an invasion and very upsetting," said Guy Weddington McCreary, a Valley VOTE donor whose family helped settle North Hollywood. But a member of the Mid-Valley Chamber, which opposed Proposition 187, said it would hurt people in the Valley. "We didn't feel that requiring medical and educational personnel to be INS cops was appropriate," James Stewart said. The debates were wrenching. "I've been a member here for 30 years and I've never seen us so badly split," said lawyer David Fleming of the conflict within the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, successor to the organization that formed in 1949 to push for industrial growth.

The Valley's reputation as suburbia incarnate endures, even if the reality no longer fits the image so cleanly. During the secession campaign in 2002, reporters from media all over North America came to explore the Valley. Many wrote about the horse trails in Chatsworth, the boundless housing tracts, as well as about Valley Girls and porn. But the truth is, the Valley now has its own satellite suburbs—places beyond the mountains, such as Simi Valley, Stevenson Ranch and Westlake Village—where baby boomers who grew up in the Valley relocated in



The Venkateswara Temple was built for local Hindus on Mulholland Drive in Malibu Canyon.

Immigrant churches flourish across the Valley, often in makeshift surroundings. These services for a Serbian Orthodox congregation in Sylmar were held in 1993.

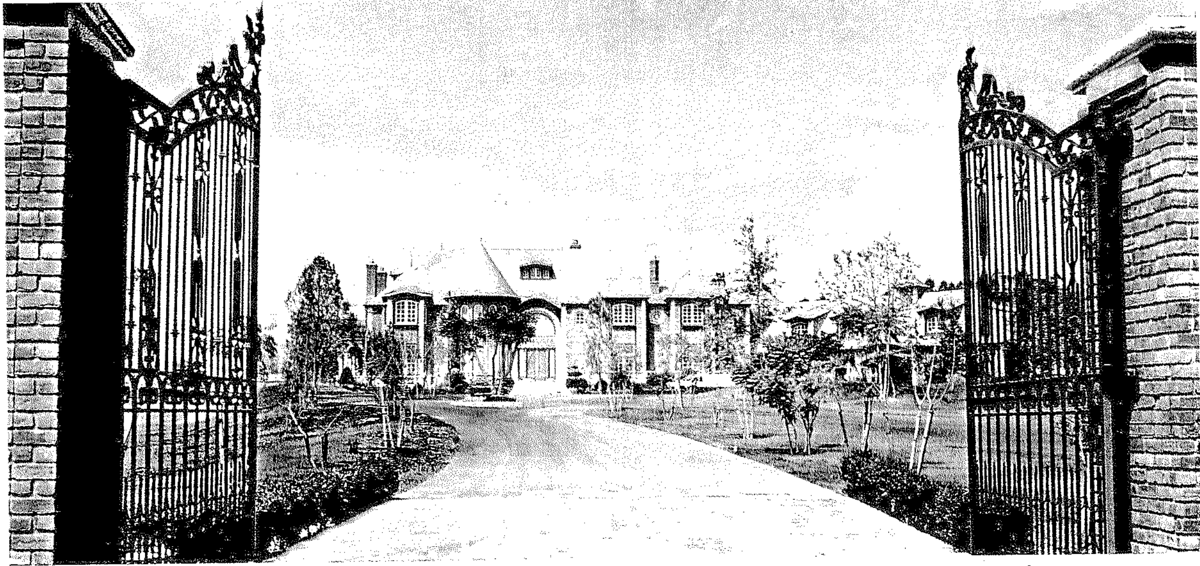
search of the less-urban existence they remember and want for their own children. Exiles in these small, truly suburban cities, among them Agoura Hills and Santa Clarita, are now almost as biased as diehard Angelenos against visiting the floor of the Valley.

Even the natives are less likely to sing the praises of their home turf. When the Los Angeles Times Poll asked inhabitants of the Valley what they thought of their community for a 1999 series on the suburbs, the responses were disheartening. One in four respondents said they regard the Valley as more urban than suburban, 35% said they no longer considered the Valley a good place to raise children, and most damning of all, 39% said they were thinking seriously of moving away within two years. In contrast, in newer suburban refuges in Ventura and Orange counties, upwards of 90% said they were happy with their lives.

Within the Valley, the existence of gated communities is on the rise—many of them enclaves of million-dollar homes and estates. Also, more neighborhoods are fashioning their own mini-secessions, redrawing the quasi-official boundaries between communities to get away from names tainted with a bad reputation or inventing new names entirely. North Hills was known as Sepulveda for 60 years, but that name was thought to be soiled by association with gangs, crime and soft property values. Parts of Canoga Park became West Hills and niches of North Hollywood won approval to call themselves Valley Village and West Toluca Lake. La Tuna Canyon broke from Sun Valley, and Arleta has battled with the U.S. Postal Service to separate its zip code from Pacoima.

Van Nuys, once the quintessential Valley address, is now the name most shunned. One corner broke off and declared itself Valley Glen, other sections fought to join the more posh Sherman Oaks, and an area near Sepulveda Dam is now proudly Lake Balboa. Homeowners in Van Nuys say all this disrespect is a bum rap: "Soon all we are left with will be the bad parts," a Van Nuys man moaned when Valley Glen won its separate status.

With all this as context, the long-festering question of the Valley's independence came before Los Angeles voters on Nov. 5, 2002. It had taken six years of guerilla politics by the secession faithful to get the measure to the ballot. The Valley's drive to detach had spawned a secession campaign in Hollywood, which also appeared on the ballot, and a smaller move in the Harbor area of Los Angeles, which didn't qualify for a vote. The Los Angeles City Council no longer had veto power over secession efforts, thanks to a law pushed by Paula Boland, a Valley member of the state Assembly during the 1990s. But in order for this



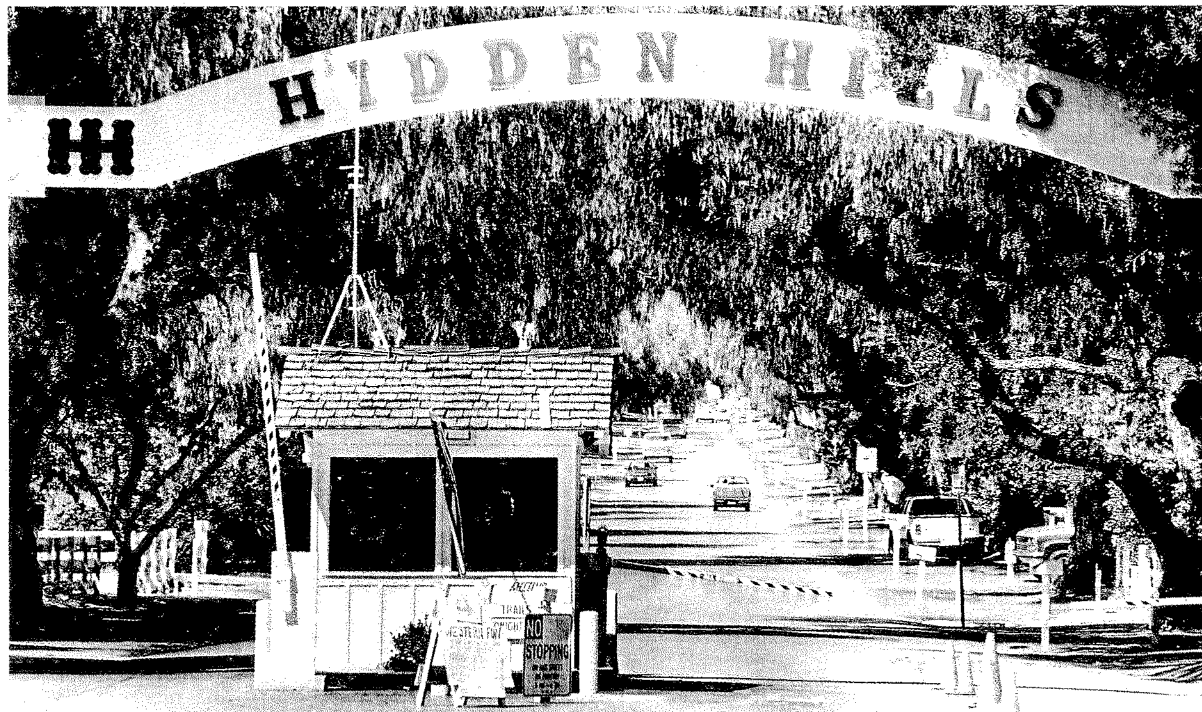
Monteria Estates, near Chatsworth, is one of the gated communities where residents with wealth are taking refuge.

divorce to happen, the Valley had to vote for Measure F and so did the entire city of Los Angeles.

For some, secession presented an enticing opportunity to engage new ideas and to start over. To stop complaining about the way government doesn't work and truly do something about it—by creating the first big city of the 21st century. And what befits the Valley's past more? The newlyweds who came after World War II—and all the immigrants before them and since—arrived looking for a new start in the fabled San Fernando Valley.

Others saw such a civic divorce as a monumental risk. The Valley city, with more than 1.35 million residents, would be the sixth most populous city in the U.S., not exactly the profile of a suburban refuge. It would begin life facing most of the problems that confront large urban area: aging neighborhoods and business districts, gnawing pockets of poverty and gangs, a spreading sense that the quality of life is declining. The tax laws of California conspire against large cities as well, unless they wish to commit large swaths of land to auto dealers and other retailers who generate sales taxes.

Some, too, saw no reason to give up their historic linkage to Los Angeles. Not just the city services they've come to rely on, but the more emotional ties of a lifetime. Some Valley natives enjoy being part of



Hidden Hills is an incorporated city located entirely behind guarded gates. The roughly 2,000 residents treasure their seclusion.

Citizens of the newly christened district of West Hills celebrated their secession from Canoga Park in 1987.

the American capital of trends and pop culture.

In the end, the message was difficult to read. Voters in the Valley split almost evenly, with a slim majority endorsing secession. Voter turnout was light, so it doesn't appear that most people were excited by the issue. The results split along the expected axis: the Old Valley—the older and whiter suburbs west of the San Diego Freeway—voted for secession. The New Valley—the immigrant neighborhoods east of the San Diego—opposed it. Secession even lost in Sherman Oaks, home base of the movement.

Backers could claim a victory of sorts, since without much money or many big-name supporters they did respectably in the face of a $7 million anti-secession campaign led by the Los Angeles mayor, James Hahn, with the help of most of the city's labor unions, major political contributors and elected officials. The accomplishment was little more than symbolic, however, since the rest of Los Angeles soundly rejected the idea. The citywide vote went about 2 to 1 against letting the Valley go.

A core group of secession loyalists vowed to press on with the fight. There was talk of filing suit to challenge the law that allows the residents of Los Angeles who live outside the Valley to vote at all. Others planned to work for less drastic reforms like dividing the city into boroughs and volunteering for neighborhood councils. Either way, without overriding the requirement of a citywide majority, the future prospects for secession don't seem likely to improve.

This is the Valley though—something else will come along to rile people up. Something always does. When people love where they live, it shows.

EPILOGUE

"I grew up in a place that has vanished, in a world that can be recalled by only a very few."

– Catherine Mulholland, granddaughter of water engineer William Mulholland in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*

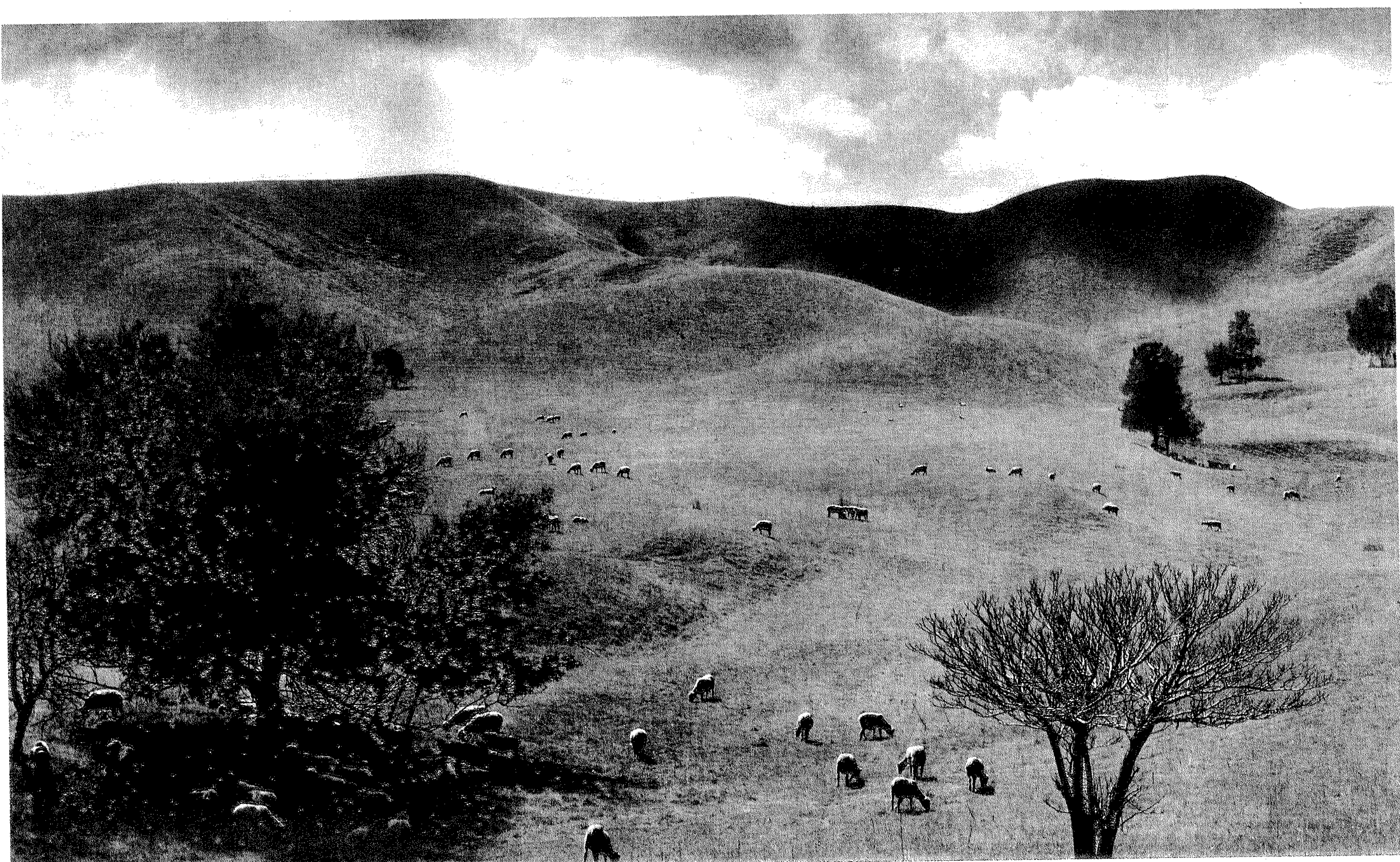
Everyone who lives in the Valley occupies a piece of ground with some connection to the stories told in this book. People digging in their yards have found grave markers, old cannonballs from the 1845 artillery battle between Gov. Micheltorena and *Californio* rebels, and Indian artifacts. History here is what you make of it, what you allow your eyes to see.

My family's half-acre in the Sherwood Forest section of Northridge had once been dry forage for longhorn cattle bearing the brand of Mission San Fernando Rey. It lay five miles southwest across the plain from the mission compound, past a shallow arroyo that somehow came to be called Bull Creek. Our little parcel then became part of Andres Pico's rancho and, later, a remote corner of George K. Porter's middle ranch. After William Mulholland's aqueduct brought irrigation water, our rectangle of land belonged to a walnut grove that sprawled southward from Parthenia Street—a narrow country lane connecting the settlements of Zelzah and Mission Acres—down to the Southern Pacific's Coast Line tracks.

We moved in late in 1956, among the first of the new suburban arrivals on Parthenia. Through the long summers we enjoyed the voluptuous shade cast by two giant, thick-limbed walnut trees. They served as second base in innumerable ballgames and kept us, and the squirrels, stocked in nuts. I realize now that every vacant lot down the block had a mature walnut tree at its center, and that they lined up in perfect rows. They were the survivors of the old way, and as the street filled in the houses were simply erected between the trees.

Such pleasing vestiges of the Valley's past can still be found by anyone with a curious eye. I drive the marathon boulevards and side streets looking for anything out of the ordinary in the suburban sprawl—a clump of tall eucalyptus trees, or an oversize corner lot where the lack of curbs and sidewalks signals the existence of a surviving ranchette. I enjoy finding hidden farmhouses tucked between fenced subdivisions, secret creeks with swimming tadpoles and dirt roads that seem out of place in modern Los Angeles. On one foray, I peeked over a brick wall on Lemarsh Street, in a tract built where I remember the pasture of the Northridge Farms thoroughbred ranch, and discovered the abandoned fruit orchard that actor Jack Oakie had planted six decades earlier, on the ranch he acquired from Barbara Stanwyck.

Orange groves dating from the heyday of citrus remain on the south edge of the Cal State University Northridge campus, at Orcutt Ranch Park in West Hills, and at the working Bothwell Ranch in Woodland Hills. Remnant olive groves may be spotted on Roxford Street and other old thoroughfares in Sylmar, the former olive capital. A splendid rank of olive trees lining Lassen Street in Chatsworth has been around so long they hold cultural monument status, as do the wooly deodar cedars shading White Oak Avenue in Granada Hills, planted by the foreman of the Sunshine Ranch before suburbia arrived.



This scene of sheep grazing on the hills along Ventura Boulevard in Woodland Hills was captured in 1956, but it could have been a century earlier.

Right on busy Vanowen Street, in Shadow Ranch Park, are the last physical remains of the Lankershim wheat ranching empire, which harvested nearly the entire southern half of the Valley from 1869 to 1909 and exported grain to Europe. The house was the headquarters of Lankershim's Workman Ranch, an outpost in a sea of wheat. Nearby, two gargantuan gum trees planted by foreman Al Workman as windbreaks more than 120 years ago are the last of his eucalyptus to have survived gales, freezes and the bulldozers.

In the Weeks Colony section of Winnetka and the Fuller Farm section of Northridge, I enjoy spotting what's left of the one-acre chicken ranches that lured so many to the Valley in the years after World War I. In Woodland Hills are still a few last examples of the speculative cottages built by land schemer Victor Girard, now shaded by mature trees he planted in the 1920s; from the same era, several dozen homes built of boulders can still be found in the Stonehurst subdivision, near horse corrals and unpaved streets in Sun Valley and Shadow Hills; and in central Van Nuys and Burbank and Northridge and Canoga Park are still homes and a few business structures left from each town's early years.

In some cases, we are fortunate to still have these evidences of the past. After the buried foundations of an old adobe were discovered across Lankershim Boulevard from Universal Studios, local historians said the building was probably the Rancho Cahuenga house where Andreas Pico and Col. John Fremont completed the surrender of California to American rule in 1847. Thanks to pressure from citizens who appreciate Valley history, the foundations will now be exposed to public view as part of the Campo Cahuenga monument that commemorates the surrender. Volunteers have saved the Andres Pico adobe in Mission Hills, perhaps the oldest remaining private house in the Valley, and which now contains a small museum and the holdings of the San Fernando Valley Historical Society. Nearby, the San Fernando adobe of the Lopez family that ran Lopez Station has also been restored. The Bolton Hall community meeting house in Tujunga was saved by the Little Landers Historical Society, which also operates a museum. The Hill-Palmer homestead house has been lovingly restored and maintained by the Chatsworth Historical Society. The last home of Miguel and Espiritu Leonis is open to the public in Calabasas, sheltered beneath a truly gargantuan oak. Other museums are dedicated to the history of Burbank and of Canoga Park-Owensmouth.

I have come to treasure all of these locales where the days that came before can be examined and quietly remembered. Some of them exude a palpable sense of history. The mouth of Bell Canyon in the Simi Hills is one of those unexpected spots for me. The creek that has flowed from the canyon for centuries is now fenced and channeled in concrete, but the rocky ridge looming overhead still looks just as it did when Spaniards gave it the name *El Escorpión*. It is not so hard to picture how the canyon must have looked when the Indian border settlement of *Huwam* stood beside the creek.

The grounds of Mission San Fernando Rey are another place where the air is thick with history. Visitors can absorb the grandeur of the *sala*, the great room, with its heavy doors beyond which the entire Valley once unfolded in a panorama of grass and foxtails. Or they may pause in the small graveyard out behind the church to ponder the 2,000 Indians whose remains were buried there. Earthquakes, vandals and time tore down the original adobe bricks, but restorations have created an historical oasis. In recent years, Pope John Paul II and, somewhat ironically, the King of Spain have walked the same corridors where Spanish padres once led prayers.

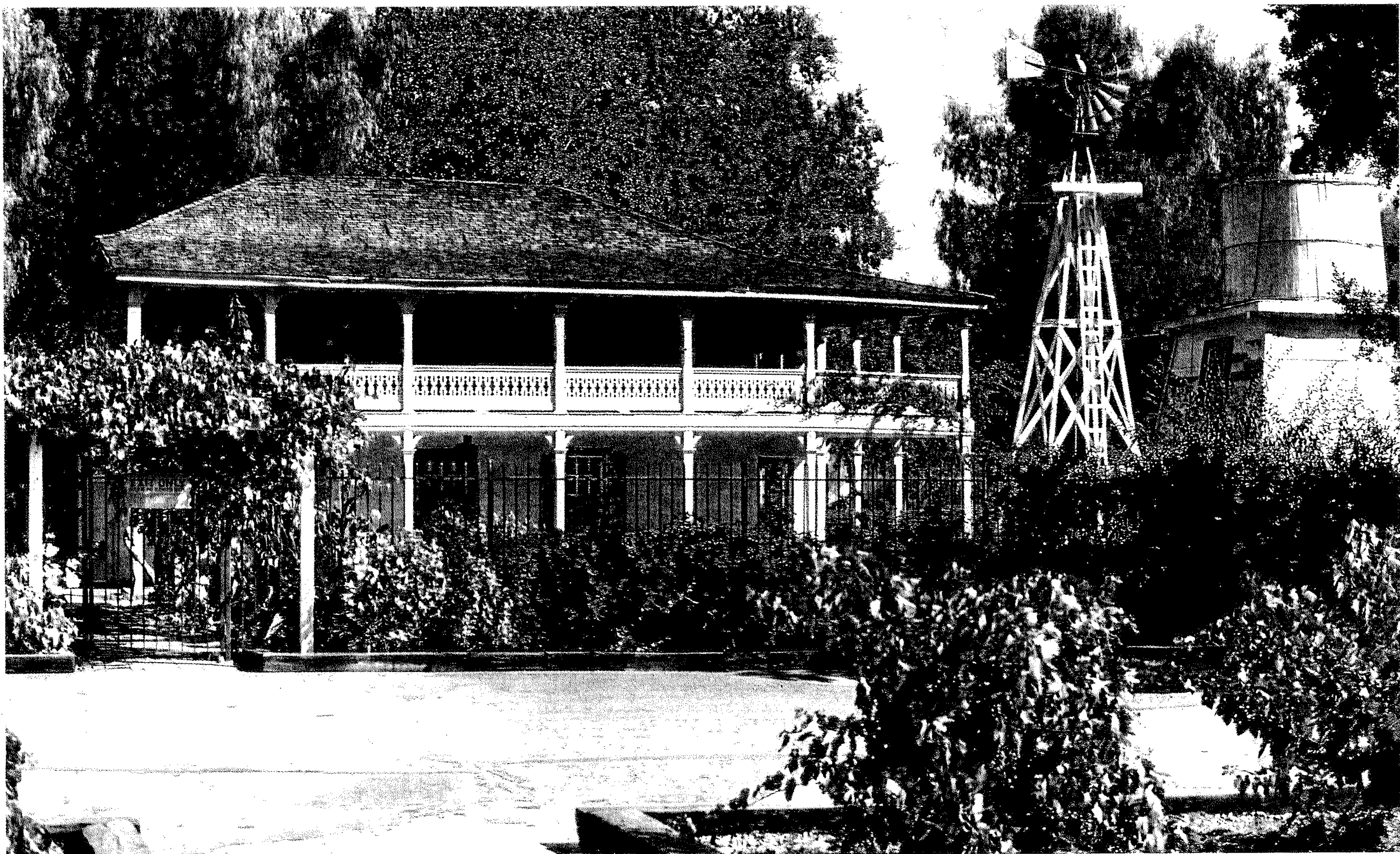
My favorite locale for observing the ghosts of the past is in an unlikely spot—on busy Ventura Boulevard, just east of Balboa Boulevard in Encino. I ignore the speeding traffic and the smoke belching from a Mexican restaurant, and instead picture a path worn in the dirt by boots and hooves and stagecoach wheels. In continuous use for more than 200 years, the path has gone by several names—*El Camino Real*, *Camino de las Virgenes*, Ventura Road, and now to many just The Boulevard. The sidewalk in front of Los Encinos State Historic Park is about the closest a Valley history chauvinist can get to hallowed ground: it just may be the location of *Siutcanga*, the village where the 1769 Portola expedition enjoyed Tongva hospitality. Inside the park, a warm water spring could well be the same abundant water source that

The Valley's oldest remaining wood-frame house and eucalyptus trees—the last vestiges of the Lankershim ranching empire—are located in Shadow Ranch Park in West Hills.

Portola's diarist, Fray Juan Crespi, and later correspondents wrote about.

This much is known: against the hillside on the far side of the boulevard, in the excavation for an office building, archaeologists in the 1980s found the richest trove of Tongva remains and artifacts ever unearthed. They and the media took to calling it the Lost Village of Encino. Nearby, they also found the detritus of a roadhouse and tavern run by Frenchman Jacque LaSalle that served Basque sheepherders on the Encino ranch. In the tavern's old dumping pit were found late-19th-century bottles, china and table implements, enough to reconstruct what food and liquors were served to travelers on the dusty highway. Both of those sites are now buried beneath an office building and parking garage.

But within Los Encinos park, other treasures remain on view. The acreage was saved by sharp-eyed residents who saw a developer's subdivision sign go up in the building frenzy after World War II. Their efforts preserved the last remaining piece of historic *Rancho Encino*, granted by Pio Pico to mission Indians and snatched from them by Vicente de la Osa, a local land schemer. In the park today, two buildings that look starkly out of place in the modern San Fernando Valley stand at angles to each other, guarded by California pepper trees and thorny tangles of *nopalera* cactus. The long, low adobe house was built facing the *camino* in 1851 by de la Osa, who used it as his home and as a roadhouse for travelers. The larger, two-story farmhouse was erected of limestone



The Leonis Adobe near Calabasas is a museum to the memory of Miguel and Espiritu.

The de Osa adobe in Encino was a real estate office in 1948, until neighbors acted to preserve it within a historic park.

quarried locally by the ranch's next owner, the French sheep breeder Eugene Garnier. The house bears a stunning resemblance to farmhouses found in Basque country in the French Pyrenees. It was Garnier who captured the waters of the famous spring in a pool shaped like a guitar. His initial and the date, 1872, appear on a metal gateworks on the pool.

Both old homes suffered severe damage in the 1994 earthquake. At least they are still standing—even though many longtime residents of the Valley whom I spoke with have no idea that the park and its treasures are there. The relics of the lost village gather dust in a warehouse, which seems a waste. Think how much richer the Valley's claim to have a distinct heritage would be if the village had been resurrected as an educational park—perhaps even as a spiritual home for the offspring of San Fernando Valley Indians, who struggle to hold onto some kind of identity.

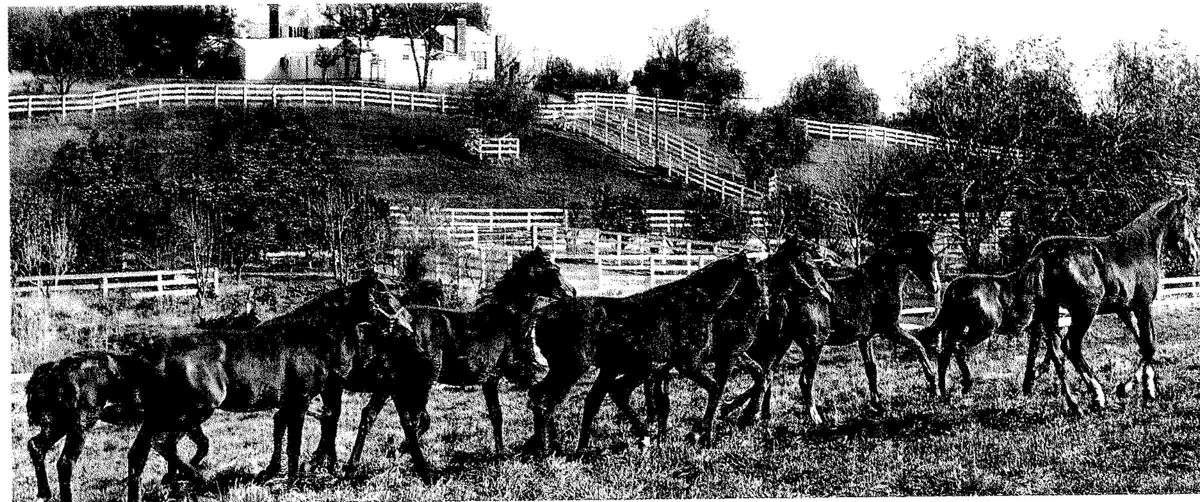
Like the lost village, many of the landmarks and noteworthy places mentioned in this book have vanished. There is nothing left to remind us, for instance, of the crowds that jammed the Jeffries Barn boxing arena on Victory Boulevard, or the Valley Garden Arena on Vineland Avenue, or the Garden of the Moon dance pavilion in Tujunga. Likewise, all traces have disappeared of the once-popular Pop's Willow Lake resort on Big Tujunga Wash, of the RKO studio ranch where Jimmy Stewart stumbled through the winter snow of Bedford Falls on a hot summer Encino day, of Richard Neutra's modernist von

Sternberg home or of the original control tower at Van Nuys Airport seen in *Casablanca*. Among the missing are landmarks of more suburban vintage such as the drive-in movie theaters, the Bob's Big Boy burger joints where Wednesday night cruisers gathered on Van Nuys Boulevard, the General Motors factory that made Panorama City possible and the Sherman Oaks Galleria made notorious as the 1980s hangout of obnoxious Valley Girls. The only vestige left of the old Busch Gardens theme park—at one time a haven of lakes and free beer at the Anheuser-Busch brewery—are the feral parrots and parakeets that squawk across the Valley sky and feast on backyard sunflowers.

In the months that I had the pleasure of working on this book, the old Valley has continued to disappear. Bulldozers took a large bite out of the arboreal knoll south of Ventura Boulevard where Gen. Harrison Gray Otis built his hacienda and planted exotic trees, and where Edgar Rice Burroughs coined the name Tarzana. An industrial park and a golf course went up beside the cascades in Sylmar where Mulholland's aqueduct makes its splashy arrival. Subdividers also began to carve up a piece of Plummer Hill where, for many decades, stands of eucalyptus and pepper trees have stood watch over a hidden creek. Graders were scouring out new homesites in the mountains above Porter Ranch, and big plans were underway for the former Ahmanson Ranch west even of West Hills, which used to be the end of the Los Angeles sprawl. Developers had their eyes on the abandoned Chatsworth Reservoir and on the Warner Ridge at Pierce College, both among the few places where one can catch a glimpse of what the Valley floor must have looked like when it was covered in grass. With each new subdivision and mini-mall, another irreplaceable piece of our past is lost.

In my old hometown of Northridge, I have watched the landmarks inexorably disappear. The reliable well that watered the laborers who laid the Southern Pacific tracks across the blazing Valley at the start of the 20th century—and that inspired the community's original name, Zelzah, a Biblical oasis—was buried beneath an auto parts store. The pre-suburbia, two-story grammar school in the center of town was removed for a bank. Most recently, to make

The Northridge train depot was razed five years after this 1956 picture showing station master E. J. Hillings. The station had served the original settlers of Zelzah.



Thoroughbred yearlings in training for racing careers romped at Northridge Farms in 1957. The land is now a subdivision.

way for another industrial park, bulldozers razed the last evidence of Devonshire Downs, home turf of the equestrian lifestyle that not so long before defined the west end of the Valley.

When my family first moved to Northridge, the community still seemed a bit like a country town and possessed much of its rustic charm. Horses grazed in inviting pastures behind white-plank fences on Reseda Boulevard. Neighbors of ours kept backyard stables, bred cottontails, and exercised their pigeon flocks every evening. We had encounters with garter snakes, alligator lizards and possums. But the transformation into suburbia was already moving at a gallop. The orange and walnut growers were moving away to less crowded places. Soon the thoroughbred ranches were gone, along with the board sidewalk in front of Brown's feed store and the wood-framed SP passenger depot at Reseda and Parthenia. In their spots rose apartment houses, a Zody's department store and a modern underpass to speed traffic beneath the train tracks.

Zody's is long gone, and some of those apartments stood for barely a generation before collapsing in the 1994 earthquake. The center of Northridge itself has shifted west a mile or two, to the clusters of shopping centers built over top of the old citrus and walnut groves, including the orchard of Catherine Mulholland's father, Perry Mulholland. Perhaps this is what people mean when they say that history doesn't count for anything in the suburbs. But that is a sentiment I can no longer accept as valid and accurate. For more than two centuries the San Fernando Valley has been filling up with people who left somewhere else to find a better life here, and they have made a past worth remembering.