

The Stagecoach Inn Museum



More than one hundred years of History, including a guest room for a "Resident Spirit"

By Donna Feeney

Want to hear a good story?

Visit a historical museum. Although such places often have been bad-mouthed as dry, dusty places, they are chock full of items with pasts rivaling bios of some well-known public figures. Admittedly, their backgrounds may not be as steamy.

Torrid or not, displays in museums do have a story to tell. Sometimes, in addition, the museum itself has a checkered history.

The Stagecoach Inn Museum in Newbury Park is such a place. The reconstructed hotel, which has been designated a local, state and national historic site, has had a past that includes many of the Biblical pestilences. Fire, flood and drought each have had a shot at the inn. And while locusts have not overrun the place, it has had bouts with termites.

Bad luck has been interwoven in the story of the Stagecoach Inn.

The original inn was built in 1876 by James Hammell, a Santa Barbara businessman. It was called the Grand Union Hotel and was located on the main thoroughfares

then called the Ventura and Los Angeles Road, now Route 101, the Ventura Freeway. An advertisement that appeared in the August 19, 1876 *Ventura Free Press* described it as a pleasure resort that offered good hunting and unsurpassed bathing facilities. "A good place to rusticate," it said.

Unfortunately, a severe drought devastated the area and within a few years Hammell lost the hotel at a Sheriff's sale.

An Englishman, Cecil Haigh, purchased the hotel and about 1,000 surrounding acres in 1885. In a taped interview for the museum's archives, his granddaughter, Reba Hays Jeffries, who lives in Newbury Park, recalled that her grandmother, who was born in Liverpool, as a young lady had been presented to Queen Victoria.

Her new home was no Buckingham Palace, although an ad that appeared in the *Free Press* in 1885 said that the proprietor would "spare no pains to make guests comfortable." It added that groceries, liquors, cigars and provisions were kept in stock and sold "at the most reasonable rates."

When the hotel opened, and at intervals after that, it served as the site of the ever-traveling Newbury park post office.

During one three-year period early in the century it was divided into four apartments. In the late 1920's and early 1930's it became Robling Military School. Patricia Russell Miller, who was raised on the Russell Ranch that has since become Westlake Village, said she and her sister attended a dance there at that time. She wasn't impressed. "It seemed kind of drab and musty," she remembers.

A touch of Hollywood glamour did come to the hotel in the person of Hoot Gibson, who filmed a cowboy flick there in 1930. Gibson co-starred with Sally Eilers, who became his wife for a union of short duration.

Following a period when the inn was used as a chicken and steak restaurant, it was rented by Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth McIntire who converted it into an exclusive gift shop. Long-time residents recall that the McIntires had a "closed door policy;" not ex-

one was given the privilege of shopping in their store.

In 1957, when the inn was in its 81st year, it became a Ventura County landmark. This was to have meaning a few years later when the planned expansion of the Ventura Freeway indicated that the hotel would need to be demolished. The Conejo Valley Historical Society was formed to save the site. Save it they did, for in 1965 the hotel was put on blocks ready for its move up the hill. Its new location was to be on land donated by the Allen Hays family, descendants of the Haighs.

After its move, the inn, which had changed in appearance during its many uses, needed a considerable amount of work. Community volunteers refurbished the building and secured donations for displays.

Their efforts literally went up in smoke, however, for on April 25, 1970, the inn burned to the ground. Some attribute the fire to electrical problems.

Although a number of items were recovered from the fire, few were of much value. Undaunted, the community and the historical society raised funds to rebuild the museum to its original 1876 appearance. Its reopening was July 4, 1976, in time for the country's bicentennial.

Since that time, the ground floor has been flooded and the roof has leaked. Nonetheless, the collections at the inn continue to grow and the volunteers who work there think that the museum's bad times are history.

But there still is the peril of Pierre to consider. He is the museum's alleged ghost, the spirit of a Basque sheepherder who apparently was murdered in the original hotel. A room on the second floor has been furnished for him and psychics have claimed to have felt his presence. To date, none of his supposed pranks have created serious problems, although a few squeamish volunteers reportedly resigned. His contributions will not be ignored in the upcoming exhibition as his Basque heritage will be among those recognized.

The museum, at 51 South Ventu Park Rd., is open Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. The entire complex is open Sunday, including Anderson Hall, containing a Chumash display, and the Carriage House, home of two stagecoaches. Self-guided tours are offered Sunday. Docent-led tours are given on weekdays. Volunteers are always welcome, says Docent Chairman Isabel Lee. For more information call (818) 889-1738.