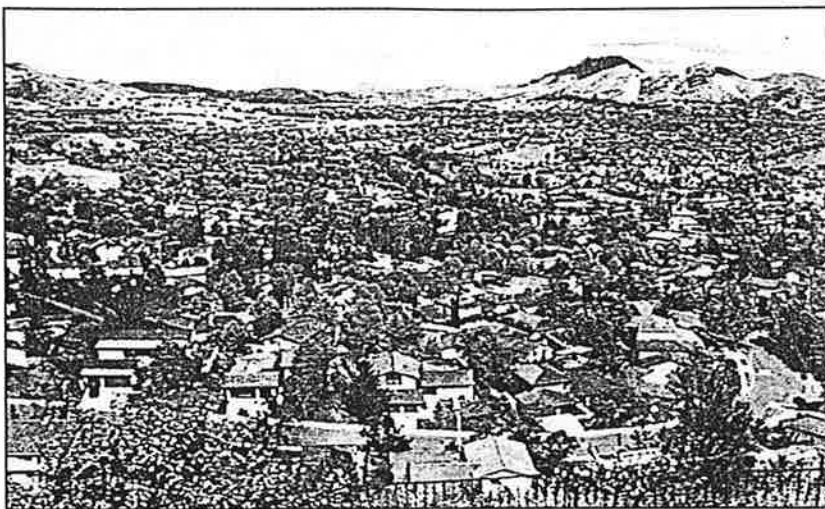


# THAT'S LIFE...

## WHERE IN THE WORLD IS RUSSELL VALLEY?



Ed Lawrence Photo, Courtesy City of Westlake Village

**THIS IS NOW:** 1984 view of Russell Valley (looking south from now-developed Foxmoor Hills) shows the bustling city of Westlake Village with city of Agoura Hills beyond.

By John Millrany  
Acorn Staff Writer

An oblique surveyor's line slices across the Russell Valley, dividing several communities into one of two counties, Los Angeles and Ventura. On the east side of the line is Westlake Village and on the opposite side is Oak Park and Thousand Oaks.

Where's Russell Valley, you say? Why it's right there under your nose. You know, starting somewhere near the Kmart store on Hampshire Road, tilting downstream, cradling both Westlake Lake and Lake Lindero before nudging up against the hills of Agoura and Calabasas.

Thought it was the *Conejo*—not the Russell—Valley, did you? Well if you did, you might be wrong but you wouldn't be alone. Unfortunately, this little-known historical fact has resulted in short shrift for the Russell family, whose forebears virtually paved the way for the development of most communities east of the Conejo Grade, all the way to Agoura Hills.

Interestingly, the line dividing Los Angeles and Ventura counties is almost analogous to the "County Divide." If you think of the Continental Divide, that line bifurcates two drainages, one to the east, one to the west. Similarly, Conejo Valley primarily drains to the northwest, including part of Thousand Oaks and Newbury Park, through

Camarillo on the Oxnard Plain, while Russell Valley drains to the southeast, via Triunfo, Medea, Las Virgenes and Malibu creeks. In both cases, of course, the Pacific Ocean captures the run-off.

Jim Henderson, one of the founders of Westlake Village and a current member of the city council, is devotedly attached to the story of how Russell Valley was named, often quoting Patricia Russell Miller's rustic reminiscences from her book, "Tales of Triunfo."

"One day in 1881, my paternal grandfather (Andrew Durkee Russell) boarded a stagecoach in Santa Barbara," Miller writes, "heading for the Conejo, where he hoped to buy his own ranch that is now Russell Valley. He had heard of a fertile one, studded with white and live oak trees, and with good water. En route, he talked to a fellow passenger, a land developer, who, he learned, was after the same ranch.

"Thus, upon reaching Ventura, grandfather rushed to the nearby livery stable, where he persuaded the owner to rent him his fastest horse."

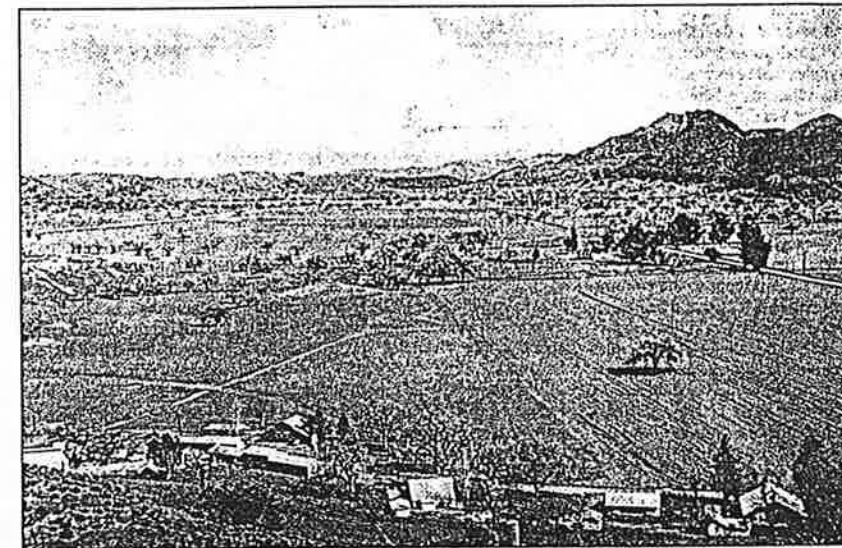
You could call it a "pulling a fast one," but the ploy worked; Russell galloped off to the east, beating the other buyer to the ranch, handed over a \$20 gold piece for a deposit, and ultimately took possession, with his brother Hannibal, of the 6,600-acre spread.

Over the years the Russell family raised hay and grain as well as registered Galloway cattle, hogs and Perherson horses, known for their ability to pull hearses, ice wagons and fire engines.

Before the ranch became the heart of what is now Westlake Village, its main claim to fame outside the valley was its post office at the old village of Triunfo, centered near the Ventura Freeway and Westlake Village where they intersect today. There was some confusion as to correct postal zones—just as today, some folks who claim to live in Westlake Village actually live within the city of Thousand Oaks.

"One thing we had, while living in one spot," Miller writes in her book, "was a whole lot of different addresses. I remember my grandmother used to drive her horse Billy, hitched to her surrey with the fringed top, to Newbury Park to pick up the mail. I have found envelopes addressed to the Russells at Newbury Park and dated as late as September 1916. There is also one for March 17, 1916, with Newbury Park crossed out and replaced with Triunfo.

"There also are some addresses from Owensmouth (now Canoga Park) for 1915 and 1916. And there are ones sent with Triunfo as the address, starting in 1916. However, after the demise of Triunfo, the mail was quickly re-routed from Agoura to



(Ed Lawrence Photo - Courtesy City of Westlake Village)

**THAT WAS THEN:** 1962 view from the site of future Foxmoor Hills residential development in Westlake Village/Thousand Oaks overlooks Russell Valley. Oak tree in right foreground marks the intersection of Westlake Boulevard and Triunfo Canyon Road. See page 11 for updated view of Russell Valley.

## Where in the World

Camarillo and we had a rural route, Camarillo address for years. That finally was changed to a rural route via Thousand Oaks.

"And now, with a Thousand Oaks post office, we use Westlake Village as our address."

Henderson joined fellow Westlake Village city council members last spring in commemorating the naming of Russell Ranch Road in the Westlake North development, and presented a plaque to Miller and her cousin, Russell Hughes, who reside in Westlake Village. The Russells will also be remembered by a park in their name now under development on the east side of the Costco shopping center at Lindero Canyon and Russell Ranch roads.

# Paradise is Also Known as a "Village Called Westlake"

By Ken Rufener

*The following historical account is taken from a speech made by Westlake Village City Councilman Ken Rufener during his term as mayor last year—the 10th Anniversary of the city.*

Some of you will remember, but most of you came too late to see the birth of a new community and to see how we looked in 1966, a quarter of a century ago.

If you had driven along the four-lane undivided blacktop road that is now the 10-lane Ventura Freeway, you would have seen a sight little different from what Padre Juan Crespi saw in January 1770 while traveling with the Don Gaspar Portola expedition or what Juan Battista DeAnza saw four years later.

But what neither Crespi nor DeAnza saw—and you surely would not have missed a quarter of a century ago—were the hundreds of black Aberdeen Angus cattle that grazed on what is now the Westlake Golf Course and the First Neighborhood.

In his diary, Padre Crespi described this area as "a plain of considerable extent and much beauty, forested in all parts by live oaks and sycamores, with pastures and water." He named it "El Triunfo."

DeAnza and his expedition camped near what is now the intersection of Westlake Boule-

vard and Triunfo Canyon Road. In his diary he wrote: "This is a lush valley where friendly natives made us welcome. There is little more to be desired for a homeland." Today a monument stands at the southwest corner of the intersection commemorating that campground.

Let us go back before any of us were here—back before Father Junipero Serra, DeAnza, Portola or Cabrillo were here. Back before the birth of Christ; back to the beginning—back to the first inhabitants—the Chumash Indians.

The Chumash were perhaps the most colorful and highly educated tribe in California. Their population was about 15,000 and their territory was along the coast from Topanga to Santa Barbara and out to the Channel Islands.

They were fishermen, but each fall many would work their way through the canyons of the coastal mountains into the Conejo Valley to hunt deer and rabbits, and gather acorns and berries.

They established small temporary villages here. There is evidence that they came back to these villages year after year. Some did live here more-or-less permanently, where we live today. Both Crespi and DeAnza mention Indian villages and the friendly inhabitants in their diaries.

Title to this land originated about the time our forefathers assembled some 3,000 miles to the east to declare the independence of this young nation from England.

The mapping and exploration of the Spanish soldiers and the explorers Cabrillo, DePortola, DeAnza and Father Serra enabled Spain to claim all of California in 1779.

The Spaniards who came as soldiers, explorers and mission founders liked what they saw and many stayed as vaqueros (cowboys). In 1803, the entire area from Newbury Park to Agoura became a Spanish land grant called El Rancho Conejo. The original grant was made to Ygnacio Rodriguez and Jose Polanco. The eastern portion including Westlake was known as El Triunfo.

In 1822, Westlake Village—and indeed, the entire territory of what now is California—became Mexican territory as a result of Mexico's revolution against Spain.

After becoming Mexico, the land was re-granted and the Polanco area—about 22,000 acres—was granted to Jose De La Guerra. A local Westlake Island resident, Hal Poett, is a direct descendent of De La Guerra and lived as a young boy on the family homestead north of Santa Barbara.

In 1871, the 22,000-acre El Conejo Rancho was sold to Howard Mills for \$2.30 an acre. He and his three daughters—his wife had died earlier—lived in a house located where Westlake Lake sits today.



Ken Rufener

Mills donated land for the first Conejo Valley school in 1877. The school building was located just west of Carl Jr's., behind the building housing the Seventh-Day Adventist Western Regional Office. A plaque there commemorates the site.

Mills sold off large blocks of land to various farmers and investors during the 1870s, including land to F.W. Matthiessen. Matthiessen built the dam for Lake Sherwood and turned it into a country-club resort. Mark Twain was an early visitor.

The years 1876, '77 and '78 were very dry in the Conejo. Just a little over three inches of rain was recorded in 30 months. It was no longer profitable to raise cattle or to farm. Consequently, the remaining 6,000 acres Mills

owned were auctioned by the mortgage-holder, San Francisco Savings Union.

Andrew Russell, a resident of Santa Barbara, heard of the auction and boarded a stage-coach bound for the Conejo. He sat next to a talkative San

Please turn to page 7

1902

## Westlake Village

from page 6

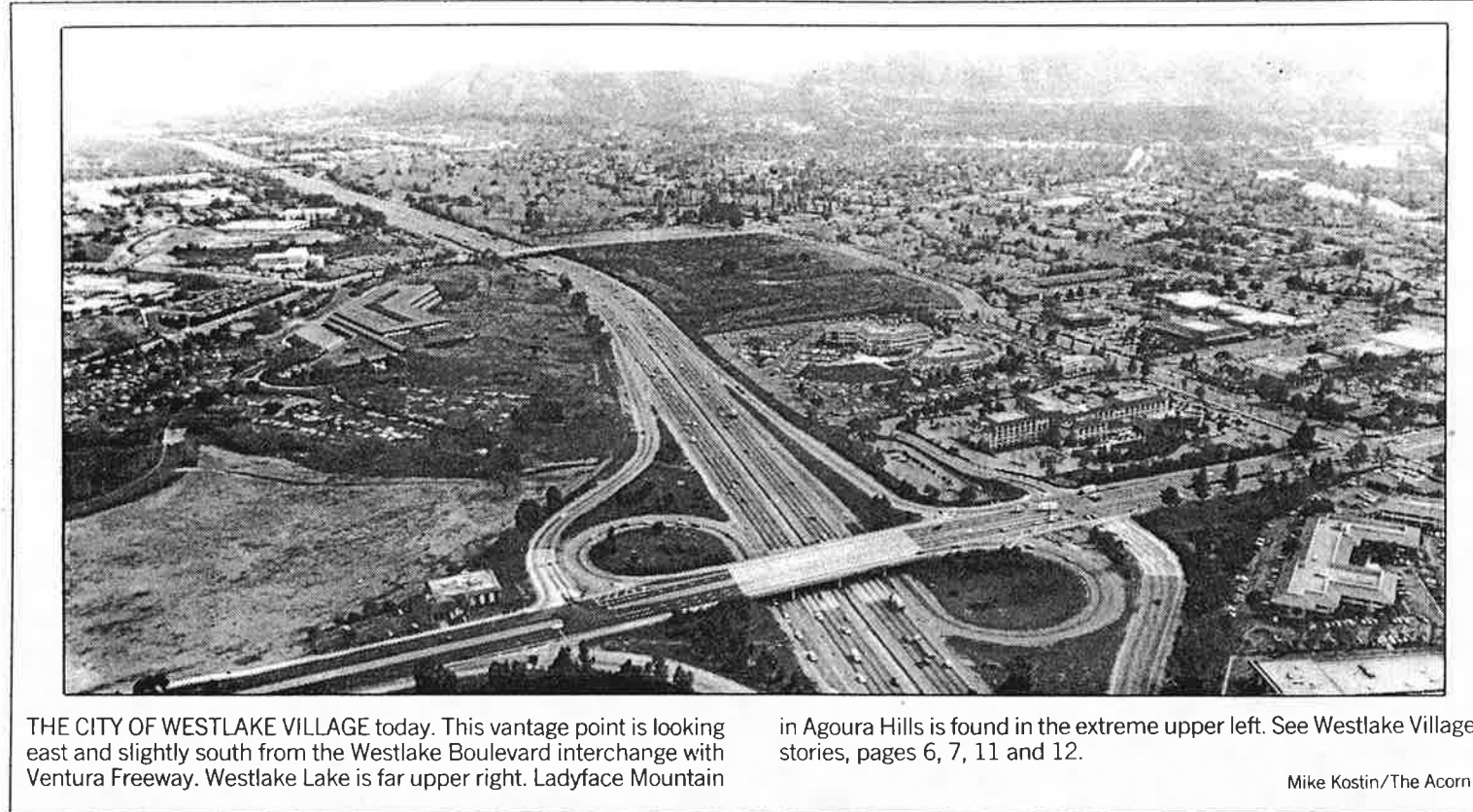
Franciscan who worked for the Savings Union bank.

The bank employee said he was on his way to the Conejo to buy some property which he expected to sell at a handsome profit. When the stage got to Ventura, Russell got off, hurried to a livery stable where he hired the best horse the stable owner owned. Galloping off in the direction of the Conejo, he managed to stay ahead of the coach by taking shortcuts.

Russell rode up to the De La Guerra adobe which was the sales office, and told the sales agent he was interested in buying the land. The agent took him on a hair-raising buckboard ride to see the land, and upon their return Russell gave the agent a \$20 gold piece as deposit on the 6,000 acres. The total price was \$15,000—\$2.30 an acre. The deed was recorded in the name of brothers Andrew and Hannibal Russell.

The Russells lived here for 90 years. Their house and barns were located on the hill behind Village Homes, a few hundred yards southwest of the Westlake Boulevard/Hampshire Road intersection.

Hannibal Russell died at the age of 41. He is buried along with 28 other early Conejo settlers in a special fenced-in plot just inside the entrance to Valley



THE CITY OF WESTLAKE VILLAGE today. This vantage point is looking east and slightly south from the Westlake Boulevard interchange with Ventura Freeway. Westlake Lake is far upper right. Ladyface Mountain

in Agoura Hills is found in the extreme upper left. See Westlake Village stories, pages 6, 7, 11 and 12.

Mike Kostin/The Acorn

Oaks Memorial Park. Upon his death, the ranch passed to the surviving brother.

In 1925, Andrew's son Joe, sold all but 160 acres around the ranch house to William Randolph Hearst. Hearst was interested in the land for oil exploration, because of a major discovery that year in Ventura—known as the Ventura Avenue field.

That was not the first oil found in the county however. In 1865, Thomas Bard, later to become a U.S. senator, discovered oil near Sulphur Mountain

in upper Ojai. That was the beginning of the Union Oil Company (Unocal). Its office was in Santa Paula.

Hearst did not find oil here. After he purchased the land, he leased it back to Russell and the ranch operation went on as before. Joe Russell recalled that Hearst visited the ranch only once—and that was when Marion Davies was making a movie here.

In 1943, Hearst sold his entire Conejo holdings—about 30,000 acres—to Frederick Albertson, a successful Los Angeles auto

dealer. He held the land until 1963 when he sold 12,000 acres to American-Hawaiian Land Company, owned by Daniel K. Ludwig, for \$32.5 million—\$2,700 an acre.

From 1963 to '65, American-Hawaiian set up the master plan for Westlake Village. A sales office opened in 1966, and the first homes were occupied in 1967.

The Westlake dam was completed during the winter of 1967-68, along with the southern half of the lake. A wet winter helped fill the lake in less than a week,

with water flowing over the spillway.

Westlake Village was a highly successful development from the beginning, except for one thing—a county line which put about one-third of Westlake Village in Los Angeles County and two-thirds in Ventura County.

It was not always like that. Prior to 1872 it was all in Ventura County, but in that year a survey party found an error in the rather loosely marked

boundaries. The boundary was moved about 1.5 miles west, leaving what is now the city of Westlake Village in L.A. County.

Between 1967 and 1972, the city of Thousand Oaks—in three separate annexations—brought the Ventura County portion of Westlake into its boundaries.

The portion in L.A. County remained unincorporated until 1981. In November, by a 79 percent majority, voters opted for cityhood. Incorporation came on Dec. 11, 1981, and Westlake Village became the 82nd city in the county.

*Rufener's wife Doris formerly served as historian for the city and assisted in the research for this speech. Also contributing were the current city historians, Ray and Joyce Prouty.*