

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

Photos courtesy Pacific Security Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, Carolyn Cole, Photo Archive Director

Odd 1800s Elections

■ Elections in the 1800s offer some fascinating details.

Since this is a year of elections in this country, I thought it would be fun and enlightening to look back at Los Angeles elections in the 19th century. To begin with, from 1850 through 1867, elections of local officials were held yearly. It is fascinating to realize that, in those formative years, what were conceived as

Committees evolved into many

Departments that we have

today in 2008. This is the

very truth of how deter-

mined and dedicated our Los Angeles forefathers were in dedicating their lives to a City they would not believe exists -- or maybe they did!

For the first 25 years of the City of Los Angeles under the American rule, the State of California mandated the government through the Act of Incorporation. In 1878, we received our first Charter, also mandated by the state. In 1889, Los Angeles conceived its first home rule Charter, which was amended ten times until the City gave birth, once again, to the 1925 Charter, which functioned for 75 years before being updated and replaced with our current 2000 Charter. But we must return to the terms of office and the election procedures of the City's 19th-century elections.

As stated above, from 1850 through 1867, Los Angeles had yearly elections. From 1868-1905, there were two-year terms; 1906-1909 a three-year term; and from 1909 through to the present, there is a four-year term, with two-year intervals holding an election for odd or even Council Districts.

In 1867, there was a peculiar election in Los Angeles. As usual, the election of that era was yearly. But three months after the election, it was considered invalid, and the 1866 slate of municipal officers returned to conduct official City business. As far as can be determined, at this time, the reason for the dismissal of the 1867 slate of officers was because the City Attorney was reviewing registration laws set up in 1866 for candidates to register before they were allowed to run for office. Apparently, two elected officials did not qualify.

Another aspect of early City elections relates to the voting process that definitely should make the present City Clerk's Office grateful not to have to endure the issues noted below, which comes from the bible of Los Angeles history, Harris Newmark's *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1913*. This lengthy verbatim passage was edited by Dr. Harris Newmark III and found in the current *Western States Jewish History*, Vol. 38, Spring/Summer 2006.

At the time of my arrival [to Los Angeles from Prussia, New York, and San Francisco], there was but one voting precinct and the polling place was located in the old municipal and County adobe ...,



This picture, taken in 1859, is the earliest known photograph of the plaza (Olvera Street area). The building in the center is the city reservoir. The Carrillo home faces it on the south, and the Lugo and Del Valle homes face it on the east.

although later a second poll was established at the Round House. Inside the room sat the election judges and clerks; outside a window, stood the jam of voters. The window-sill corresponded to the thickness of the adobe wall, and therefore about three feet deep. This sill served as a table, upon it being placed a soap-or-candle box, into which a hole had been cut for the deposit of the votes.

There was also no register, either great or small, and anyone could vote. Each party printed its own tickets; and so could any candidate. This resulted in great confusion, since there were always many tickets in the field—as many, in fact, as there were candidates; yet the entire proceeding had become legalized by custom. The candidate of one party could thus use the ticket of the other, substituting his own name for his opponents and leaving all of the remainder of the ticket unchanged; in addition to which there was such a lack of uniformity in the size and color of the ballots as greatly to add to the confusion in counting.

To make matters worse, the ballot-box was not easily reached because of the crowd, which was made up largely of the candidates and their friends. Challenging was the order of the day; yet after crimination and recrimination, the votes were generally permitted to be cast. Although it is true, of course. That many votes were legitimate, yet aliens like Mexicans, who had not even considered the question of taking out citizenship papers, were permitted to vote while Indians and half-breeds, who were not eligible to citizenship at all, were irregularly given the franchise.

Beyond the scope of Los Angeles, other unbelievable stories of voting chicanery occurred during the same era. Newmark relates two hilarious accounts where an entire tribe of Indians was allowed to vote. The other occasion involves "the names on a steamer's passenger-list were utilized by persons who had already voted that very day, once or twice! Cutting off the hair, shaving one's beard or mustache, reclothing or otherwise transforming the appearance of the

voter." These were some of the practiced pranks, which a new 1866 registry law partially did away with.

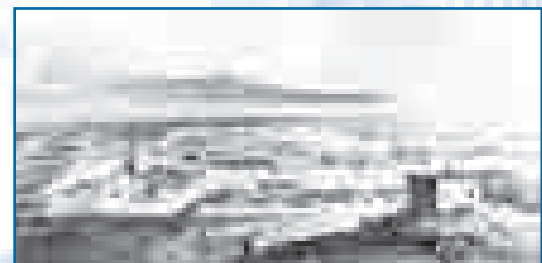
Sonorans, who had recently arrived [in Los Angeles] from Mexico [like others mentioned previously], were easy subjects for the political manipulator. The various candidates, for example, would round up these prospective voters like so many cattle, confine them to corrals (usually in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights), keep them in a truly magnificent state of intoxication until the eventful morning, and then put them in stage[s]...for the purpose...as temporary prisoners...until their votes had been securely deposited. They were closely watched by guards.

On reaching the voting place, the captive[s] were unloaded from the stage[s] like so much inanimate baggage and turned over to friends of the candidate to whom, so to speak, for the time being they belonged. One at a time, then creatures were led to vote; and as each staggered to the ballot box, a ticket was held up and he was made to deposit it. Once having served the purpose, he was turned loose and remained free until another election unless...[they] were corralled again and made to vote a second or even a third time the same day.

Happy primary election day to one and all!



Harris Newmark, author of *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1913*. (Photo courtesy the *Western States Jewish History Journal*.)



A bird's-eye drawing of the Plaza and pueblo in 1853.



One of the earliest known drawings of the pueblo of Los Angeles, 1847. Drawing by William Rich Hutton.