

The War Over Bullock's Bridge

■ Bullock's plan to build a bridge over St. Vincent's Court in 1919 created a war between Chandler's Times and Hearst's two papers.

by Eddy Feldman

In 1896, Fourth Street and Broadway was way out in the country. A small retail store at that corner proved the point by failing. Arthur Letts, an émigré from Holdenby, Northhamptonshire, England, and newly arrived in Los Angeles, purchased the bankrupt store and merchandise at an auction for \$8,167. Mr. Letts turned out to be a talented merchant, and as his general merchandise business prospered he acquired various nearby buildings. The intersection of Seventh and Broadway fascinated him.

Early in 1906, a developer began building a seven-story store at the northwest corner, but the project died, with the steel work halted midway. The owner called on Mr. Letts, who promptly signed a 50-year lease on the unfinished structure. Mr. Letts appointed an executive at The Broadway, John G. Bullock, to complete development of the newly acquired property by organizing another entity to be known as Bullock's Department Store. He also put up \$250,000 to get it started. Mr. Bullock left The Broadway on Nov. 1, 1906, taking another Broadway executive, P.G. Winnett, with him.

Bullock's opened to the public March 4, 1907, and succeeded swiftly, catering to buyers of "finer merchandise." Expansion westward was indicated. In July 1917, Bullock's acquired a building on Hill Street, north of Seventh Street, which had been occupied by the Pease Furniture Company. A bridge was built with a permit from the City Council.

Then, in June 1919, Bullock's signed a long-term lease covering the property at the northeast corner of Seventh and Hill Streets and at the Eshman Building at 311 W. Seventh St. These transactions gave Bullock's unbroken frontage from Broadway to Hill Street, other

than for an alley, 40 feet wide and 60 feet deep between Bullock's and the Eshman building and unbroken frontage on Hill Street, two thirds the way north towards Sixth Street.

The Los Angeles Times recorded the event:

"The purpose behind the transaction is business expansion, according to Mr. Bullock, who foresaw this step as one which, in the light of store's wonderful story of mercantile development since it was established 12 years ago, was necessary to parallel the phenomenal progress of Los Angeles...." When it is remembered that only as far back as 1906 the corner of Broadway and Seventh, where the present fine Bullock's store is situated, was occupied by a two-story frame structure – a relic of the early [18] eighties – it is pointed out that such progress would represent at least half a century of growth in an eastern city."

The block, Sixth Street and Seventh Street bounded by Broadway and Hill Street, is an interesting piece of real estate. As Harris Newmark noted in *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1913*, in the late 1850s, Ozro W. Childs contracted with the City to dig a water-ditch, perhaps 1,600 feet long, 18 inches wide and about 18 inches deep. The City allowed him one dollar per running foot, and he took land in payment. The land, comprised in part the "wonderfully important" square beginning at Sixth Street and running to Twelfth, and took in everything from Main Street to Figueroa.

Boyle Workman, who had been a schoolmate of Mr. Childs at St. Vincent's College, and was president of the Council during this period, added in his recollections, *The City That Grew*, that had Mr. Childs held on to the land, "its ultimate value would have been so great that he would have received more money for the contract of digging that *zanja* [ditch] than the United States paid for the construction of the Panama Canal."

A plaque installed on Sept. 4, 1957, on the alley wall of the original Bullock's store, reads in part:

"St. Vincent Court: This was the site of St. Vincent's College from 1868 to 1887. The college, now Loyola University, was founded by the Vincentian Fathers in 1865 and was the first institution of higher learning in Southern California."

We return to Bullock's bridge.

If Bullock's intended to expand the operations of the several upper floors of Bullock's to the several upper floors of a renovated Eshman building, it needed access other than by the passage way at ground level. A bridge over the alley connecting the several floors, and a tunnel underneath to service them, was the answer. Now, although the

property on both sides of the alley was owned or controlled by Bullock's, the City still owned an easement over this public way by virtue of the recording of a map back in 1886. Such being the state of affairs, Bullock's required a permit from the City to build the bridge and the tunnel.

Bullock's petitioned Council for such a permit on Aug. 20, 1919. The petition was referred to the Public Safety Committee, which recommended approval of a permit to erect a structure nine stories tall. Bullock's anticipated no problem. After all, the City had granted a permit to build a bridge between the Bullock's and Pease buildings in 1917. However, Councilman Walt Mallard, a member of the Committee, opposed the recommendation because the City would not receive any compensation for what he called a "grab." On Sept. 22, 1919, the Council granted the permit, anyway. Excavation began.

The permit also stated that it shall be revocable at any time at the pleasure of the Council of the said City of Los Angeles, or at the pleasure of such other officer, body or board as may be empowered to revoke such permits

Bullock's was not comfortable in committing to thousands of dollars of construction if later Council might move – for whatever reason – to revoke the permit. Bullock's wrote to Council offering to pay a "just" rent and thus "make its grant secure." The Council referred the matter to the City Attorney.

There was something of a consensus at the time that this alley was worth \$480,000.

It should be noted that in the years during which the Bullock's construction was going on, there were just three newspapers of significant circulation: *The Los Angeles Times*, owned by the Chandler family, and the *Evening Herald* and the *Examiner*, which were both owned by William Randolph Hearst. Bullock's, which advertised extensively in *The Los Angeles Times*, placed not a single advertisement in either Hearst paper. It is not surprising then, that, by February 1921, a few months before a primary Council election, there would be a full-blown war between the Hearst papers and *The Times*. Hardly a day went by when there was not some publication of provocative remarks that may have titillated members of the public, but which were deadly serious to the individuals with financial interest in the outcome. To the Hearst papers and to President Mitchell, the permit to build over St. Vincent's Place was an unconscionable gift of the taxpayers' property – a "grab" by a millionaire. To *The Times*, Bullock's was demonstrating the wonderful attractions of Los Angeles and the skill and good will of a master merchant. In addition to serious editorials written in stern prose, readers were treated to poetical arguments from both sides.

On Feb. 18, the *Evening Herald* published a parody after Thomas Macauley's "Lays of Ancient Rome," with John Mitchell as "Horatius at the Bridge." Only the last two of 23 verses need be printed here:

*Then with a crash like thunder\Fell every loosened
beam\And, like a dam, the mighty wreck\Crashed down
and blocked the scheme.\And a long shout of
triumph\Rose from the walls, about\As Bullock's bridge
did bust in 'twain\And Letts must flee in route.*

*When the leaders meet in session\And hear the public
needs\When the vested rights of people\Superseded all
grasping greeds,\With cheering and with laughter\Will be
the story told,\Of how John Mitchell wrecked the*



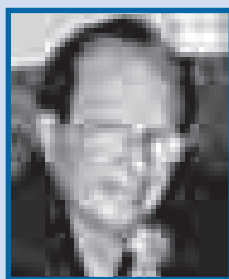
Landmark dedication of St. Vincent's Court, 1957.

Please welcome my guest columnist, Eddy Feldman.

Eddy moved to Los Angeles in the 1940s, where he continues as a practicing attorney to this day. From 1958 to 1975, he was the Managing Director of what is now known as the Los Angeles (Furniture) Mart. From 1961 to 1973, he was a member and President of the Los Angeles Board of the Municipal Arts Commission, a precursor to Cultural Affairs.

Eddy is a prolific writer in history, litigation and legislation. In 1979, the Dawson's Book Shop published his book, *Street Lighting of Los Angeles*. He is past President of the Los Angeles City Historical Society, 2004-2007. He is working with Councilman Tom LaBonge on a Sister Cities project.

— Hynda



Guest columnist, Eddy Feldman.

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member

'bridge' And left Letts-Bullock cold.

A few days later, a poem, inspired by one written by Robert Louis Stevenson, appeared in *The Times*. The last few verses will suffice:

What matters so I may have my fun?
What matters so I may gorge my spite?
The people are so credulous
I cannot resist the rich delight

Of making long-eared fools of them
Of stretching merchants on the rack
Of threatening reputable men
Who advertise not with me
Shall feel my knife in his back!

I sing my ditty, do my dance,
My eyeballs rolled up toward the blue.
Pay off my private grudges well,
And to "deluded taxpayers" yell:
Dear people, all for the love of you.

On Feb. 15, the Council moved that the City Attorney be instructed to prepare an ordinance revoking the permit. But President Boyle Workman ruled the motion out of order, for which action he was renamed in the Hearst press as "Hard-Boyled" Workman: Councilman Wheeler remarked to the Council that the Council "had a legal right to do what they did [grant the permit], but it was just as legal that the petitioners should comply with the law; this, they have not done; had Bullock's come to the Council as one who had complied with the law, the Council may have been legally justified in allowing the petitioners to proceed, but as it is the Council can consistently refuse to allow them to proceed. It is rather peculiar that some papers and organizations that are loud in their daily demands for the enforcement of law, suddenly reverse their attitude, and demand and require that the little fellow obey the law; why should the millionaire be excepted."

Mr. Bullock responded to the criticism and informed the Council that it had always been prepared to pay a "just" compensation to the City if a way could be found to make the payment legal. On Feb. 17, the Council requested the Los Angeles Realty Board to report to it what it found to be a "fair market ground rental value per month" of St. Vincent's Place.

The newspaper war continued. On Saturday morning, Feb. 26, the *Times*' front page, left hand column, was headlined: "Hearst Takes Charge of It." The story became personal:

"Dissatisfied it appears with the abortive efforts of his local representatives to blackjack Bullock's because that

store declines to forget his pro-German war record and advertise in the *Examiner*, William Randolph Hearst has assumed personal charge of the anti-Bullock campaign and is directing by wire from New York a concerted attempt by the entire field force of the *Examiner* to array the merchants of Los Angeles against each other.

"Hearst ordered the lavish use of billboard space now being given to the fight on Bullock's by the *Examiner*, and Hearst directed that every available man be sent out from the *Examiner* office to call upon the other merchants of the city and to represent to them that the Bullock interests, as their business risks, are their personal rivals as well. In this not-too-subtle way the Hearst men are instructed to try to persuade the businessmen that they should support Hearst's *Examiner* and *Herald* with advertising and in other ways because of Hearst's war on the common enemy."

On Feb. 28, the *Evening Herald* reported a suggestion that "the children of the city might begin a revised game: 'Bullock's bridge is coming down, coming down, coming down.' And they could shout, 'Let's take the bull out of Bullock's.'"

The Realty Board submitted its report to Council on March 2, concluding that the net annual rental value of the nine upper floors over St. Vincent's Place should be \$5,370.

Frustrated by the Council's inaction, Mr. Hearst's people acquired signatures for two initiative propositions: (1) to revoke the permit given in 1917 to Pease Furniture Company and to Bullock's for the bridge already built between their stores, and (2) to revoke the permit given in 1919 for the bridge over and passageway under St. Vincent's Place. If the 1917 permit were to be revoked, the bridge presumably would have to be demolished, and in the 1919 instance the work on the partially completed structure would have to be torn down. After only four days, Hearst submitted 12,207 signatures in favor of Propositions 1 and 12,207 signatures in favor of Proposition 2.

On March 7, Bullock's agreed to pay the \$5,370 for 34 years, even though, it still insisted, it was not legally obligated to do so.

Council on March 16 placed the two initiatives on the May 3 ballot. At the request of Bullock's, it also placed a third proposition accepting Bullock's offer to "donate" \$5,370 annually for 34 years.

The papers took sides, of course.

The Hearst papers supported the four councilmen who "are credited with standing the 'acid test' in their action in refusing to give up a valuable price for city property for the erection of a store building without proper financial remuneration to the City." The *Evening Herald* noted that three of the "faithless five" [Councilmen] who voted to give away a city street for a store building, and who are candidates for reelection will not be looked upon with favor by the voters.

Large ads appeared in *The Times* supporting Bullock's position, urging "no" on Propositions 1 and 2, and "yes" on Proposition 3. The names of many prominent like-minded citizens were listed.

On election day, the voters firmly rebuffed the Hearst proposals,



Bullock's on Seventh and Broadway, 1938.

while at the same time they accepted \$408,000 at the rate of \$1,000 a month over 34 years.

Next morning *The Times* chortled:

"The vote yesterday was one of the severest in the series of setbacks the New York publisher has received in his career, which has been marked by similar unsuccessful attempts to act as a dictator to National, State and City governments in the United States."

The editorial in the *Evening Herald*, nevertheless, made it look more like a Hearst victory:

"The People Have Spoken.

"By an overwhelming majority the voters of this city have gone on record against permitting any person, firm or corporation using municipal property for private gain without paying a just rental fee to the municipality.

"Proposition No. 3 on the primary ballot, which makes it necessary that Arthur Letts and J.G. Bullock pay the city of Los Angeles the sum of \$1,000 a month – or \$12,000 a year – as rental for the building site over a public thoroughfare received by far the heaviest vote polled at yesterday's election. The taxpayers of this city overwhelmingly went on record at the ballot box against the efforts of Letts and Bullock to grab St. Vincent's place and convert it to their own uses without reimbursing the people, whose rightful property it is.

"The *Evening Herald* is very proud of the leading part taken by this newspaper in exposing the Letts-Bullock scheme and in aiding the people to win the victory against greed and oppression which was scored yesterday by the voters."

The Times was not in a forgiving mood. Its editorial on May 5, read in part:

"Hearst Blackmailers Rebuked.

"Revenge may be sweet; but an attempt to secure it that falls is gall and wormwood. By an overwhelming majority the voters of Los Angeles have served notice on Hearst and his Los Angeles subalterns that they are not so stupid nor so credulous as to aid Hearst in punishing those who have withered him with their contempt. His minions on the *Examiner* and the *Herald* have seen the tremendous vote by which the initiatives whereby they sought to destroy the Bullock's bridges have been repudiated by the people and they are about as happy as whipped lackeys....By Bullock's agreeing to make a donation to the Treasury while the bridges are maintained, the city gets a virtual rental even greater than it would probably receive if the land were city property."

On May 12, City Attorney Stephens informed the Board of Public Works that there was no legal restriction on Bullock's resuming construction. The City Clerk reported to Council that checking the signatures on the initiatives had cost the city \$1,938. On July 1, Council adopted an ordinance carrying out Propositions 1, 2 and 3 by affirming the permits and adopting an agreement that fixed the times when Bullock's would pay its obligation to the City. On Aug. 24, the agreement was signed by Mayor George E. Cryer and John G. Bullock. The store had already sent two checks, each in the amount of \$1,000 for rent for July and August 1921.



The Broadway Dept. Store in 1896.