

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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

IN MEMORIAM: Dr. Doyce Nunis Jr.

■ The City has lost its pre-eminent local historian.



Dr. Doyce B. Nunis Jr.

Historian Doyce Blackman Nunis Jr., distinguished teacher, author, editor and beloved dean of the southern California community of scholars, died Jan. 22. He was 86. He had been in failing health for the past year.

Professor Nunis began his lifetime of service as a teacher at El Camino College, where he quickly attained tenure. He was then offered the post of field historian at UCLA, assigned to locate and acquire manuscripts and papers and to create a program in oral history. He subsequently accepted a professorship at USC, where he continued teaching history and heading the department for the rest of his academic career. He was the recipient of USC's Award for Teaching Excellence and more recently he was given USC's Distinguished Emeriti Award.

He was a passionate advocate of original research, setting an example for his students in using primary documents including personal letters, journals and public records to construct an understanding of the past. He pursued his research through the nation's libraries and collections, going to St. Louis for the materials relating to the fur trade and to Baltimore for early railroad papers. As a Guggenheim Fellow in 1964, he searched in London through documents of the Hudson's Bay Company and went on to search the files of the London Public Records Office,

the archives of the House of Lords and the papers at the House of Commons. He drew upon these materials to write his first book, *Andrew Sublette, Rocky Mountain Prince, 1808-1835*. In all he authored more than 70 articles and wrote or edited more than 40 books.

His subjects ranged from the history of the frontier west to the history of science and medicine to American political thought. He was fond of the art and architecture of the European Renaissance and traveled widely to appreciate it firsthand. He was devoted to the opera, chamber music and the symphony, giving substantial support to the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra.

Doyce had a special fondness for working with the collections of the Huntington Library and in turn brought to the staff's attention many newly discovered documents, including the papers of Los Angeles pioneer, Benjamin D. Wilson. He was given the archive by Wilson's granddaughter, Anne Wilson Patton, sister of General George S. Patton. Recognizing the value of the collection, Doyce requested that the gift go to the Huntington Library, where it would be available to future generations of scholars.

Professor Nunis supported the Historical Society of Southern California for decades, serving as editor of the society's scholarly publication, *Southern California Quarterly*, for

As the reader shall see, Dr. Doyce B. Nunis Jr., a retired professor of history at the University of Southern California and the most knowledgeable historian of local interest, has died. He was truly a renaissance man in every sense of the word. Not only was his expertise of California history broad-based, but he gave to the local community, namely the City and County of Los Angeles, outstanding and everlasting contributions in book form, including *Los Angeles and Its Environs in the Twentieth Century: A Bibliography of a Metropolis, 1900-1970*, which was updated from 1970 to 2000 and can now be found on the University of Southern California's database.

Doyce was very involved with the City. A giant among scholars, he assisted me when I had an idea that a history of Los Angeles City government from 1850 to 2000 needed to be written. He was the first person I contacted with my concept. After much discussion, we called for an advisory board to meet for further exploration. It was then decided the history of this monumental City government should be looked at, as a work-

ing whole, through the different departments that truly give this government its total personality. Many of these agencies, bureaus and offices of today were seen originating as committees as far back as the 1850s, when the City of Los Angeles had very humble beginnings. The two-volume history of our City government is titled *The Development of Los Angeles City Government: An Institutional History, 1850-2000*. Dr. Nunis wrote the prolog.

He also gave of his time very generously when this newspaper, *Alive!*, did a feature story in October 2006 on the 250th birthday of our City. That issue of *Alive!* features a great interview with him. If you don't know much about the City's history, or you want to dispel some of the common myths about the City's founding, I recommend you read it for a good, basic knowledge.

The following comes from the original memorandum. It was written by Patricia Adler-Ingram, Ph.D., Executive Director, Historical Society of Southern California.

— Hynda

43 years. He was founding chair of the Santa Barbara Mission Archives and of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles at San Fernando Mission. His service in the preservation of the archives was recognized by Pope John Paul II with the order of Knight Commander of the Pontifical Order of St. Gregory.

He was a committed student and interpreter of the documents relating to the Spanish colonial era in the southwest, editing a bilingual reference book, *The Founding of Los Angeles: A Bilingual Edition*, for publication by the Historical Society of Southern California.

For this work and an earlier anthology titled *Southern California's Spanish Heritage*, King Juan Carlos II of Spain bestowed on him the Orden de Isabel la Católica.

Professor Nunis was an officer of the rare book collector's organization, the Zamorano Club, of the Westerners' Los Angeles Corral, and of the Historical Society of Southern California.

In a recent interview Professor

Nunis said, "I have found historical research to be an unending chain of questions with one link drawing you on to the next. It is a grand pursuit."

A Memorial service was held at the Chapel of Saint Vibiana in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Los Angeles Feb. 18.

Dr. Doyce Nunis spoke to *Alive!* in October 2006.

