

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Hynda Rudd
City Archivist (Retired) and Club Member

By Marc Wanamaker

For 117 years, Griffith Park has been L.A.'s playground. Generations of Angelenos have jogged its trails; hiked its hills; ridden horses and bikes along its paths; picnicked under its trees; played soccer, cricket, and baseball on its fields; camped within its forests; cheered at its concerts; explored the heavens from its observatory; golfed on its links; looked at exotic animals inside its zoo; swam in its pool; played tennis on its courts; climbed aboard its miniature train and visited Travel Town; ridden the merry-go-round; admired its Christmas lights; and visited the famous Gene Autry Museum. To this day, 12 million visitors come to the Griffith Observatory alone and others to the Greek Theatre. It's been called "L.A.'s Central Park," a more rough and wild park as compared with other cities around the United States. Griffith Park is the geographical and spiritual heart of L.A., located six miles north of downtown at the eastern end of the Santa Monica Mountains. It's bordered on the north and east by freeways, and by the districts of Los Feliz to the south and Hollywood to the west. I have collected photographs and memorabilia on Griffith Park since I was a child and literally "grew up" visiting the park and its attractions. Knowing Los Angeles District 4 Councilman Tom LaBonge for many years, I always asked when I was going to do a book on Griffith Park. Finally in 2011 the book, Griffith Park, was published by Arcadia Publishing with co-author E.J. Stephens. You can find the book at either Amazon or Ebay sale sites.

It was a labor of love to try and squeeze in 117 years of history into one small volume. The history of Griffith Park and its attractions is complicated and interesting. The park means much to many people. It is a place of solitude, a gathering place for crowds, a place of exploration and discovery. Its attractions are varied for every age group, and it has been seen in many films and television shows since the turn of the last century.

The first human inhabitants of the area were Native American peoples known as the Tongva. Their legacy lives on in the names of the many native plants and modern places, like nearby Cahuenga Pass. Europeans arrived in January 1776 when a party of soldiers and colonists from Mexico, led by Juan Bautista de Anza, camped here en route to establishing San Jose. One of the soldiers on the trek was Cpl. Jose Vicente Feliz, who was awarded the coveted piece of land that would later become Griffith Park by the Spanish Crown around 1800. The parcel covered more than 6,000 acres, stretching between the Cahuenga Pass on the west and the Los Angeles River on the north and east. Rancho Los Feliz, named after his family, literally means "the happy ranch." After the death of Jose

Feliz, his widow willed the ranch to her son Antonio in 1853. By 1883 the ranch was sold to Col. Griffith J. Griffith. He was born to a poor family in Wales in 1850 and left for America 16 years later. He studied journalism in New York, and after becoming a reporter he moved to San Francisco, where he quickly became the leading mine reporter on the West Coast. He used the knowledge he gained in this new field and invested in silver mines in Mexico, which earned him a fortune. By 1882, Griffith was in Los Angeles, where he paid \$5,000 for the 4,071 acres that remained of the old Rancho Los Feliz. He settled into the role of the gentle-

man rancher, growing crops and raising sheep, horses, dairy cows and ostriches. early as 1909 the first filmmaking started with the Bison Film Co. of New York using the wild and rough topography, which was depicted as the "real west" in films of the time. By 1911 the Nestor Film Co., which opened the very first studio in Hollywood, used Griffith Park until the company was absorbed by Universal Pictures in 1912. Universal established its studio ranch adjacent to Griffith Park on the west boundary, which is today Mount Sinai and Forest Lawn Hollywood. Since then, almost all of the park, including the former gravel quarry in Bronson Canyon, has been used by film and later television companies, increasing the fame of Griffith

became a temporary prisoner-of-war concentration camp during World War II.

Over the years, equestrian activities ranging from pony rides to professional polo matches have taken place inside the park. Other outdoor activities, including swimming, cricket, tennis, and golf, have been mainstays to this day. The five golf courses became important venues for golf tournaments for decades. The first public golf course in the park opened in 1900 and was named the Riverside Course. By 1921 a new 18-hole course was created on the Riverside course. A second course named after Woodrow Wilson Golf opened in 1923. The Riverside Course was closed

for a time, reworked, and reopened the following year as the William G. Harding Golf Course. The Wilson and Harding Golf Course Clubhouse opened in the 1920s when golf became very popular at that time. Nearly 275,000 rounds of golf were played in Griffith Park in 1927 alone. Today there are five golf courses, three named after Presidents (Wilson, Harding and Roosevelt), as well as the Los Feliz Golf Course and the Marty Tregnan Golf Academy.

Trains played a big part of the Griffith Park experience since the 1948 opening of the miniature Griffith Park and Southern Railroad at the park's southeast corner. On the opposite side of the park, the following decade celebrated the opening of Travel Town. In 1988 the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage opened on

land where the airport was once located. The 140,000-square-foot facility is a major attraction for visitors who come to Griffith Park.

Much has changed in Los Angeles since 1896 when Col. Griffith envisioned a central park for the ever-growing City of Los Angeles. Today, in spite of competing interests, governmental involvement ranging from disinterest to micromanagement, and disasters—both natural and man-made—Griffith Park remains. This fact can largely be attributed to the foresight of a colorful and controversial immigrant with the redundant name of Griffith J. Griffith, who once said that "public parks are a safety valve of great cities and should be made accessible and attractive, where neither race, [nor] creed, nor color should be excluded." One hundred and seventeen years after the Colonel's endowment, his words ring true now more than ever.

LA'S 'CENTRAL' PARK



Griffith Park has spent 117 years as the center of Los Angeles.

Griffith Observatory, 1941.

man rancher, growing crops and raising sheep, horses, dairy cows and ostriches.

On Dec. 16, 1896, the 46-year-old Col. Griffith presented Los Angeles with a gift of 3,015 acres of Rancho Los Feliz, valued at \$300,000. The Colonel wanted to create the largest city park in the world for the people of Los Angeles—a city he believed would soon become one of the more important cities in the world. He asked only for rail fares be kept to a nickel so poor people could afford to enjoy the new park, and that the grounds be named after him. At this time Los Angeles had a population of 110,000 and the parkland was outside of the City limits. The City agreed to accept the gift only after the Colonel added an additional parcel, which gave L.A. coveted water rights to the Los Angeles River.

On Sept. 3, 1903, Col. Griffith and his wife Tina, were vacationing at a hotel in Santa Monica when in a drunken state, he accused Tina of trying to poison him. He took aim at her with a pistol and fired one shot, disfiguring her and costing her an eye. After the Colonel's arrest and a circus-like trial, he was convicted and spent two years in San Quentin prison. After his release he continued to work on the Griffith Park project until his death.

In 1912 the first Griffith Park Zoo opened with animals donated by the former Selig Zoo in north Los Angeles on Mission Road. The movie industry also had a lot to do with Griffith Park being publicized in the Los Angeles press. As

Park around the world. The most remembered film shot at the Griffith Observatory was *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean acting out scenes in and around the Observatory building.

In 1919, Los Angeles began the process of creating a serious public park throughout the 1920s. The construction of both the 5,900-seat Greek Theatre in 1930 and the Griffith Observatory in 1935 came many years after Griffith's death, a dream he never saw realized. Griffith's son, Van, continued his father's dream of going ahead with as many plans for the park as possible. Much of the construction work on the park during the Great Depression of the 1930s was done with thousands of unemployed workers. Near where the Zoo is today was a level piece of land, which was known as the Griffith Park Airport, later becoming the National Guard Air Station. During the Depression, the area that now houses Travel Town

About the Author

Alive! readers, please welcome back Marc Wanamaker, a world-class expert and consultant on film history who has been my guest in this space before. His experience includes being a published historian, lecturer and teacher of film history. He is the founder of the Los Angeles Film Exposition, known as FILMEX, and the Bison Archives in Los Angeles, which has an extensive and unique photo archives of the film industry. We are fortunate to have this film authority write this month's article.

Many thanks, Marc!

—Hynda Rudd



Marc Wanamaker