

# San Clemente Historical Society

*Forward with the Dream*

## WHAT'S HAPPENING

May 1, 2020



The Board of Directors of the Historical Society hopes everyone is holding up well in these difficult times. We look forward to getting out of our houses and back out into our beautiful Spanish Village and seeing all of you by June. It is too early to schedule our next meeting, but we will as soon as it is safe to do so.

A Meeting of the Board of Directors was held on April 20 via teleconference. It was awkward but productive.

*The following article by Tom Marshall will appear in the San Clemente Times next week. Our readers get a sneak preview! Thank you Tom.*

### The Year San Clemente Almost Died

“San Clemente Broke; May Fire All City Employees,” read the headline on the front page of the Santa Ana Register on October 19, 1935. It was the height of the Great Depression and cities large and small were struggling to stay afloat. As we all struggle through the current fallout from the Coronavirus Pandemic, it is worth taking a look at information recently uncovered by the San Clemente Historical Society’s researchers.



In the early 1930s, San Clemente was still a fledgling beach town relying mostly on tourists and vacationers. As the Depression worsened an estimated 25 percent of the area’s

population became unemployed. Among the first items cut from people's budgets were vacations and entertainment, including expenses related to a second or beach home. So many people quit paying their local property taxes the city was left on the verge of bankruptcy. Even the Bank of America owed the city more than \$125,000 or six years of back taxes. The bank had already foreclosed on numerous local properties, including the home of city founder Ole Hanson, as people could no longer afford their mortgages, as well as the taxes. The city tried to help local residents by issuing a moratorium on paying delinquent taxes, but that only made matters worse for city government finances.

With the loss of property tax revenue, the city had depended largely on traffic fines for income. Some two million vehicles a year passed through town, apparently many of them not bothering to slow down much. Even that revenue stream dried-up as people began to travel less.

The financial crisis came to a head during a city council meeting the night of October 18, 1935. Faced with \$22,081.94 in unpaid bills, exhausted credit, and virtually no income, the city council proposed the elimination of almost all municipal functions except the water and fire departments. This would have meant discontinuing street lighting, the golf course, street and pier maintenance and laying off all but a couple city employees. Bank of America offered some hope by agreeing to pay \$2,500 of its due tax bill immediately, but that wouldn't have covered the city's cash shortfall. In a last-ditch effort, the council voted to hold a special meeting a week later. If no remedy was found, as Mayor A.T. Smith put it, "the council will pass a resolution calling for the cessation of all municipal activities." The city of San Clemente would cease to exist.

At that meeting the Bank of America announced that it now had a plan to pay all its taxes in full. It was not revealed what changed that enabled the bank to do that. As Mayor Smith put it, "The city is saved for bigger and better things." That included a community wide celebration with a dance and rodeo. Thousands reportedly attended with proceeds going to purchase Christmas gifts for all local children. Perhaps the lesson for today is life will get better if we just keep trying.

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## Scholarship

Our Scholarship Committee has determined the recipients of this year's two \$500 scholarships. The Committee carefully reviewed the essays and academic qualifications of over 30 college bound San Clemente High School Seniors. All were outstanding, but two shined brightest for the Committee. Tristen Wallace and Alyssa Banks are those two! The current crisis has tragically disrupted the academic year, the graduation, the Awards Ceremony, college matriculation, and much more for graduating seniors. Our hearts go out to these young adults. They deserve better.

We hope that these Scholarships will help Tristen and Alyssa leave these hard times behind and find academic success.

Thank you to Suzi Klickstein, Marilyn Wigglesworth, and Pat Corless for their great job on the Scholarship Committee.

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## Miramar Theater



The cleanup crews have been busy at the Miramar Theater and Bowling Alley. Daniel Conrardy, architect for the project is working with the Coastal Commission to get the permits to proceed. The normally labyrinthine process is even more so with the current crisis.

The old Orange Julius on the east side of the theater was opened up and decontaminated. It will be demolished and replaced with lavatories. We asked Mr. Conrardy if anything of interest was found inside. No money. No secret formula for Orange Julius. Just rot.

He promises to give us a presentation on the project at our next meeting, whenever that may be.

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## Mills Act Inspection Fee



The City Council approved the imposition of a \$500 inspection fee, once every five years, for historic buildings protected by the Mills Act. About 80 of our 204 historic resources are enrolled in the program, which the City calls the Historic Property Preservation Agreement (HPPA). Owners receive significant property tax savings in exchange for agreeing to maintain their property. State law requires that these HPPA properties be inspected every

five

years.

While the imposition of this fee was unpopular with the owners of some historic properties, the Society believes the interest of historic preservation in San Clemente will be well served by these inspections.

The Staff Report on this subject may be found using the following link.

<https://www.san-clemente.org/Home/ShowDocument?id=57129>

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## Archives

The Archives Committee is alive and well! The Society was recently given several great photo albums from the Murphine Family. The photos are from the 1920's and 1930's taken in Seattle and San Clemente. Mr. Phil Tessier, long time owner of Creations Unlimited sign shop here in town gave us a great montage of signs he produced.

Jackie Dooley, our Archivist, has been working on selecting a computer program to help us manage our collections. She has a sub-committee busy evaluating the relative merits and costs of the myriad of choices out there. A decision will be made soon, and then the work will begin. We will need to input a whole lot of information into that new system. Volunteers?



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**Please Stay Healthy!**

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