

## Bryant Ranch Property: A Look at Its Past

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*Editor's note: The Yorba Linda City Council is in the process of determining how to preserve several historic structures that stand on the Bryant ranch property owned by C-W Associates. This is the second installment of a three-part series - the majority of which was written by Dolly McKenna - that looks at the history of the eastern Yorba Linda ranchland.*

Part II is on the history of the ownership of the land. And, Part III highlights Susanna Bixby Bryant and the botanic legacy she left to the world.

McKenna was a member of the recently disbanded Cultural Heritage Committee, a group concerned with preserving Yorba Linda's rich history.

The main entrance to the Bryant Ranch compound is a narrow road lined with pomegranate trees, a profusion of pink blossoms in the spring.

Once several miles long, less than a mile of the trees will remain once C-W Associates, which purchased the ranchland in 1978, carries out its plans for the residential, commercial and industrial development of the land.

At the end of the road is the headquarters of the citrus and cattle ranch that in recent times had more than 500 of its acres devoted to citrus cultivation, and more than 1,000 cattle roamed its hills and valleys.

North of the headquarters area, comprised of several homes, a barn and unroofed sheds and out-buildings, is a road shaded by a stand of tall eucalyptus trees on one side and citrus groves stretching as far as the eye can see on the other.

Nearby is an old pump house with its huge wheels, which once controlled all the water on the ranch. The twisting and turning road continues up the side of a hill, passing a large reservoir, which used to double as a swimming pool, now almost empty of water.

The panoramic views from this road are breathtaking. At the top of the hill is the Assembly Hall, built especially for picnics and parties, with a tennis court nearby.

Across the front of the Assembly Hall is a wide porch offering another beautiful view of the mountains and land that was once a Botanic Garden. Sprinkler heads of the vast watering system still remain, a reminder of what use to be.

The beginnings of what used to be can be traced back to 1810 when Jose Antonio Yorba acquired land to the south and east of the Santa Ana River by the only Spanish land grant made in this area.

He called it Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. Bernardo was his third living son and upon his father's death inherited that property along with his mother and three brothers.

In the 1830s the Mexican government was taking land from the missions to give to men who would develop cattle ranches. Bernardo Yorba was granted "three leagues of land, more or less" north of the Santa Ana River. Adding to his in later years it became one of the largest cattle ranches in Southern California and was known as Rancho Canon de Santa Ana.

When California attained statehood in 1848, the United States agreed to accept Mexican land titles, many of which took years to clear. It was not until 1866 that the Mexican grant of Rancho Canon de Santa Ana was confirmed.

About nine years later, John W. Bixby, the ranchland's next owner, came into the picture.

Bixby, born in Maine the year California became a state, was a sixth generation American. He came to California in his early 20s to work for his cousin Jotham Bixby at Rancho Los Cerritos in Los Angeles County.

Also living at the ranch was Jotham Bixby's sister-in-law, Susan Hathaway. John Bixby and Susan fell in love, were married and moved to Wilmington to live. A son Fred was born there.

A few years later they subleased a part of the Rancho Los Alamitos and moved back to Los Angeles County. A daughter, Susanna, was born on the ranch. Entering into a partnership which purchased Rancho Los Alamitos, John Bixby took over as manager.

Some years before this the Yorba land holdings offered for sale. At different times, John Bixby purchased three adjacent portions of this land, comprising nearly 6,000 acres and forming Rancho Santa Ana. The ranch was used for stock raising and the family never lived there.

In 1887, at age 39, John Bixby died of appendicitis. After his death his wife, Susan Bixby, became almost a recluse, withdrawing from family and friends. With her children, Fred and Susanna, she moved to Berkeley. Fred graduated from the University of California and Susanna went to finishing school in Boston.

Her formal education ended in 1900 and she toured Europe with her mother, followed by a trip around the world with her friends. In 1902, she returned to California to live, buying an apartment in the Russian Hill section of San Francisco.

In reports written about her, it is said that Susanna was a lovely young lady, slim, with blue eyes and wavy brown hair, and she had an excellent mind and a strong will. When two years later she met Dr. Ernest Albert Bryant, a prominent physician and surgeon, it was love at first sight.

After a three-month whirlwind courtship, they were married and honeymooned in Alaska. They lived in Los Angeles and had two children, Sue and Ernest Jr.

After her mother's death, Susanna inherited a share in the Los Alamitos ranch as well as one-half of Rancho Santa Ana, her brother Fred inheriting the other half.

According to a book written about her life by her daughter, Susanna Bryant Dakin, called "Scent of Violets." Susanna decided to assume active management of Rancho Santa Ana in 1911 after she became "tired of women's luncheons and teas, committee meetings and benefits."

Eventually she bought out her brother and became the sole owner of the ranch. Within a year she built a house for herself, which is still standing on the property and has been nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. She also planted the first citrus grove on the land at this time.

Susanna did not live on the ranch permanently, but maintained her Los Angeles residence as Dr. Bryant was not interested in the ranch and seldom visited it. She continued to develop the ranch, planting more orchards, putting up additional buildings, and providing good housing for the workers.

In 1925, Susanna began to plan a garden of native plants and devoted herself to the establishment of a Botanic Garden north of the railroad line on the ranch. It was designed as “a scientific institution for a better understanding of the natural flora” and extended over 200 acres.

Following the death of her husband in 1933, Susanna moved to a large house which she had built in the midst of the Botanic Garden. Thirteen years later, she died suddenly while on a trip to Santa Barbara. In her will she left a trust for the continuance and maintenance of the Botanic Garden.

In 1950, the garden was moved to Claremont, where it has been successfully preserved and is flourishing.

Susanna left an unmatched legacy to California and the world in the Botanic Garden.