

Strange case of the happy town

by Keith Monroe

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No one has satisfactorily explained the town of Yorba Linda, California — not even lifelong residents. For how can anyone explain a community where a church owns a liquor license, where there is no jail or policeman, where even children attend Chamber of Commerce meetings?

“All the big Los Angeles bankers tried to figure out why Yorba Linda was so peaceful and prosperous,” says realtor Slim Worsham, who has lived there for many years. “Seemed like they thought we were contrary to economic law. Nobody gets rich here, but not a soul has ever needed charity.” Olaf Martin, who recently bought the town restaurant, knows why he moved to Yorba Linda: “The wife and I first saw this town when we attended a dance. Folks were the friendliest we’d ever met anywhere. Right then, we decided to settle here.”

Ralph Phillips, a come-lately rancher, got the same impression on his first visit. “I’ve lived in lots of places, but I never saw any town with less snobbery or more neighborliness,” he says.

At Los Angeles headquarters of the Bank of America, Yorba Linda has been discussed in the same manner parents discuss their favorite child. Brad Lane, comptroller, beams as he says: “If ever I saw town haul itself up by its bootstrap Yorba Linda is it. Somehow that little bunch of farmers, by main strength and earnestness, manage to ram through civic projects that would be too big for towns ten times the size.”

Since its earliest days, the village has been used to winning against odds. It began as a subdivision 30 miles from Los Angeles, tucked away among warm hills in a citrus valley. Realtors promised that water, electricity, and roads would come soon, so the newcomers settled down trustingly and began planting orange trees.

Months passed before county supervisor Bill Shoemaker finally trudged into town -- “The County has \$300 for new roads,” he told the Yorba Linda men. “I might be able to allocate \$100 to you, if you’ll match the sum.” Art Pickering, a lively little rancher, spoke up. “We’ll do better,” he said. “We’ll pledge our own labor to build the road, if you’ll give us materials and help.”

Shoemaker, touched by the man's earnestness, certified a longer road than he had intended. Thirty men pledged to build it, and 29 did. The county was so startled and delighted that it spent \$1,500 on roads to the town, instead of the \$100 contemplated.

"Every dollar you give that gang goes five times as far as in any other town," Shoemaker explained. That was in 1911. Then Clifford N. Jones, a white-haired Quaker minister, wanted to build a church, and townfolk hastened to donate labor and materials, though only a minority were Quakers. Later a Methodist church was also erected by unanimous effort, and today the two houses of worship are ample for most of the 500 families who live in and around Yorba Linda.

The town holds to the old-time Sabbath. Not a shop or eating place opens on Sunday, except the drugstore. Likewise the inhabitants take a stern stand on pool playing. Once, when a poolroom established itself in town, a committee headed by the Rev. Mr. Jones urged the proprietor to convert to some other enterprise. He refused. That evening the committee returned. "We're fixing to move thy furniture out," Jones announced politely, rolling up his sleeves. "Would thee prefer to move with it, or wait till we move thee?" The proprietor promptly left town under his own power.

Some years later, when Jones died, he was succeeded by Elden Newkirk, another Quaker minister. Soon after Newkirk's arrival, a stranger opened a bar before townspeople realized what was happening. At the minister's suggestion, a group hurried to the State Board of Equalization, which said the newcomer was legally entitled to sell liquor. Thereupon Newkirk and the committee visited the bar.

"Thee won't find business good in this town, because nobody drinks," Newkirk told the owner. "If thee move out now, we'll buy the liquor license, so thee won't take a loss." The tavern keeper, already dismayed by lack of customers, agreed. The town chipped in and bought his license, which they transferred to the Quaker church. Thus, presumably, Newkirk became pastor of the only church in America that owns a liquor monopoly.

Yorba Linda has never needed a policeman; the only crimes have been a few car thefts. During the war, the black market never got a local foothold: the town *was* too busy pouring money and effort into every sort of patriotic drive.

Perhaps the neighborly spirit of cooperation explains the absence of "charity cases." Once, when fire destroyed a man's home, he faced ruin because of lack of insurance. But townspeople passed the hat and built him an even better house.

Yorba Lindans believe in sharing their wealth. When the women decided they should have a clubhouse, businessmen chivalrously said: "Let the ladies take over our stores for a day and keep whatever they make." Joyously the women began making plans. Soon the shopkeepers noticed that money was only trickling into their stores—everybody was saving up to buy on Ladies' Day. When the day dawned, women moved in like happy locusts. Sales were the heaviest in history, and the clubhouse was a certainty.

Although Yorba Lindans spend generously they watch each dollar of public expenditure. "Any town disbursement is debated at monthly Chamber of Commerce meetings— which are in startling contrast to similar gatherings elsewhere. "Every body goes to Chamber meetings in Yorba Linda, says Hal Lucas, former Bank of America branch manager. "And I mean everybody—men, women, children! They thrash

out every issue, from appointing a volunteer fireman to campaigning for a factory. Debates get mighty angry—but there are no hard feelings afterward.”

By pulling together, Yorba Lindans have produced many good things. They decided they wanted a public library, so they donated old books, persuaded larger towns to contribute discarded volumes, chipped in to hire a librarian and got the project started. They needed a bridge across a dangerous railroad crossing; they took off their coats and built one. They thought their town looked bare; they planted trees on every street.

The Rotary Club lacked help to wait on luncheon tables; members set their own tables and cleared them afterward. Citrus farmers struck snags in packing and selling fruit; they built a communal packing house, then pooled their crops for marketing.

Not long ago, merchants on Yorba Linda's block-long business street grew uneasy at the number of residents who drove to other towns to shop. “People go out of town to make bank deposits, so they shop on the same trip,” they reasoned. “We better get us a bank.”

At a Chamber meeting, the whole town approved, so a committee headed by W. H. Barton went to Los Angeles to ask the Bank of America to open a branch. Brad Lane, who received the delegation, was friendly but frank, “We'd need a permit from the U. S. Comptroller of Currency,” he explained. “But first, the government must be convinced that the community really needs a bank.”

“Now, there are ten banks within ten miles of Yorba Linda, and...” “But we need that bank and no mistake,” Barton interrupted pleasantly. “If we're going to grow, we've got to keep our shoppers at home.”

The argument went on for eight months. Yorba Linda delegations went to Los Angeles again and again. Gradually the bankers realized they were confronted by men of unusual determination. “Sometimes we base decisions on character instead of statistics,” Lane explains. “We came to feel that if Yorba Lindans promised to make a branch a success, they would.”

Nevertheless, Yorba Linda's application gathered dust in Washington. So the militant townspeople peppered their congressman, senators and the Comptroller of Currency with letters, telegrams, phone calls and personal visits. Soon the application was pried from a pigeonhole, and a dormant charter which had been given to the Bank of America for another town was transferred to Yorba Linda.

Since then, Bank of America men in Los Angeles have watched the town with fascination. One day an Eastern furniture manufacturer asked the bank's help in finding a location for an assembly plant. Promptly they escorted him to Yorba Linda—and now a \$400,000 building is under construction. It will neither smoke nor smell, and the 200 employees are to be drawn exclusively from the community.

But the good people of Yorba Linda still refuse to relax. Now they are talking of better school equipment and higher pay for teachers. They want a civic theater, a swimming pool, a bigger park. No doubt they will get them, too, for the town that has already pulled itself up a long way by its bootstraps never intends to quit pulling.