

Former Residents Gain National Fame

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Yorba Linda may claim with pride two former residents who have achieved international fame.

It's easy to guess the first name: Richard Milhouse [sic] Nixon, who was born in Yorba Linda, and whose birthplace near Richard Nixon School is marked with a plaque and sign.

There are no plaques in Yorba Linda pointing out that Jessamyn West, author of the "The Friendly Persuasion," once lived in Yorba Linda.

One of her books, "South of the Angels," is a story which has many parallels to problems encountered by the settlers of Yorba Linda.

According to Miss West herself, "My parents arrived in Yorba Linda while water for drinking was still being hauled in barrels from what was then called the 'Anaheim Lake.' I loved every inch of those dry, brown, cactus-covered, jackrabbit and ground-squirrel-inhabited hills and lament their passing."

Jessamyn West (Mrs. H.M. McPherson of Napa, Calif.) was six years old when her parents came to California in 1909. She left Yorba Linda in 1926 and began writing only 21 years ago.

She went to the Yorba Linda Elementary School, Fullerton Union High School and Fullerton Junior College. It was while she was a patient in a tuberculosis sanitarium that she organized a group of short stories into one of the most heart-warming stories ever written.

"Friendly Persuasion" was not written as a novel, but is a collection of memories and imaginations of stories Miss West heard her parents tell about Indiana and the people they knew there.

The West [sic] came to California from Indiana in 1909 and settled in the Whittier area, where Eldo West and his wife had many relatives.

He soon purchased a plot of land in Yorba Linda and planted a lemon grove. He built a two-storied structure which still stands north of the corner of Yorba Linda Blvd. and Club Terrace.

"He built a two-story house high on a hilltop at a time when there was nothing except a few willows between that hilltop and the Santa Ana winds," wrote his daughter. "When the Santa Ana blew, father propped up the house on the west side with a series of planks.

"In times of maximum gusts he bedded his children down in the waterless weirbox. The house held together, but it rocked sufficiently to cause the beds on the carpetless floors upstairs to leave the caster marks of their rolling as permanent scars on the floorboards.

"The Santa Ana wind, like the dear old Santa Ana River, has been robbed of its force, I understand, and no longer are the tumbleweeds the size of washtubs to be seen bouncing ahead of it across the brown hills of Yorba Linda. No longer in fact are to be seen the brown hills. Or the washtubs."

Addressing Yorba Lindans at the dedication of the local library, Jessamyn West told of her great hunger for books to read and their scarcity when she was a girl. There was a library established in the janitor's broom closet at the grammar school, composed entirely of about 50 donated books, and to her it was a holy of holies, she said.

At that time there was a charge of one dollar for a library card and although dollars were scarce at her home, she was given one. She dressed herself in a costume considered appropriate for library visits (including shoes) and ran all the way to the school house, her dollar clutched in her hand.

Her brother, Merle West of Whittier, recalls that as a girl around home, she used to write down new words each day to learn and increase her vocabulary.

In Yorba Linda, though, she had no thoughts of becoming a writer. After Fullerton JC, she entered Whittier College and after graduation was married to Homer McPherson in the Friends Church of Yorba Linda.

The couple moved to Hemet where they grew apricots. Mrs. McPherson took a job as secretary to the school principal. She later took a job as teacher, instructing all eight grades in a one-room country school.

Mrs. McPherson also went to Europe, where she studied at Oxford University and did post-graduate work in English.

Then she contracted tuberculosis. It was then that she began contributing to small literary magazines. Soon she hired an agent and with "Friendly Persuasion" she launched a literary career which has seen her ranked as one of the foremost writers of today.

To the Yorba Lindan who loves his community today and seeks to recapture the past, there can be no more rewarding search than to read Jessamyn West seeking glimpses of a Yorba Linda which must have influenced her work.

Some of her stories mention the wind, the hardships of the early settlers, and also excursions to pick lupine, yellow violets and other wildflowers after the rain.

There is no plaque commemorating Jessamyn West in Yorba Linda. She needs none. She is well-commemorated in the widely-circulated and well-used volumes of her work in the Yorba Linda Library.