

Jessamyn West is city's other famous resident

by Gisela Meier

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Even if Richard Nixon had not lived in Yorba Linda, the city would still have a claim to fame through a former resident who has earned a reputation as an author, poet, script writer, lecturer and teacher.

The author, Jessamyn West, grew up in Yorba Linda during a time when its hills were covered with citrus and avocado groves, and there were, in her words, "more roadrunners than people."

Yorba Linda has not forgotten West, and last year the Beautification Committee located the house in which she grew up, in the hopes that it can be preserved.

A few longtime residents also remember the author as a young girl.

"I went to grammar school and Campfire Girls with her," recalled Ruth Munger. "We graduated together and then we went to Fullerton and graduated in 1919."

Viola Page also went to school with West and recalls walking with her through the hills that surround Yorba Linda.

"She loved to read all the time," said Page. "Every morning she would come to school with a book in her hand."

Eventually West wrote 16 books of her own, including *South of the Angels*, which contains impressions of her childhood in Yorba Linda.

Her other works include *The Friendly Persuasion*, *The Witch Diggers*, *To See the Dream*, *Leafy Rivers* and *The Massacre at Fall Creek*.

In addition to novels, short stories and poetry, West wrote the screenplays for *The Friendly Persuasion*, *The Big Country*, *Lucy Crown* and *Stolen Hours*.

A recipient of literary awards, she has taught at writers' conferences and was presented honorary doctorates from five colleges.

Oddly enough, West is related to Yorba Linda's other famous resident through her mother, who maiden name was Milhous.

Born in Indiana in 1907, West moved to California with her parents when she was 6 years old. Her father, Eldo, planted a lemon grove north of Yorba Linda Boulevard near Club Terrace Drive and worked for the Yorba Linda Water District.

According to Yorba Linda's historian, March Butz, the young West often enlivened outings of the local Campfire Girls by writing nonsense skits for the girls to dramatize.

After graduation from high school, the writer attended Whittier College, where she met her future husband H.M. McPherson.

Their marriage at the Friends Church in Yorba Linda is remembered by Hurless Barton, who said the newlyweds hid behind his garage while trying to escape their playful friends who were trying to keep them from leaving town.

According to the author's brother, Merle West, the couple lived in Yorba Linda for a time, and Jessamyn had a job selling advertising for the Yorba Linda Star.

The couple then moved to Hemet, where they operated an apricot orchard and Jessamyn taught in a country school, March Butz writes.

After post-graduate studies at Oxford University in England, West returned to California only to discover she had an advanced case of tuberculosis.

In her book, *The Woman Said Yes*, West describes her experiences in a TB sanatorium and afterwards at her parents home in Whitter, where she was sent to die.

During this time her mother entertained her with stories of life in Indiana, and as she began to recover from her illness Jessamyn wrote down the stories she had heard. They were later published as *The Friendly Persuasion*, her first novel.

The West home located by the Beautification Committee is located off Park Avenue. As described by West in one of her books, the house backs up to a small ravine and overlooks the Nixon home several hundred feet away.

According to Merle West, this is only one of the homes the family occupied in Yorba Linda. Others were located elsewhere on Park, on Rose Drive and further east in [sic] Yorba Linda Boulevard.

Jessamyn West now lives in Napa, northern California.