

# Preservation Association of Clark County

January 2004

Las Vegas Courthouse 1914-15

photograph courtesy of UNLV Special Collections

## From the President's Desk

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

Greetings! Yes, it has been a very long time since we produced a newsletter. Our board has experienced some changes over the past few months and hopefully we will be able to get back to the rhythm of things. We thank Dorothy Wright for her many years of service overseeing the publication of our newsletter, and serving as treasurer and secretary. Dorothy found it necessary to resign from these responsibilities to attend to both professional and personal matters. She remains dedicated to preservation, however, by continuing to serve on the city's Historic Preservation Commission.

2004 will mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the founding of PACC. We plan to acknowledge this accomplishment at our next Annual Meeting and Program in May 2004. It will be held during or about the time of Preservation Week. We are looking for good ideas as to how and where we can celebrate. It is still in the planning stages and we will inform you on the date and program as soon as it becomes available. You may submit ideas you have by writing to P.O. Box 96686 Las Vegas, NV 89193-6686, or contacting us through our web site at [www.pacc.info](http://www.pacc.info).

We look forward to seeing you again in May 2004. The Board at PACC wishes you all a happy and prosperous new year.

### Archaeology and Historic Preservation Awareness week: May 9-15

The State Historic Preservation Office, in conjunction with The Nevada Archaeological Association, has announced that their theme for this year is based on water: "Flowing Through Nevada's Past." The SHPO is publishing a brochure and poster listing all Preservation Week activities. Deadline for inclusion is February 16. For more information contact Alice Baldrice at 775 684-3444.

## Frank Wright Remembered

Many of you knew Frank Wright personally and would therefore understand the great loss his passing causes us. Not only was he a fine man but also a well respected expert on Southern Nevada history. He began his tenure at the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society in 1979 as Curator of Education. He retired as Curator of Manuscripts in 2002. It was while serving under this capacity that most of us with an interest in Nevada history had an opportunity to see Frank shine. It was written in *The Sun* shortly after his death in April, "Journalist, students working on homework papers, authors, movie script writers—anyone who needed information about Las Vegas' past—turned to Wright."

Frank was also a champion of preservation. He authored teaching materials for local students, pamphlets for the museum and sat on the Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission. In addition he was a member of the board of directors for the Neon Museum and the Las Vegas Springs Preserve. He was also the recipient of the American Association of State & Local History award for his long-running public radio series, "Nevada Yesterdays."

His complete list of contributions and accomplishments are too numerous to mention here. Michael Green of the *Las Vegas Mercury* wrote, "No fitting way to honor Frank exists" (May 8, 2003). But PACC will try. The executive board has voted unanimously to sponsor a petition to the Clark County School District to name a school after Frank. On behalf of PACC, Garry Hayes authored and submitted the application that will be considered in the next naming cycle. We will keep you informed via our web site of dates, times and places as to when this application goes before the naming board. It is our hope that Frank's place in Southern Nevada will be remembered by way of exhibits in the lobby of a school that bears his name.

Visit our website: [www.pacc.info](http://www.pacc.info)



photograph by Joe Thomson

## Railroad Cottages soon to be cut in half

By JOE THOMSON

Twelve of the original sixty-four “Railroad Cottages” currently remain, but within a month or two it is expected that number could be reduced to five. The Cottages can currently be seen at 601, 605, 609, 617, 621, 625, 629 South Casino Center Boulevard; 608, 612, 616, South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, and 604, 608 South 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

The value of these properties to the community cannot be overstated. The Cottages, in terms of historical significance, are the most important structures in Downtown Las Vegas. The role that the Cottages played in the community easily surpasses that of the Post Office and High School that arrived a generation later. The majority of current Las Vegans are oblivious to the fact that Las Vegas was once a company town, and the “San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad” was the company. In the not too distant future we could be left without any physical evidence of the railroad’s existence.

The Railroad Cottages were one of the first tract housing developments in the United States. Built between 1909 and 1911, the Cottages were conceived as part of a plan to revive what was then a failing “Clark’s Las Vegas Townsite.” The Cottages along with expanded rail yards and a machine shop brought upper level employees to the Las Vegas area. Conductors, engineers, brakemen, and even a railroad surgeon soon arrived with families to fill four blocks of the town site. These homes were quite upscale for the period costing approximately 4 times the price of a typical wooden structure. The blue-collar employees who leased to purchase the homes would be similarly compared to mid-level casino managers of today.

Seven of the Cottages are soon to face immediate challenges, and it is probable that none will remain in their current location. Five of these, 601 605, 609, 617 and 621 South Casino Center Boulevard are owned by local attorney, former Judge, and present Settlement Judge Jerry Kaufman. Mr. Kaufman purchased the properties as an investment a few years back when the Regional Justice Center next door began construction. Mr. Kaufman has all along pledged to

give the Cottages to organizations willing to move and preserve the structures. Mr. Kaufman has been a great caretaker for these properties but the cost of maintaining them as rental units has forced a move to create commercial use on this site. If anyone has suggestions or solutions for new locations for these units please contact PACC and we will facilitate advancing the proposals. There should be many creative solutions to this dilemma.

The other two Cottages are in the middle of a more complex scenario. 604 and 608 South 4<sup>th</sup> Street were part of a second unit of Cottages and have survived for nearly 93 years. Recently it was discovered that the City of Las Vegas had acquired the properties. In an ideal world this would mean immediate recognition of the social and cultural value of the recent purchase and guaranteed preservation of the property. But this is Las Vegas.

What happened to the original Court House, an incredible structure built in 1914, or the War Memorial Building, or the Ice House, or dozens of smaller structures that somehow burned to the ground? Las Vegas has not found it necessary to preserve a single structure tied to the railroad’s contribution to the community; even the historic water tower had to go. In a city that will soon pride itself in celebrating its 100-year anniversary it is unfortunate that preserving structures representing our past is not part of the program.

The city purchased the Cottage properties as part of a land speculation process that has targeted a city block between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets and Bonneville and Garces. The city has purchased these properties under the corporation “Office Parking 1” and proceeded to accumulate all of the property on the block except for a corner lot owned by a local attorney. The questionable land dealings and the eventual plans for this property in this area have overshadowed any effort to preserve these properties. Andrew Kirk of Preserve Nevada and Dorothy Wright, an active preservationist, brought the fact that the Railroad Cottages were now in the ownership of the city to the attention of the Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission. Robert Stoldal and I brought it to the attention of the Centennial Executive



Committee. I believe these actions stopped the planned demolition of the cottages and have now opened the door to possible preservation of some sort.

According to the city Preservation Officer, Courtney Mooney, the Cottages will not be preserved on site. I have cooperated with Ms. Mooney in providing historical information about the Cottages as the city is documenting the structures before their removal or demolition. At this time it is probable 608 South 4<sup>th</sup> will be demolished and hopefully 604 South 4<sup>th</sup> will at least be moved.

During a recent interview on KNPR, Margo Wheeler, who works as the assistant director for city planning and was speaking as a representative of the City of Las Vegas Preservation Commission, stated that the Springs Preserve will accept moved cottages, "we have a verbal commitment from them to relocate some if not all of the cottages to that site." In addition when asked why the cottages could not remain on site, Wheeler stated "we are in the process of seeking development opportunities for those consolidated properties, because it is not just that one lot, the city owns 7/8ths of that block." First you might question why the city owns 7/8ths of that block and what are they going to do with it that could not somehow include the Cottages, secondly the Springs Preserve does not have room for all of the cottages. This misleading statement might prohibit other organizations from participating in this preservation effort. Gregory Seymour, senior archeologist for the Springs Preserve, acknowledged that they are in discussion with the city but the Preserve has limited space and established concerns with their own ongoing project.

It is unfortunate that the Cottages will not be preserved on site. Movement to another site removes all association to the original location, which is critical for historical significance. A structure out of context becomes nothing more than a museum object, a bone on a shelf. The Railroad Cottages are historically important because of where they were located, in "Clark's Las Vegas Townsite."

At this point any preservation by the city, due to their abysmal track record, can be seen as a giant step forward, but it is hard to reconcile why one of these Cottages cannot be incorporated into their future for the site. Within this block, where these two Cottages now stand, were 16 Railroad Cottages, 15 on what was or is city owned property. We must seriously ask the question, are the parking lots that have replaced these historic structures a greater contributor to the city and community? Our position as the Preservation Association of Clark County is to inform the community about historic and preservation issues. I strongly believe there will be few opportunities to save any of the Las Vegas railroad history. This moment is one of those opportunities.

## The Clark County Museum

By MARK RYZDYNski

The Clark County Museum is in the middle of a major capital expansion with over a million and a half dollars being put into collection management space, administrative areas, signage, outdoor interpretative area, public access area and historic preservation. Work continues on the Las Vegas Railroad Cottage that was relocated to the museum in 2001.

The Museum has completed planning our next three years of scheduled exhibits including a unique self-curated yearlong exhibit in 2005 that celebrates the Las Vegas Centennial. If there are any questions about these County Museum programs, please contact me at the Clark County Museum at 455-7955 or ryz@co.clark.nv.

### Membership Dues Needed Now!

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

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Sustaining ..... 100.00

Contributing ..... 50.00

Institutional ..... 25.00

Family ..... 15.00

Regular ..... 10.00

Senior Citizen ..... 5.00

*Send to: Preservation Association of Clark County*

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December 1925, Bill and Ted Gilcrease

photograph courtesy of Bill Gilcrease

## Best Kept Secret

By JOE THOMSON

The life pursuits of the Gilcrease brothers can still be found in the North West. Open to the public are two of the Valleys hidden treasures, the “Gilcrease Bird Sanctuary,” and the “Gilcrease Orchard. Both nonprofit establishments are found on a portion of what was once 1,500 acres of Gilcrease farm property.”

The Gilcrease boys William Orr and John Theodore (Bill and Ted) arrived in Las Vegas with their parents Leonard and Elda Ann in 1920. The family purchased property from ex-pony express rider Bill Morgan and began to farm the acreage supplying the valley with everything from alfalfa to Turkeys. At peak production the Gilcrease’s farm was the largest in the Las Vegas Valley.

Leonard and Elda both graduated from the University of Reno where they first met and married before moving to Vegas. After a motorcycle accident left Leonard injured he lost interest in the farm and became a traveling salesman during the depression. Eventually, Leonard left the farm and family behind pursuing other interests. Elda and the boys continued to operate the ranch from then on. Their mother home schooled the boys so, they were rarely seen in town. The extensive responsibilities on the farm further kept the boys from socializing much. Both Bill and Ted spent their entire lives on their property, self sustained without the need for outside employment. Neither married, and both continued to develop their individual and joint interests.

New development has left the properties sandwiched between new but densely placed homes, and what remains of ranch estates and horse properties. Through a series of transformations in zoning and use restrictions, both the “Gilcrease Bird Sanctuary” and “The Gilcrease Orchard” find themselves in potentially threatening situations.

**The Gilcrease Bird Sanctuary** draws on Bill’s expertise with both wild and domesticated birds ranging from a toucan to ostriches. Many of the domesticated birds are brought in by individuals who underestimated the time and dedication needed to care for exotic birds. The Sanctuary is about as close as you will get to a zoo in the Las Vegas Valley. The cost for visiting is only \$1 for children and \$4 for adults. Miniature horses, a petting zoo, llama, emu, peacocks, desert turtles, many rare wild fowl and quite a few trained domestic birds can be found at the Sanctuary. Bill envisions the Sanctuary expanding beyond the present 10-acre site to a location that would create a more natural environment for the birds and animals. The Gilcrease Bird Sanctuary is a non-profit foundation that is aided by donations of time and financial assistance. Volunteers are welcome; Bill says often the birds, especially the domesticated ones, simply need added attention. If anyone is interested in volunteering please contact Charlene at 645-4224.

**The Gilcrease Orchard** for decades, has been *the* place for Las Vegans to hand-pick fresh produce. Unfortunately, it has recently suffered a tremendous loss with the death of Ted Gilcrease. Ted and Bill Gilcrease spent the majority of their lives working together on the farm. Bill and Ted would later build a juice facility to process excess apples. And I must confess the freshly processed juice is the best you will ever taste. But it is unlikely the apple trees will survive the rapid development surrounding the Gilcrease Orchard.

The Clark County School District is in the process of building a high school adjacent to the Gilcrease Orchard. Clark County high schools in the northwest have at times surpassed 4,000 students and the orchard will not survive that type of traffic. The school district actually purchased the property from the Gilcrease brothers, but the brothers were greatly misled by the intentions of the school district, as were the neighbors in the area who are currently

involved in a lawsuit to stop the construction of the high school.

School officials convinced the Gilcrease brothers that they were going to build a small technical type school that would have curriculum that revolves around interaction with the orchard; a co-operative effort that would help ensure the survival of the orchard. The brothers were convinced to the point that they sold the land at a discounted rate of 2.7 million when the 40-acre site is worth closer to 10 million. The brothers never received any money. Instead there was some type of elaborate property exchange that Bill seems to have been persuaded into entering. When Bill found out about the intended use after the sale, he attended two council meetings to oppose the construction. At these meetings Bill Gilcrease was embarrassed and ridiculed by the council for selling the land, even though Bill and Ted have donated millions to the community in the form of land for Father Flanagan's Boys Town and the New Vista Ranch for adults with special needs.

The fight then fell in to the hands of the other neighbors whose rural property surrounds the school. Just how did this property zoned agricultural become rezoned in a matter of months avoiding confrontation with the local property owners?

The neighbors, who formed a coalition, contacted the county, the city and the school district but were unable to get answers. For some reason the plans were kept from the public until the 11th hour. For years there was another CCSD owned site at Elkhorn and Buffalo designated for a high school, but all building efforts shifted to the Gilcrease location.

Sharron Linsenhardt, a property owner in the area, provided the timetable of events that lead to the current school construction. On October 12, 2001 the county quietly recorded the deed for purchase of the property; the property was never up for sale so the neighbors did not know a transaction had taken place. By April of 2003 there was still no public information about the plans and no environmental or traffic study. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May the land was annexed by the City of Las Vegas and on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May the annexation was finalized. The residents were sent a card in the mail announcing a meeting with officials from the Clark County School District on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. This would be the first meeting with neighboring property owners even though the plans had been in the works for at least two years.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> the Las Vegas Planning Commission unanimously turned down the CCSD request to build the high school and suggested they work with the neighbors to produce a solution that would be orchard friendly. The CCSD was trying to place a four-story school with a parking garage that greatly exceeded the space limitations of the site. Matt LaCroix of the Development Department for the Clark County School District took the position that the school district was unwilling to compromise their plans

and was not concerned with the school's effect on the orchard. The neighborhood group went to the City Planning Commission on July 24<sup>th</sup> where the proposal was again turned down unanimously. Nevertheless, the project then moved forward to the Las Vegas City Council on August 6<sup>th</sup> where it was approved without comment. On the following day the site was leveled as construction moved forward.

The property owners in this rural/agricultural-zoned portion of the valley were given only two months from June 2<sup>nd</sup> to August 6<sup>th</sup> to address an issue that will drastically change their life style. The school district had plans for this site for over two years, all done without public knowledge or input. The neighborhood group has petitions with thousands of signatures in protest of the high school and has created a web sit to gain support. The group can be reached at [www.lasvegasorchards.com](http://www.lasvegasorchards.com).

## Old Fort News

By CHRIS MACEK

The biggest news at the Old Fort was to be the announcement that the visitor center would soon be under construction. It was hoped that the construction would begin soon and be completed by May 2005, in time for the celebration of Las Vegas' 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Old Fort. Unfortunately, that announcement cannot yet be made. We are still awaiting word that the money from Question 1, the bond issue passed by the voters in 2002, is available and we can begin the bid process for the construction contract. Hopefully that will happen soon, although there is no indication that it will. Our fingers are crossed.

The Old Fort has a full slate of programs planned for the winter and spring such as candle making, corn husk doll making, archaeology, rope making and much more. Contact the park at 486-3511 for more information, or better yet, stop by for a visit and pick up an event calendar.

Finally, we said goodbye to Elaine Weaver, a veteran seasonal employee at the Old Fort. She left in May to move to Florida with her husband and a whole new adventure. But we say hello to the new guy, Mike Murphy, who started at the Fort in late September and has already shown he will be a capable replacement for Elaine. Welcome aboard Mike!

**Renew your membership now!**

The Newsletter is published quarterly by the Preservation Association of Clark County, a nonprofit organization established in 1974 for the preservation of Clark County's heritage.

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