

NOTABLE Jonathans

The Great Developer

by Grafton Tanquary



H.J. Whitley honored by the Janss Corporation, 1911. Photo courtesy of the Oviatt Collection, California State University Northridge.

Hobart Johnstone Whitley was one of the nation's most successful land developers, founding over 140 towns during his lifetime. Elected to the Board of Directors of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad he built over 100 townships along the railroad's right-of-way, including Fort Sill, Norman, and Wichita.

In 1886, he honeymooned in southern California and, according to family lore, met a Chinaman hauling wood down a mountain while out on a buggy-ride with his bride. When asked what he was doing, the Chinaman answered "All time haully wood." HJ took a shine to the hill-top overlooking the fruit groves to the south and shook hands with the owner of the property to option the purchase of 480 acres, which he called Hollywood.

Returning east, he established towns for the Northern Pacific. Whitley opened his personal bank in the Dakotas and, unarmed, fought off a group of bandits intending to rob the bank. In 1886, Theodore Roosevelt spoke at the bank during the Fourth of July celebrations. Whitley and Roosevelt became good friends. Roosevelt taught HJ's wife Gigi to shoot at his ranch, and HJ accompanied Roosevelt on the cattle roundup that fall.

With the opening of the Oklahoma Territory in 1889 Whitley staked out land which soon became Guthrie, the future capital of the state. Asked to be Governor, Whitley refused. However, he was instrumental in the development of laws for the new state and was President of the Chamber of Commerce.

Returning to California, he built his home at 839 South Flower Street and opened a jewelry store at 111 North Spring. The business became the largest diamond merchant in the west, "Tiffany's only rival." Among his directors was **Griffith J. Griffith**.

In 1889, he finalized the purchase of the 480 acres of the Hurd Ranch north of Prospect Boulevard, now Hollywood Boulevard, between La Brea and Cahuenga. The area called Whitley Heights is north of Franklin and east of Highland, overlooking the Cahuenga Valley. His home was located at 6643 Whitley Terrace on a lot he and his bride had chosen on their honeymoon years earlier. For the opening of the Heights, HJ planted 10,000 trees and shrubs and invited 1,000 people to a barbecue. He has ever since been called "The Father of Hollywood."

In 1900, he formed the Los Angeles-Pacific Boulevard and Deve-

lopment Company, assuming the position of President. In 1902 the company developed the Ocean View Tract, started the Hollywood National Bank, and built the Hollywood Hotel on a strawberry patch fronting a block at Hollywood Boulevard at Highland. He also convinced **General Moses Sherman** and **Eli Clark** to extend their trolley line to Whitley Heights.

As president of a syndicate including **General Harrison Gray Otis**, he promoted the construction of Sunset Boulevard from downtown Los Angeles to the sea, which opened in 1904. The most pressing problem at the time for residents of the Heights was the control of sheep being driven from San Fernando Valley to Los Angeles.

While president of a land and loan company, he purchased 32,000 acres in the San Joaquin and started development of Corcoran, California. On one of his trips to Egypt, he brought back seeds of the coveted Egyptian long-staple cotton to plant on his lands in California. Whitley Avenue is the main street of Corcoran.

In 1920, with **General Harrison Gray Otis**, **Harry Chandler**, **General M. H. Sherman**, **H J Whitley**, and O. T. Brandt as members of the Board of Control, the Los Angeles Suburban Home Company purchased 47,500 acres of the Van Nuys Ranch along the southern boundaries of the San Fernando Valley. Whitley was General Manager in charge of sales. On opening day of the first subdivisions, the company hired the telephone company to call every subscriber in Southern California to invite them to a barbecue at the Patton Ranch, a 10,000 acre property which was the headquarters of the American Beet Company, the largest single field in the world, 10 miles long.

Whitley built a 10,000 square foot villa in Van Nuys as a second home. He was an officer in five valley banks and was directly responsible for the establishment of the cities now known as Van Nuys, Reseda, and Canoga Park.

As the motion picture industry began to grow in Southern California, Whitley Heights became the preferred home of its stars and producers. Included among the residents of the Heights were Jean Harlow, Ethel Barrymore, Charlie Chaplin, Marion Davies, W. C. Fields, **Harold Lloyd**, Rudolph Valentino and later Tyrone Power, Bette Davis, Norma Shearer, Maurice Chevalier, William Faulkner, and Wallace Berry. The first motion picture in Hollywood was filmed on October 26, 1911 at the Whitley estate.

Whitley also bought the 30,000 acre Sacramento Ranch and the 18,000 acre Estrella Ranch near Paso Robles and started the town of Whitley Gardens. He supervised construction of the Ridge-Route connecting Southern California to the San Joaquin Valley.

He was especially pleased that his friend **Harry Chandler** named his new radio station KHJ in his honor, or at least so his wife held.

Whitley died at the age of 83 in 1931. Whitley Heights is on the National Register of Historic Places. His obituary in the New York Times called him "The Great Developer."

For more information about Whitley, see "The Father of Hollywood" by Gaelyn Whitley Keith in our library.



First Family of Hollywood, HJ Whitley and family. Photo courtesy of Gaelyn Whitley Keith.



Cahuenga Pass, 1909. Photo courtesy of the Oviatt Collection, California State University Northridge.



Ventura Boulevard, 1910. Photo courtesy of the Oviatt Collection, California State University Northridge.