



The Branding Iron

DUARTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OCT - DEC 2022

Claudia Heller Retires

Claudia Heller's column in *The Weekly Star* could be described as unique, even adventurous, as her weekly musings brought together Duarte's people, history, and the news into a read that engaged local readers for more than 30 years.

Claudia has decided, it's time to turn a page. After Saturday's issue, her fresh takes will be no more. Heller, 78, is retired. "I'm having problems health-wise," she said. "And I just figured while I know what I'm doing, I should quit. I'm just suffering from old age."

Claudia Heller began writing for the *Weekly Star*, which is owned by the Southern California News Group, back in 1991. Eventually, she became a columnist.

"Well, it keeps me in touch with the people in the San Gabriel Valley," she said. "People are always sending me their interesting stories, so I've made a lot of friends that way. And, basically, I've just met a lot of people and I've really enjoyed passing on their stories."

She has particularly loved waxing about the outdoors, and anything historical. It was just this past October that she retired as president of the Duarte Historical Society & Museum. She remains on the board as President Emeritus.

"I enjoy writing about activities around the riverbed and nature and animals and hiking, things like that," she said. "And then when I write about it, people read about it. Then they send me a message, 'Oh, I did that, thanks for telling me.' So it keeps me in touch with the community."

She said that as much as she has loved writing about these stories, her subjects equally enjoyed conveying them to her, making it all the more worthwhile.

Alan Heller has been his wife's photographer for her columns; next year they will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary.

I did an article on mailboxes one time," she said. "We had a lot of interesting ones in Duarte. Like, there was a fireman and he had a mailbox of a fire station. And then we had one on Royal Oaks that was airmail and it was way



up 20 feet high. Things like that. I would write a story and Alan would take a picture..

Claudia and Alan have teamed up for three books. "In 2010 we quit our jobs and we bought a trailer and took off from Santa Monica to Chicago, and we wrote a book called *Life on Route 66*," she said. "That book did really well." Another book was *Duarte Chronicles* (2013); the other was *Curiosities of the California Desert* (2015).

It's been an unforgettable journey, one Alan is also sad to see end. "Claudia's good at writing about people, particularly," he said. "I would say that's her forte.... It's been amazing. I really kind of hate to see it go away."

She's not the only one who shares that feeling. "Claudia's column has been a truly unique wonder for a long, long time; it truly captured the tone and texture of the area," said Tom Bray, senior editor for the Los Angeles County editions of the SoCal News Group. "Claudia deftly blended compelling glimpses of local history, issues that shaped the day's news, and profiles of pivotal people.

Perhaps, as important as anything, Claudia believes she served her readers well. "I think that I have because I think I've been pretty versatile with what I write about, and so I talk to people about the cabins they used to have up on the hillside and they tell me all these stories and one story will run into another," Claudia said. "And I think it saves all these things that otherwise might be lost."

WHAT A RIDE IT HAS BEEN!



President's Message

I've cleared about half the "collections" from the future Route 66 Room, currently the largest storeroom. And I've temporarily arranged two display cases with pegboards behind them. Richard Armadori's Route 66 collection will be moved into these cases. Richard has generously donated his extensive collection of Route 66 memorabilia to the Duarte Historical Museum. I'm excited about this addition to our displays and about the future Route 66 Room .

I'm waiting for the city to add shelving to the bathroom closet. Then, I will be able to remove many of the remaining boxes from the Route 66 Room, sort them by subject matter, and move them into that closet, neatly labeled.

There have been two astronomy-related events held at the Duarte Museum since the last Branding Iron was published. In July, Tokuo Nakamoto spoke about our solar system; while on September 25, Tim Thompson discussed the many significant strides in astronomy that occurred at the Mt Wilson Observatory.

Unfortunately, there has been some vandalism at the Duarte Historical Museum. As I walked around the museum I noticed glass all over the floor. Upon closer inspection, I found one side of the window in the Citrus Room had a hole the size of a baseball and the screen had been ripped open. The other window had been struck in two spots, but was not shattered. I filed a report with the sheriff and notified the city.

A big thank you to the city crew. The "yellow shirts" did a great job of cleaning up the glass. Glass is so difficult to pick up because breakage always covers a larger area than you think. The result is that the museum now has a brand new window in the Citrus Room.

The Duarte Museum participated in the city picnic on September 24 at Royal Oaks Park. We sold Route 66 t-shirts, Route 66 buttons, and books by our own Claudia and Alan Heller. Many thanks to the docents who volunteered at the picnic - Maria Dixon, Dilip Tiwari, Connie Ream, Judy Ann Blake, Ellen Worley, Sharman Warner, Liz Reilly.



I really like the above photo of Claudia and Alan Heller in the Citrus Room with the mannequin of Victoria Duarte in the background. All three of them are legends. Claudia has been President of the Duarte Historical Society & Museum since 1990. And wherever Claudia volunteers, so does Alan.

Claudia tells a wonderful story about how she began writing the newsletter. Claudia saw a copy of an early Duarte Museum newsletter that had cross outs and didn't look very good.

"I didn't want to offend anyone, but thought I could really help them do a better newsletter." She went into the museum, which was in a storefront at the time, and asked to see the person in charge.

She was shown into a back room where she saw Aloysia Moore "hunting & peeking" on a typewriter. Can I help you with that? Claudia asked.

The reply – Hallelujah! Thank you Jesus! And so Claudia became editor of the museum newsletter. Back copies of the Branding Iron have been bound by the Hellers and are available for reading in the Duarte Museum library.



2021 Duarte City Picnic – Holiday Heller, Claudia Heller, Sharman Warner, Liz Reilly

The Duarte Museum Building

Several weeks ago, Mark Montgomery and I were at the Duarte Museum talking about the museum building and how it happened to be relocated to Encanto Park. Mark really knows a lot about the move. It's a very interesting story. Many visitors ask about the house.

When a visitor enters the Museum, after you welcome them and ask them to sign-in with their name, mobile number, and email (this gives us an opportunity to send them info about our events), you can tell them a little about how the Duarte Historical Museum arrived at Encanto Park.

Below you will find the written story about the origin of the house. I have placed a copy of it in a plastic protective sheet and put it next to the Docent sign-in binder.

This house was originally built in 1920 on Pasadena's west side, the Linda Vista area, right next to where the Rose Bowl is currently sitting. It was a wedding gift from Buron Fitts, Sr. to his son, Buron Fitts, Jr, who was getting married on election day in 1920.

Buron Fitts, Jr was also elected the 29th Lieutenant Governor of California on that November day. In 1930 he was elected District Attorney for Los Angeles County, a position he held for three terms.

In 1930 the house was cut in half and taken to the southwest corner of Royal Oaks Drive and Cotter Ave. in Duarte, where members of the Fitts family lived until 1990.

When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Los Angeles Area, decommissioned the Monrovia Ward and merged with the Duarte Ward, they bought the Fitts property in Duarte to build a new church. Because the Mormons wanted the property, but not the house, it was sold to the Duarte Historical Society for \$1.00, providing the building was moved.

The move took place with great fanfare, on a Saturday morning, with the Duarte High Marching Band leading the procession along Huntington Drive to Encanto Parkway.

It took most of the next year to reassemble the house, with the help of former, long time Mayor J A (Monty) Montgomery and his construction company.

The Duarte Museum was opened at Encanto Park on March 23, 1991, with many local and regional representatives from throughout the San Gabriel Valley present.



Speaker
Series:
Mt. Wilson
Observatory

On Sunday, September 25, Tim Thompson spoke about "Mt. Wilson - Where Astronomy Began" and presented a most riveting and entertaining program showcasing the important discoveries that made Mt. Wilson a premier observatory.

Tim is an amateur astronomer, and has been an astronomer at the Garvey Ranch Observatory, in Monterey Park since 1975, with extensive experience in public outreach. He has been elected President of the Los Angeles Astronomical Society 12 times.

Tim has been a volunteer at Mt. Wilson Observatory since 1981, and was one of the founders of both the docent & director programs. He was elected to the Board of Trustees of the Mt. Wilson Institute in September 2015.

Mount Wilson Observatory's 60" telescope was completed in 1908 by Observatory founder George Ellery Hale with funding from Andrew Carnegie and was the largest operational telescope in the world from 1908-1917.

It allowed astronomer Harlow Shapley to "discover" in 1918 that Earth was the center of the Milky Way and to determine its true size and shape.

In 1919 Edwin Hubble proved that the universe extends beyond the Milky Way Galaxy by demonstrating that the Milky Way is only one of millions of galaxies in an expanding universe.



Tim Thompson, Liz Reilly holding photographic plate taken by Mt Wilson 60" telescope in the 1950s.

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Directors: Judy Ann Blake, Maria Dixon
Docent Coordinator: Sharman Warner
President Emeritus: Claudia Heller
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