



LAS FLORES AND ITS INN

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Now that I'm getting up in years and with little else to do I often go to the internet (You-Tube or Google Earth) for entertainment.

Just for kicks I typed in the old address where I grew up at Las Flores, before World War II. What came up astounded me. Two doors from my house was an ultra-modern three-story house featured on the market, with every conceivable amenity attached or installed. It also had a hefty \$6,500,000 price tag. I had never considered that I once lived in the lap of such luxury. We owned the house but the land, which was leased only at the time, was fifty-foot wide lots that pretty well limited building any mansions.

In the mid nineteen thirties our beach front community of about forty houses was regarded as the poor man's paradise. It was a half-mile strip, unprotected from the ravishes of storms and high tides; and because of the Rindge Trust there were no water or sewage lines allowed, which made the full-time residents more resilient and neighborly...unlike the snooty neighbors further up the Coast Highway at La Costa or Malibu.

I was in my early to mid-teens, with no brothers or sisters. I personally felt somewhat isolated during the winter months when many residents retreated to their inland homes and came down only on holidays, leaving about one-third of us who remained to fend on our own.

Gone were my hiking or surfing buddies. I really missed the summertime evening gatherings for snipe hunts and congregating around the fire pits with

our made-up wild tales. For those of you now living in the twenty-first Century, this was before Television and Computers.

Earning spending money was always a challenge as there were no lawns to mow. I did design and build my own 'Sand-Sifter'. The contraption kept me busy during the summer months sifting and making fancy designs in the sand in front of the beach homes.

We did have an abundance of Ice-plants. It was hard for me to believe that someone would deliberately plant this unruly ground cover. Until you have personally hacked and chopped a hundred square feet of a three-years growth, it's hard to imagine what a problem it can be. The weight of the plant would amaze you. You can't put 500 pounds in the trash, so now what do you do with it? I suggested to Mr. Borzage, (that was the name on a plaque under his mail box) that if I could use his skiff, maybe it would only take me two or three trips out through the surf to unload the mess; he agreed. He brought out the oars and oarlocks but before we turned the planked 10-foot skiff over, I got my first introduction to boat ownership. No telling when had been the last time the skiff saw water. You could almost see through the seams in the thin planking. He brought out a broad chisel, hammer and a reel of large strings of cotton and started pounding. He announced "Watch and learn," and began driving the cotton into the seams. He handed the tools to me, "Now you caulk".

Two hours later, after turning the skiff over and tightening several screws around the stem and stern, he ordered me to fetch several buckets of water to fill the bottom of the boat and then suggested that we let it set over night. First thing in the morning, before the surf built up, I launched the skiff to take the ice plants out to sea.

Not only was I generously paid, I learned boat maintenance and Mr. Borzage gave me permission to use the skiff anytime I wanted as long as I kept up with the ice-plants in his yard and maintained the boat. Our deal lasted for near three years. As far as anyone was concerned, 'it was my boat and Mr. Borzage gave me permission to park it on his beach'; his house being the furthest up the beach from the surf line.

The physical condition of our beaches on the strip would change, at times drastically. A high tide over one day would erode the sand to shear six to eight-foot sand cliffs; a few weeks later we'd have 200 feet of beautiful white sand from our bulkhead (a heavily constructed patio wall) to the surf line.

We were always concerned with the high tides, especially if they were somehow associated with a frontal system. A normal six to seven-foot-high tide would send surf lapping a few feet from the bulkhead at the base of our house.

My Mother and I, by ourselves...and on quite a few occasions, would place 50 or so sand-filled burlap bags in various places for protection, plus empty all the storage lockers on the lower level of the house. My stepfather knew he had me around to do all the menial tasks and never offered to help, or give me a farthing for my labor...he, being very British.

Our house had three stories. The lower level was like a patio; six deck chairs, large umbrella table, a large bamboo credenza holding bar towels, glasses etc. To the rear was a large dressing room with a grooming bar and mirror, shower and commode. Opposite was a storage room for brooms, shovels and other household items and tools.

The second story had one large bedroom with bath and one small bedroom...mine, I used the bath downstairs. The bedrooms were off the kitchen-dining room area. A stairway to the top floor took up a lot of headspace from my bedroom.

Outside, we shared a wide stairway and landing with our next-door neighbor, whose house was a mirror image of our house. Both families used this mid-level landing as our main entryway. We both had a bridge-like staircase from the road to the top level but never used that entrance. Above the mid-level landing was a two hundred-gallon fresh water tank, shared by both families and used only for showers and clothes washing. The water truck came by once a month and would pump water to the tank for a few cents a gallon. For drinking water, my stepfather would drive me a few miles up Topanga Canyon and let me out with four five-gallon Arrowhead glass bottles. I'd drive my angle iron stakes into the side of the cliff and water from underground springs would dribble into the bottles. He'd come back for me an hour or so later. Several people living in remote areas of the hills came here for their drinking water even if they had fresh water pumps on their property.

The top story of the house was my escape area; four heavy plate glass windows six feet wide by five feet high, with four built-in settees that each slept two people. We were able to, and did, accommodate as many as 16 overnight guests.

I spent many hours at the windows watching huge waves break on the rocks down the beach from us or just staring out to sea. For me it was a most comfortable and private retreat and I slept many a night there.

Our house was fortunate to have the only rock-free swim beach in front. Three large spotlights were installed by the previous owner, along with a large ship's bell. We also inherited their cannon. We felt obligated to carry on with the traditions set by those before us. If a neighbor had overnight guests and

they wanted to go for a night swim, they'd ask if we would turn on the lights (Al once remarked he could see the light meter needle spinning around, so he put on a restriction of only a half hour).

The 12-inch diameter ship's bell was only to be rung if there was an emergency, such as a fire or someone in need of help. The one exception being 'Grunion'. We knew the dates and time when they were going to run and could almost set our watches on the hour they appeared. We younger set were on the lookout and couldn't wait for the first sighting to be the first to ring the bell. When the bell rang crowds of people would evacuate their houses and charge the beach like gold miners hitting pay dirt. I was amongst them with my tub...catching maybe 300 of the little fish in maybe twenty minutes time...then 'poof' they would disappear. I made a penny-a-piece selling to those not adept enough to catch their own. My mother got into the spirit and often would fry up a large platter of the small fish, offering them to our neighbors.

The cannon was an 'old' Lyle gun, once used by seamen to shoot a messenger-line to someone or a vessel in distress at sea. After loading with gun powder, a rod or projectile attached to a coiled line was stuffed in the barrel. When the fuse was lit the explosion would rocket the projectile out in the direction of those in need. We would load it with gun powder and fire it off on New Year's Eve or Fourth of July. That damned thing and my own stupidity cost me the use of my right eye and gave me a hurdle I've been jumping for most of my life.

LAS FLORES INN...For those of us going to school, this was where the buses transferred students to a smaller bus that continued to the county line some ten miles or so on up the Coast Highway. For safety reasons Rick (our school-bus driver) would not let us off to cross the busy highway at our houses and deposited us in the parking lot of the Inn, forcing me to walk the half-mile back down the beach to my home. Not that I minded...as the Inn became a gathering spot to plan what mischief us guys could get into.

There was an Italian fellow who took care of the seal tanks (how I wish I could remember his name). He was a very friendly and helpful fellow. I'll call him Luigi... he sold fresh fish and had a large brick smoke house in the parking lot, where he smoked some of the best tasting fish I've ever eaten. He also tended the seal tanks.

The seals and their antics became a major attraction for the Inn. There were three twelve-foot concrete tanks in a row and the seal's routine started when one seal would dive over the wall, from one tank to the other, and start barking. Within a few seconds the other seals would be diving from one tank to

the other, all the while barking and splashing water everywhere, even on the crowd. This high-spiritedness lasted for maybe three to four minutes, and the crowd loved it. Of course, Luigi rewarded the seals with fish. Maybe the seals weren't as dumb as we thought, they got a fish treat for their show.

Luigi knew I liked a certain young seal pup and gave me sardines to feed him. I was trying to train the seal to come to me and to nuzzle our heads together. That's when I noticed the lobsters on the bottom of the tank. I asked Luigi how he got them. He suggested that I could set out some pots (traps) and he'd give me fifty cents for every lobster I'd bring him.

There was a young dog that showed up one day at the Inn, barking and chasing seagulls. I saw this boy, who was going on up the coast on the other bus, pick up a stone from the parking lot and throw it at the pup. I went over and raised hell with him...almost coming to blows; he got on the bus and left.

The dog started chasing the sea gulls again and Luigi said the restaurant should pay the pup to keep the gulls away. I called for the dog..."Come here boy". He trotted right up to me. I noticed he showed his teeth as if he was about to take a bite out of me, but he was friendly. His tail was wagging out of control from side to side. I pointed this out to Luigi and he said that the pup might have been mistreated and dumped out there as he'd only been around for a couple of days.

I studied the dog; he was less than a year old, had short wiry red hair, a scar on his nose, another scar on his fore-shoulder, a broken tail and was skinny as a rail. Luigi said he looked like an Airedale. He seemed to like me. Luigi asked if I would keep an eye on the seal tanks as he needed to go to the toilet. On his return, he brought a pack of meat scraps and a bowl for water for the dog. Luigi was my hero.

I walked down the path leading to the beach and removed my shoes so I could walk the surf towards home. The Airedale came along side me baring his teeth smiling at me, how could I resist. The stiff breeze had many gulls on the beach, much to the delight of 'smiley' who wouldn't allow the gulls a moment of rest. When we made it home my mother absolutely refused to let 'smiley' in the house. Period.

The weekend came and after completing my chores I headed for the Inn. Luigi called me over to show me two lobster pots he had built. They were made out of chicken wire mesh and grape-stakes, with a nozzle of split bamboo to let the bug crawl in but prevented it from getting back out. The pots were 20 inches high by 48 inches long and 30 inches wide. He walked me to the cliff and pointed to several areas where I could set the pots. He showed me how to open and close

the top and place the bait. They each had a 20-25 feet of half-inch twisted sisal rope tied to a one gallon glass jug...and he offered them at no cost as long as I gave him my catch at an agreed-on price. He said he'd even supply the bait. I went over and nuzzled my seal buddie and the deal was 'sealed'.

The owner of the restaurant came out and asked me if I wanted a part-time job. They needed a dishwasher on the weekends and he said that I could start that very day. We went to the kitchen and introduced me to the cook. He took me to the dish washing area...what a mess...I almost turned around and left. I found out later that the cook and the dishwasher had an argument and the dishwasher was fired. The cook offered me 35 cents an hour to start. I told him I would help out, but at that price...for today only.

It took me an hour and a half just to clean a path to the sinks. Garbage cans had to be emptied out back, dishes had to be scraped and rinsed then stacked again, even before washing them. There was a large table with a four-inch-high rim stacked high with dirty dishes, plus garbage. The waitresses couldn't scrape the garbage off, because the cans were already full. On top of all that the waitresses were yelling for salad dishes or glasses...needing them...Now! I was ready to walk out.

I remember there was a large metal box-like contraption next to the sink that they called the rinse box. The washed dishes were stacked in a rack. I pulled an arm to open the box, slid in the rack of dishes, closed the door and pushed a lever that started the hot spray cycle. The dishes came out the other side almost dried ready to stack in the clean dish shelves.

I finally got things in order and a routine going. Except for one hiccup...the planks. They had to be scrubbed with a stiff brush, washed, rinsed and put in the broiler until dry. They were for the featured 'entree' of the Inn; a 'Plank Sea Food Platter' for two. It was presented on a one inch thick oval shaped Oak board 10 x 16 inches and the surface, charred almost to a cinder. Mashed potatoes were squeezed with a scallop effect around the edge of the plank, then tomatoes arranged. At one end, several large shrimps stood with tails up in a dish of zesty sauce. At the opposite end a large boat of coleslaw and in the center, the diner's choice of fresh fish grilled to perfection. The waitresses transferred portions to dinner plates leaving what remained on the plank for leftovers.

The reason I know this was because some months later, when the two cooks called in sick (or drunk) I was asked, by the owner if I could fill in for them. On a Sunday afternoon. Don't get me wrong, I didn't do it by myself, everyone chipped in. The waitresses got their own salads and set-ups. I mashed

the potatoes and squeezed them through the 'piper and nozzle' (a cloth cone with nozzle) to decorate the rims of the planks and went crazy keeping an eye on the fish and french-fry's, in the deep fryer. I remember one smart ass waitress kept yelling for her two hamburgers that she had ordered a half hour ago...I don't remember if she ever got them.

After the rush was over, everyone was surprised that things worked as smooth as it did.

My first week of lobster trapping started out lousy. I launched the skiff and went out through the breakers OK. I got to where I thought I had set the traps, but found no sign of the jugs that acted as buoys to mark where my traps were set. I tied the skiff off on to some kelp and dove over the side. The water was only ten to twelve feet deep. I made several practice dives to exercise my lungs. After several minutes and dives I found one pot, grabbed the line and went to the surface and tied it to the kelp.

With great effort I pulled up the pot that was heavy with the weight of the rocks used to anchor the pot down. One small and one large bug fought me all the way, they kept flipping their bodies. I was afraid they could cut my finger off. I finally tossed them in the bow. On my way back through the five to six-foot breakers, a breaker caught me, tossing the skiff over and allowing the bugs to go free.

Mike, a classmate of mine, admitted to shooting the jugs with his 22 rifle, saying he used them for target practice and didn't know that the pots were mine. He offered to help me recover the other pot. Luigi gave me some painted cork blocks to replace the jugs.

With a raise to 50 cents an hour, I lasted two weeks as a dishwasher; then they hired an older fellow. I was promoted to pantryman, peeling nearly a hundred potatoes at a time, then trimming them into blocks to fit into the French fry cutter, I also made the coleslaw. At the dinner rush, I heated the bread wrapped it in napkins and placed it in baskets, heated the planks so the cooks could decorate them, and set up the dishes as needed so the cooks didn't have to leave their cooking area, I also ran back and forth to the chiller box to fetch what the cooks needed. The reason I'm going into details of my experiences at Las Flores Inn is because it became a way of life for me. I spent as much time as I could there; I worked hard, met people. I also heard of the under-life on the other side of Las Flores Creek. The gambling tables and slot machines, plus...the house of prostitution. I've heard that these activities were going on everywhere. I listened in to Al, my step-father, and his restaurant friends when they came for a visit, describing their experiences on the gambling

ships, Rex and Tango, just offshore and where they locally moved to when the ships shut down.

One of our greatest fears, besides the high tides with waves trying to destroy our houses...was fires. Our houses were wood constructed and so densely packed together that if one house caught fire the rest would be in danger before help could arrive and us with damned little water to fight the fire.

A fire started up in the Topanga back country, then went out of control because of the high winds. The whole area, all the way to Malibu Canyon was on fire. Several homes in Las Tunas Canyon were lost as well as up in our own Las Flores Canyon. The Inn was going to shut down but they were designated as a disaster center. People were filling the parking lot with their household furnishing and bringing in their pets and stock animals, horses and goats from their small farms and ranches.

I heard later that the Inn became the command center for emergency services.

Al, on his way home from work at 2 o'clock in the morning, was conscripted by the Sheriffs to fight the fire. There was no way he could have made it home, and he had no way to contact us. We didn't have a telephone.

My mother and I grabbed wet sacks to fight the embers and soot that was flitting around everywhere. I rigged up a couple of garden hoses to the salt water pump that we used to flush the toilets and began spraying both houses, ours and Dr. Lidenhiemer's (who had already moved to his inland home for the winter). The electrical power was very erratic; we knew we were going to lose it when it started flickering. It would go off for an hour and then come back on,

I've mentioned this following incident in a previous story. I think it needs repeating. We had been up most of the night, worrying and keeping an eye on the fire and when we awoke in the morning (still no sign of Al) we saw a herd of about 20-30 deer racing, in a frenzy, up and down the beach. I don't know if they were being chased by the mixture of other animals following in their path. After a time, they seemed to gather together and entered the surf and started swimming out to sea.

I noticed that several purse seiners were already standing off shore. I wondered if the Coast Guard might have asked them to stand-by in case there were stranded people on an isolated beach who might have to be evacuated. I heard later that the fishermen tried every way possible to turn the animals around, the deer were exhausted but determined to keep going and the boats

wound up having to purse them up in their nets and take them to Malibu pier to off-load them.

Roadblocks were set up at Pacific Coast Highway and Sunset Boulevard, rerouting all traffic back through Hollywood, allowing only residents with ID to come through. We couldn't go to school for close to a week.

We were well aware that when heavy rains came they would gush mud from gullies formed by the sheer cliffs, turning peaceful streams into raging torrents that flowed from every crevasse and canyon. We came to expect the highway to be shut down, sometimes from three days to a week at a time, while tons of rock that tumbled across the road was scooped up and hauled away. The cliffs then had to be graded so they didn't collapse again. Fires, high winds, heavy rains, raging seas could be expected anytime without warning. All this made life exciting...at least for me.

Immediately after the bombing at Pearl Harbor the Army set up a Radar Station in the parking lot of Las Flores Inn.

They set up a large contraption resembling a 20-30-foot wide assemblage of bedsprings, that rotated partially on a mount. The military gave me the impression it was very secret. As friendly as I became with some of the soldiers, they wouldn't let me peek into the scope area. Though I did see the greenish light from outside.

What did impress me was a pedestal with binoculars built in. The GI's did let me look through the set-up. They told me that if we spotted something in the glasses they could flip a switch and as we tracked the target, our direction, elevation and range would be sent to the range-finders up in the hills. I found that fascinating.

Everyone called my dog 'Smiley'. I named him 'Pete'. We became an inseparable duo. Because of the war and less traffic on the highway, Rick let us off the bus at our homes. I'd cross the road, go down to the beach and wait. In a few moments, I would see a dot coming down the hard-damp sand racing as fast as he could. My Pete. He would see the school bus drive into the Inn's parking lot and knew I was at home.

The war had a great effect on our community. Gas rationing had the most effect. We had an apartment in Santa Monica where we would stay when leasing the beach house. Al's work didn't entitle him to a high gas ration sticker. My mother could have gotten the sticker as she was a supervisor on the A-20 line, installing the landing wheel assemblies, at Douglas Aircraft.

One time when Pete wasn't around, we left for the apartment in Santa Monica. The next day, Saturday, I took off on my bike for Las Flores, 15 miles

up and 15 miles back. I found Pete with the men at the Radar Station. I didn't have to ask him to come, he trotted alongside me all the way back to the apartment in Santa Monica, and that is where I got my first reality shock. My mother and Al refused to let Pete in the apartment, saying the lease said 'no pets'. I found some line and tied it to the bottom trunk of a hedge and to Pete's collar. Thank god for Luigi, had he not hammered a nickel into a collar tag and stamped Pete's name on it I would have lost Pete forever and he would probably have been put to sleep.

During the night, I heard Pete barking and went down to quiet him. I took food and water and one of my old sweatshirts. Very early in the morning I awoke and went down to checkup on Pete. He wasn't there, he had chewed through the line and took off. I grabbed my bike and searched the neighborhood, calling for Pete everywhere. I rode as far as the Incline and then to Santa Monica Canyon, thinking he might be trying to make it to the beach house. No Pete. I was going crazy. About ten in the morning as I rode down Lincoln Blvd, I saw a parked police car. I stopped and described my situation. They asked if I had called the dog-pound in Inglewood; I told them I had no money to make a phone call. The policemen called their dispatcher and asked if he would call the pound. I gave them all the information on Pete. Ten minutes later the dispatcher radioed the police car with the news that Pete was there with a broken leg in a cast and that the pound wasn't open but they would let me in to see him. The policeman gave me instructions on how to get there. I was in tears and so relieved. I thanked them over and over again. I rode my bike the 10 miles, arriving as the pound people were about to close. They let me in to see Pete. He was in a small cage and whimpered when he saw me; they said he was hit by a car. The driver's stayed until the police came. They took Pete to a Vet who put a cast on his leg. The Vet called the pound to come and pick up Pete.

I was informed that before they could release Pete, \$35 would have to be paid for the vet bill and a license for Pete. The Venice policemen offered to pay for the license. The pound said I had about an hour to pay the bill or I'd have to wait until morning. I tried to explain to them that I had no way to call my mom and I knew they probably wouldn't come, let alone pay the bill.

Pete was in his cage asleep. I told the lady in charge I'd wait outside.

As I was getting comfortable for the night on a park bench on the pounds front stairway a car drove up and an elderly couple went to the front door; they were admitted and a few minutes later the lady came out and asked me if I were to get my dog now, how would I get him home?

I said, “If I could find a cardboard box, I could carry him home on my handle-bars.”

Her husband came out, backed his car to the lighted area and opened the trunk. He beckoned for me to come and help him stuff my bike in the trunk, announcing that they were going to take Pete and me home. An attendant brought Pete out, wrapped in a blanket, and placed him in the back seat. As we were driving the elderly couple said their daughter, who worked for the pound, called them and told them of my situation. I’ll never forget their kindness.

Months later, when I quarreled violently with my step-father and ran away from home to make my own way in the world, I had to leave Pete in the care of Luigi and the GI’s at the Inn...but I never forgot him...or my days on the beach at Los Flores.