Pacific Beach Historical Society
NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 9200 San Diego, CA 92109 John Fry, Editor 272-6655 Vol. X, No. 6 June, 1988

ROSE HARTWICK THORPE, THE FIRST LADY OF PACIFIC BEACH

(Excerpted from *'Curfew' Rang No Cash Register Bells for Rose Hartwick Thorpe,* by Joe Stone, in the San Diego *Union*, December 28, 1975)

In his book "La Jolla Year by Year," S. F. Randolph wrote of Rose Hartwick Thorpe, "She was undoubtedly the first of La Jolla's many celebrities."

Randolph may have been tinkering a bit with local geography. Mrs. Thorpe lived in Pacific Beach for more than a decade before moving to La Jolla shortly after the turn of the century. Some of the famous people of La Jolla might have argued about who was first.

One thing about Mrs. Thorpe he got dead right. She was a celebrity.

Her fame brought her to San Diego. Harr Wagner was here publishing a magazine, the Golden Era. He had cornered a male star, Joaquin Miller, the poet. Wagner decided that Mrs. Thorpe was the female star he needed.

The year was 1887, and there was probably not a minute in the day when, in some schoolroom, theater, auditorium, living room or declamation and recitation class, someone was not reciting, in English or any of the many languages into which it was translated, that most melodramatic of ballads, "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight."

Mrs. Thorpe, 20 years before, had written "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight," also known as "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight."

Look it up. The poem has four verses with "must not," four verses of "shall not" and one verse of "did not." Mrs. Thorpe, who first named the poem "Bessie and the Curfew," seems to have preferred "must not."

When Hillsdale College of Michigan gave Mrs. Thorpe an honorary master of arts degree, its president, D. W. C. Durgem, said, "It is a poem which will never allow the name of its author to die."

That was much nearer the truth than saying, as some did, that Mrs. Thorpe's fame rested one one poem -- that she was a mere poetaster, a dabbler in verse. She was a poet, all right. She never produced another to rival the fame of "Curfew", but her other verse stands reading, even now.

Who's Who in America listed, under her name, 14 of her works, both prose and poetry.

Here is a wisp from a poem she wrote about California poppies:

". . . on the brown plain
The Sun dropped a kiss in the footprints of rain."

Mrs. Thorpe was born July 18, 1850, in Mishawauka, Ind., near South Bend. Her parents were William and Mary Hartwick. She was the second of their four children. Her father was a once prosperous tailer who lost everything in a business deal.

The impoverished family, when Rose was 10, moved to the territory of Kansas, but arrived during a drought when settlers were struggling to leave. With the help of relatives the Hartwicks went to Litchfield, Mich. There Rose went to high school.

As a child she read everything she could find to read. She was a dreamer who frequently had to be aroused from reverie by her elders. She loved poetry and began to write it early.

One of her chores was to feed the chickens. She said in an interview in San Diego, when she was quite old, "I called the chickens in rhyme."

There are variations in the story of how "Curfew" was written and published. They range from accounts given after interviews with San Diego newspaper reporters, to the story as it was told in her column-long obituary in the New York *Times*. It goes, in a general way, like this:

As a teenager, Rose borrowed reading material from anyone who had any. One neighbor was a Dr. Coston. He subscribed to *Peterson's* magazine, and Rose borrowed it.

In the September, 1865, issue of Peterson's, page 185, there was a story titled "Love and Loyalty." The auther is known to history only as "A New Contributor."

The story is printed in full in George Wharton James' 1916 booklet about Mrs. Thorpe, on file in the California Room of the Public Library. It is a long and laborious tale about a young woman of Cromwell's time in England.

The damsel found that her lover was a prisoner sentenced to die when the big bell in the village church rang evening curfew, the signal to villagers to go to their homes and stay there.

The young woman in the tale climbed to the belfry and grasped the bell's clapper. With her hanging by her hands, the bell could not ring when the sexton pulled the rope. Her trick worked because the sexton was deaf. Her lover was saved.

One night when Rose was doing despised homework, she thought of the story. She needed little excuse to avoid arithmetic. She took her slate and wrote "Bessie and the Curfew," which became "Curfew Must Not (Shall Not) Ring Tonight."

Her mother saw the poem on the slate and knew it was the best thing Rose had ever done. She suggested the girl put it on paper before it was lost. Rose did so, and wrote the date -- April 5, 1867.

The young girl had done a remarkable job of taking a long, overwritten tale and reducing it to a brief, melodramatic story. Her skillful and rythmic emphasis on on, and repetition of, the doomsday phrase, "Curfew must not ring tonight," would have done credit to a poet of far more mature years. But her spelling was atrocious.

She kept the copy she had written from the slate on paper and in later years would point out how it was necessary to reconstruct such words as *mistic, tryed, sollam, murmer, whare, too and frow, too and froe, lader, awfle, beneth, tounge, stoped, swang, funearal, beeting, sleped,*

cryed, geathered, and seigned.

Rose sent a copy of her poem to the Detroit *Commercial Advertiser* newspaper with a note telling the editor, to whom she had previously contributed, if he did not like to poem to throw it away.

She got a letter from him telling her the poem would be published -- and apologizing because he would not be able to pay money for it. She was given a year's subscription to the newspaper, worth $1.50.

That is about everything of value Rose got out of the poem. She knew nothing about copyrights.

Prabably every newspaper in the United States which printed poetry copied the poem from the Detroit newspaper. In 1870 Rossiter Johnson included it in a book of little-known poems by unknown poets called "Waifs and Their Authors."

He doubted a 16-year-old girl had written "Curfew," but nevertheless used it.

The popularity of the work gained momentum until it became an overwhelming success similar to the 1948 song, "Nature Boy." But the author of "Curfew" remains better known that the author of "Nature Boy" -- remember Eden Ahbez?

Rose Hartwick was married September 11, 1871, to Edmund Carson Thorpe, a Litchfield carriage-maker whose middle name reflected the fact that his father knew Kit Carson, frontiersman.

The first 16 years of the marriage were filled with ill health and misfortune. Two children died. One daughter, Lulo, lived to marry, to became the mother of three and to die March 6, 1938, in San Diego as Mrs. Edward Y. Barnes.

Mrs. Thorpe kept writing in spite of illness and bad luck, but Lulo was 6 before her mother sold a poem for cash. The magazine *Youth's Companion* paid her $2 for one. But by the year 1883 the woman was becoming legendary.

The New York *Sun* printed a series of articles about her. Queen Victoria of England became interested in the "Curfew" poem and ordered an investigation of the source of the story.

The Queen was informed that the incident had actually occurred in the village of Chertsey, 20 miles from London, and the bell tower was still there, above an abbey, and in it was the bell, which had been cast in the year 1310.

Tiny replicas of the bell were manufactured and sold as souvenirs. The were inscribed, "The Chertsey Abbey or Curfew Bell."

There were other symptoms of increasing fame. Questions were raised publicly as to whether a 16-year-old girl could have written "Curfew" There were parodies of the poem. Vaudevillians recited, "Rooster Must Not Crow Tonight."

The "Curfew" story lent itself to illustration, and thousands of booklets with art depicting the drama of it were sold. Without copyright, the author did not profit.

Still, a Boston publisher claimed to have purchased the copyright from Mrs. Thorpe. When Caruthers Bros., publishers in London, announced they were coming out with an illustraded "Curfew," Boston publiiisher Lee & Shepard wrote Caruthers a letter of protest.

Mrs. Thorpe also got a letter from the Boston firm reminding her that she had sold the copyright. It was the first she knew of it.

Caruthers Bros. went ahead with their booklet and sent Mrs. Thorpe a copy. She sent them $5 to pay for it. The English firm returned the $5, along with 200 copies of their booklet.

It culd not be learned what she did with the 200. It was one of the few opportunities she had to make money directly from the poem. She may have sold them.

Meanwhile, the Thorpes left Litchfield for Chicago, where both worked for Fleming H. Revell, a publisher. Mrs. Thorpe was editor of three magazines for children which he published.

Thorpe's health began to fail. The family moved to Grand Rapids and then, seeking a climate in which he could regain health, to San Antonio, Tex. He got a job as a baggage master for the Southern Pacific Railway.

While living in San Antonio, Mrs. Thorpe wrote a poem, "Remember the Alamo," which became popular enough to make people wonder if she had produced another "Curfew."

It is a story of the incident in the Texas fight for independence from Mexico as told by an old man, a veteran of the war. It lacks the universal appeal of "Curfew," and does not have the throb, the beat of the childhood work.

Thorpe's health had improved when the letter from Harr Wagner came. The decision to come to San Diego was apparently an easy one.

They arrived during the great boom of the 1880's. Mrs. Thorpe later wrote that she saw people who could not find lodging camping under sheets stretched across fence corners. Newcomers and transients spent hours in lines waiting, for example, mail.

"First-class mail was delivered," Mrs. Thorpe wrote later. "Newspapers and magazines and lesser mail was dumped in the bay."

Thorpe knew of the boom before starting for San Diego. He arranged for a railroad carload of prefabricated cottages to be shipped here from Grand Rapids.

He sold them rapidly, all but one. It was erected at 1225 Ninth Ave. and became the family home until the spring of 1888 when the Thorpes moved to Pacific Beach, their destination from the beginning.

They settled on five acres under the skirts of Mt. Soledad, north of what is now the intersection of Ingraham and Garnet streets. (*More likely Lamont and Garnet -- John*) At that intersection, where the shopping center is now, was the College of Letters. Lulo and her mother were students there.

Pacific Beach was to be the cultural center of the West, the way the dream went.

Mrs. Thorpe was an editor for *Golden Era* and quickly made an important contribution to the local scene. According to the late historian John Davidson, who knew the Thorpes, Harr Wagner had written of his dissatisfaction with the name "False Bay" for the body of water on whose shores Pacific Beach was growing. He discussed the matter with Mrs. Thorpe.

In the August, 1888, issue of *Golden Era* there was a poem about the area by Mrs. Thorpe. In it, for the first time, the name Mission Bay was used to describe what had been known as False Bay. The name did not become official until 1915, however.

Michigan claimed Mrs. Thorpe as a favorite daughter. During the 1893 Columbian Exposition, the World's Fair in Chicago, a jeweled banner featuring the name Rose Hartwick Thorpe and the image of a young woman clinging to the clapper of a huge bell was a centerpiece of the Michigan exhibit.

Embroidered in the banner were the lines from the poem, "Out she swung. Far off the city seemed a tiny speck below..."

The banner was sent to San Diego to Mrs. Thorpe after the 1893 exposition. It was displayed in Balboa Park during the California-Pacific International Exposition of 1935-36.

By 1950, when the late Ben F. Dixon

was trying to get the name of Pacific Beach Elementary School changed to Rose Hartwick Thorpe Elementary School, the banner was in the possession of the San Diego Historical Society. A recent effort to find it failed.

(Note -- Mrs. Franklin Barnes told me that the banner had hung in the Women's Clubhouse on Hornblend, and had disappeared from that building -- John Fry)

In the 1890's the Thorpes had a sort of literary show they took on the road in Southern California. Mrs. Thorpe read "Curfew" and other material.

Thorpe was good at German dialect. He wrote poems in it, and recited them. Two of his recitations were "Dot California Flea" and "Der Hoogleberry Picnic."

Thorpe became a lemon-grower and contractor. In 1891-92, when San Diego had a bicameral governing body of six aldermen and 18 delegates, Thorpe was elected a delegate. That cumbersome system was abandoned for a Common Council, and in 1905 Thorpe served on it.

He built many houses in La Jolla before the Thorpes moved there. They first appear in a La Jolla directory in 1903. In 1916 Thorpe was driving Mrs. Thorpe in their Overland roadster about Pacific Beach. While waiting in the car for her to return from an errand, he suffered a stroke and died.

Lulo became Mrs. Barnes. Her husband was, at first, a lemon-grower in Pacific Beach. He was then a retail merchant; and finally bought the produce business of Ed Fletcher when the latter branched out into land and water development and politics.

Their children were Franklin, now of Julian; Hartwick, of El Cajon; Joseph, of Oregon; and the late Mrs. Margaret Fay, who died March 24, 1941.

Franklin remembers his grandmother as a splendid teller of stories.

"When we were small, if we could get her to tell us a story it was a wonderful experience," he said. "I guess I was in high school before I realized how famous she was. Teachers and other students talked about it."

After the death of her husband Mrs. Thorpe lived with the Barneses at 3361 Fourth Ave. She was active and honored. On her 80th birthday in 1930, she attended a party in her honor in the U. S. Grant Hotel and heard "Curfew" dramatized on a national radio network.

In 1936 she got telegrams from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mrs. Lou Henry Hoover, wife of the former president, honoring her on the 70th anniversary of the writing of "Curfew." Later she revealed that the congratulations came one year early, on the 69th anniversary.

On her 85th birthday in 1935, the International Exposition was on in Balboa Park, and there was a Rose Hartwick Thorpe Day in her honor. On July 18, 1939, she was a guest of radio station KFSD, San Diego, to celebrate her 89th birthday.

She died the following day. Her remains were cremated and the ashes scattered at sea. There were no services. No bell rang.

IN PERSPECTIVE

From Readers' Digest, April, 1988.

My grandmother enjoyed reminiscing about her early married life and the rearing of her 11 children. One day she told me that she always knitted three pairs of wool socks for each child every winter. Knowing how hard her life was and how many other chores she had to perform, I asked her how she ever found the time to get this done.

"Well, honey, she replied, "it wasn't always so bad. A heap of times I had store-bought yarn.

Contributed by E. B.

Are You A Member of the Pacific Beach Historical Society?

For those of you who aren't members, weren't aware of its existence, or thought membership was by invitation only—guess again! The society actively seeks new members. We meet on the first Saturday of each month (unless it conflicts with a holiday), at 1 p.m. at the Copper Skillet Restaurant. If you've ever wondered about the history of the beach, now's the time to find out about it. A membership application is provided below.

PACIFIC BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NAME _____ DATE _____

BUSINESS/GROUP _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIPCODE _____

HOME PHONE _____ BUSINESS PHONE _____

☐ - $10/Single Membership ☐ - $15/Family Membership ☐ - $20/Business/Group Membership

Send to: Membership Secretary, Pacific Beach Historical Society, P.O. Box 9200, San Diego, CA 92109

* Make checks payable to: Pacific Beach Historical Society (or P.B.H.S.)

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Pacific Beach Historical Society will be held on Saturday, June 4, at the China Inn, 877 Hornblend.

President John Fry will reprise the popular *People Movers*. slide show -- the story of the streetcar in San Diego. As always, the public is welcome and there is no charge.

We especially encourage you to come early for an excellent and inexpensive lunch.

MEMBERSHIP

New members include Otto Enne, Steve Opsal, and Phyllis Field. Joining the society at the recent Block Party were Irene Ruiz Monroe and Lou and Joy Tassi.

Renewing their memberships were the following:

Helen & Harry Whelpley, Virginia Sandera, Elaine MacLeod, Margaret Blair, Florence Lynch, Rhoda Samuel, Mrs. James Cooke, Bob Brown, Jr., Helen Allen, Homer Rydall, Jack Barnes, George Silvani, Geraldine Bromley, Ruth Smith, Pug & June Sandford, Charlie & Marion Cole, Art & Anne McDaniel, Mr. & Mrs. Frank Martin, Elizabeth Van Valin, Ila Aylward, Hazel Hansen, Ken Charles, Homer & Madge York, Mary Lynne Perry, Ron & Marilou McConnaughey, Leslie & Shirley Marshall, Tom & Karen Evans, Bill & Betty Straub, Dorothy & Max Trudersheim, Norma Taylor, Marie Martin, Grace Mayers, Thomas Wright, Ethel Walsh, Joan Pudvan, Mildred Barnes, Ethel Wright, Margaret Hollenbeck, Roland Peik, Arnold & Elizabeth Landweer, Mr. & Mrs. Austin Nipper, Richard Cowart, Trudi Flennikan, and SAN DIEGO TRUST & SAVINGS.

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