

Written and Researched by Judie Graham-Bell

The City of Westlake Village has a rich and varied history... The community is located on a portion of the former Albertson Ranch, whose cattle-grazing operation on the land ended in the mid-1960's when construction of Westlake Village commenced. In 1963, the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company bought the 12,000-acre ranch for \$32 million and, in partnership with Prudential Insurance Company, commissioned the preparation of a master plan for a "City in the Country." Prominent architects, engineers, and land planners participated in designing a unique, integrated community that has become a nationally acclaimed model for the planned community concept. "The City in the Country" was named Westlake Village and soon became recognized as one of America's most successful suburbs and finest areas to live, work and raise a family. The American Hawaiian Steamship Company subsequently passed development responsibilities to the Prudential Insurance Company. The owner/developer set out to create a master plan which included the development of 20 strategic neighborhoods in the Westlake Village area. The "First Neighborhood" and "The Island" were the first areas to be developed. By 1974, there were 16 planned neighborhoods. The Los Angeles County side, consisting of 3,456 acres, was incorporated as the City of Westlake Village in 1981 and became the 82nd municipality in Los Angeles County. The Ventura County side, comprised of the remaining 8,544 acres of the original Russell Ranch, was annexed into the City of Thousand Oaks in two portions in 1968 and 1972. The wisdom of the master planners in preserving, protecting and enhancing the natural environment of the area is evident today in the consistent growth and vitality of Westlake Village. The primary impetus for incorporation revolved around maintaining the high quality of development within the City and preserving the general pattern of land uses and design standards envisioned in the master plan.

... In 1969, a group of ladies, all members of the Westlake Village Newcomer's Club, began meeting informally at their homes to share their mutual love of gardening. In February and March 1969, there were organizational and business meetings respectively, for the newly formed Westlake Village Garden Club. In April, the first speaker, Mr. Irving Bialkin of Boething Treeland Farms, presented "Spring Gardening Tips." This was followed by programs on Christmas flower arrangements, the art of preserving flowers, and tips on "Spring Gardens" by Mr. Moor of Green Thumb Nursery. Adding to the first year's activities, field trips included visits to Leonis Adobe and Descanso Gardens to see camellias in bloom. The year culminated with a Christmas arts and crafts fundraiser at a member's home and a meeting to discuss a Garden and Patio Tour. So much was accomplished that first year!

THEN AND NOW

Then: "Open to Residents of Westlake Village; not to exceed 50 members." **Now:** "Membership is open without discrimination to all individuals.

Then: "Alternating members to host at their home, organized by a hostess and co-hostess.

Now: "The Hospitality Committee assigns member refreshment duty at monthly meetings.

Then: Dues \$3.50

Now: Dues \$40.00

STILL THE SAME AFTER ALL THESE YEARS!

Meetings: 9.30 a.m., First Tuesday of the month. Summer hiatus for 2 months (then & now)

Installation of Officers: June Luncheon (then & now)

Rules: Robert's Rules (then & now)

Sunshine: Telephone call/ or handwritten card (then & now)

The Objective and Purpose of the Westlake Village Garden Club

Then: "The object of this Club shall be to stimulate the knowledge and love of gardening among amateurs; to exchange experiences; and to aid in the protection of native trees, plants and birds; to encourage gardening in Westlake Village and to participate in other civic beautification."

Now: "Stimulate the knowledge and love of gardening; aid in the protection of native trees, plants and birds, help support students pursuing studies in horticulture and/or environmental science; encourage gardening in Westlake Village and surrounding communities; and support the objectives of Channel Islands District, California Garden Clubs Inc; (CGCI) Pacific Region and National Garden Clubs Inc." (NGC)

The First Decade 1969-1979: Early records indicate that the membership held steady at 48-50 members. Meetings were held in member's homes, and occasionally held at the First Neighborhood Community Center for Christmas luncheons and silent auctions. As time went on, the Christmas/holiday became an evening affair, with husbands and escorts invited, and included a Christmas boutique. For a number of years, it evolved into a Wassail holiday bowl and silent auction party.

Floral workshops were held at Island homes with members Beverly Brune, Annjane Clough, Margot Schlick and Vivien Worth conducting the programs and serving as member judges. The Westlake Village Garden Club Garden and Patio Tour was first held in May of 1971. Nine homes were featured; seven of the nine homes were located in the First Neighborhood, including four homes on Regents Court.

The second Garden and Patio Tour was held on the afternoon of May 19, 1974. The ticket price was a donation of \$1.00! The title of the tour was "Prelude to Summer." A small 4"x 5.5" booklet was printed and featured brief home descriptions as well as extending thanks to the following businesses: Brown Realtors, Kreis Pottery Pavilion, Boething Treeland Farms, plus Girl Scout Cadette Troup 621. In addition, there were 5 advertisements. It was noted that the gardens had been selected to offer a wide variety of planting and patio ideas. Over these formative years the WVGC donated money to long term projects such as Freedom Square, the Gregor Mendel Botanic Foundation (Conejo Valley Botanic Garden) as well as to California Garden Clubs. There was even a family picnic at Escondido Falls in Malibu, and a number of joint field trips with the Conejo Valley Club. Workshops were also popular.

Freedom Square

The Westlake Village Garden Club grew in influence, becoming more and more visible in the community. In 1974, the Club was invited to landscape the prominent entrance to the First Neighborhood of Westlake Village, an area at the junction of Agoura and Lakeview Canyon Road. The members designed and landscaped the landmark to include flower beds, pathways and a memorial rose garden. The lot was designated "Freedom Square" on Flag Day, June 1975, at which time an engraved rock was dedicated to the late Mrs. Dorothy J. Steiner, 2nd President of the WVGC and a US flagpole was placed. Members of the WVGC diligently maintained Freedom Square until 1989. The Club was honored with the Richfield Civic Beautification Award for the design and development of Freedom Square.

Freedom Square was recently renovated in 2015-16. The City of Westlake Village helped by providing a grant to improve this area. A dry creek bed, new flowering plants, fruit trees and a walking path were installed. The original rose garden was refurbished.

Westlake Village Garden and Patio Tour: From 1974 until 2017, the Westlake Village Garden Club Garden and Patio Tour was held annually in either April or May, and became the major focus of the Club's fundraising efforts. Tour homes ranged from a variety of small to medium size gardens to large estate gardens. Each had been lovingly landscaped by

passionate gardeners, while others had been professionally landscaped. It is interesting to note that one year an Ambassador's home was on the tour and another year included the home of A.E. Hanson, landscape architect who developed Hidden Hills. There were homes that featured water-wise gardens, lush tropical gardens, vegetable gardens, interesting water features, fun and whimsical gardens and one that lovingly displayed miniature trains running through parts of their garden.

Visitors marveled at one garden with an oak tree that was over 400 years old. Rose gardens have always been a favorite, as were trees and plants that attracted birds and butterflies.

Over the years, added value to the tour included speakers on subjects such as "poisonous plants," "pruning roses," "organic composting," "butterflies," "bees," and "squirrel rescue." And while touring magnificent gardens, visitors always looked forward to traditional baked cookies and lemonade prepared by club members. With the proliferation of the home computer, the tour booklet became more sophisticated and changed from a small 4"x 5.5" format in 1989 to an 8"x14" three-fold pamphlet. In 2015, an 8.5"x5.5" full color booklet with sponsorships, advertising and more in-depth garden descriptions gave the club additional fundraising opportunities. Over the years ticket price grew from a \$1.00 donation to \$25.00 per person. Due to unforeseen circumstances, in 2018 the WVGC Board made the difficult decision to cancel the Tour...hopefully to resume sometime in the near future.

Changing Times!

Additional Fundraising: In addition to holding an annual Garden Tour for a total of 44 years, members contemplated many other ways to raise money including selling entertainment books and a "Vision of Beauty" Calendar published by the National Council of State Garden Clubs. Also, adopted was the "Save the Bald Eagle" USPS Stamp project, plant and Dutch bulb sales and silent auctions to add funds to the Club's treasury.

Charitable Donations: The Club's proud 50-year history includes a wide range of support and giving back to the community. One simple example, WVGC member Connie Mercurio taught members how to make corsages that were then delivered to residents at Mary Health of the Sick Convalescent and Nursing Hospital. Many members still remember the smiles on resident faces! This theme was later repeated by President Judy Doane with her "Cup of Cheer" project. The club organized donations to benefit Agoura High School's horticulture department, Westlake Hills School for national science books, and purchased landscape and artistic design books for the Thousand Oaks Library. Members participated in a Villa Esperanza fundraiser by painting pots and supplying cuttings for the event. Over the years, the Club has donated numerous trees and plants to a variety of organizations including the Wellness Community in Westlake Village. It has also been a proud supporter of MANNA Food Bank. Since 2011, in addition to funding our scholarship program and supporting Conejo Valley Botanic Garden, WVGC has donated over \$10,000 to organizations such as the Stagecoach Inn, Santa Monica Trails, Penny Pines, California State Park and other conservancy and restoration funds.

Conejo Valley Botanic Garden: In the early years, the WVGC donated money to the Gregor Mendel Botanic Foundation...which in 1991 was renamed the Conejo Valley Botanic Garden. Located in Thousand Oaks, the botanic garden encompasses 33-acres of unique terrain that provides a natural habitat for birds and small animals. Specialty gardens include California natives and water conserving plants from other Mediterranean climates. Tours of the Garden are offered to schools, scout and garden club groups, as well as the general public. The expansive garden is free to the public. The Westlake Village Garden Club has supported the garden for decades...both with volunteers, and donating money to various projects including the outdoor workshop, "*Kids' Adventure Garden.*" In 1998, club member Jo Maturro applied for a grant to develop a bird habitat at the Conejo Botanic Garden. A \$500 grant was awarded through the Shell Oil Company and National Council of State Garden Clubs. The following year, the late Maryanne Lucas applied for a State

P.E.T.A.L.S grant of \$500 for adding an arbor and attached benches. The WVGC matched both grants! The due diligence of dedicated club members made this achievement possible. In fact, WVGC member, Beverly Brune, currently serves as a President of the Conejo Valley Botanic Garden and has donated 17 years of her time to support and manage the Conejo Valley Botanic Garden! Our current WVGC President, Jean Reiley, has also served as President and donated some 14 years of her time to the Botanic Garden!

Ronald Reagan Library: In 1992, President and Master Judge Betty Rohan addressed the Garden Club, "I am very pleased to announce that the Westlake Village Garden Club has been selected by the Ronald Reagan Library to assist them in the care and feeding of the roses in their lovely garden. Annjane (Clough) and I met with the landscape director and they are looking forward to our help. I hope you will be able to visit the library and participate in this exciting new project."

Speakers/Programs: Over the years, members have enjoyed a wonderful array of speakers and subjects. The most popular subject throughout the 50 years? Roses, Roses, Roses! Also popular subjects - Orchids, Iris, African Violets, Geraniums and Ikebana...Herb Gardens and Container Pots...Basket Arranging and "Suspended Gardens" a/k/a hanging baskets...Hydroponic Gardening, Growing and Caring for Cacti and Succulents and Growing and Caring for Citrus Trees...to Birds, Butterflies and Bats! Member, Britt McKelvy, particularly remembers a program on "If flowers could talk, the story they would tell" given by member, President, and Master Gardener, Elda Bielanski in 2011. At least a dozen of the talented WVGC members have presented very memorable programs. Over the years, demonstrations and hands-on programs have been extremely popular.

Then: Slide Presentations: Italian Gardens. Wildflowers of California. Gardens and Flowers of South Africa. Butchart Gardens.

Now: PowerPoint Presentations: Garden Celebration in Painting. Roses/Roses/Roses presented by favorite Rosarian speaker, Tom Carruth. Five yearly meetings include horticulture and the study of flora which has been judged for several years by Master Gardener and Rosarian, Barbara Morse.

Accomplishments of the Westlake Village Garden Club and Its Members: Early on, flower shows were popular with both amateur gardeners and professional designers. A major show was sponsored by California Garden Clubs (CGCI). Conejo Valley Garden Club and Westlake Village Garden Club also sponsored shows over the years. National Garden Clubs still sponsors a flower show school where garden club members may attain the status of "Flower Show Judge" after completing five courses over a two-year period. Beverly Brune, AnnJane Clough, Betty Rohan, Vivien Worth and Jo Maturo attained Master Judge Status.

In 1992, Master Judges Annjane Clough and Jo Maturo were selected by the Thousand Oaks City Council to judge a competition of business and industrial landscape entrants. "We are pleased to have these qualified Judges participate in this City project," according to a spokesman. The Westlake Village Garden Club has been honored to have these Master Judges educate the membership by participating in panel programs and workshops for the benefit of the membership. A number of WVGC members received awards at various flower shows. In 1980 and 2014, WVGC won the "Blue Ribbon Certificate of Achievement" for its Garden Tours, which was awarded by the California Garden Club.

Field Trips: For many years there was an annual trip to the World Flower Festival at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Today, Casa Del Herrero, Huntington Gardens, Virginia Robinson Gardens, Lotusland, Descanso Gardens and the Los Angeles County Arboretum continue to be popular destinations.

Year Books: In putting together this 50-year history, a 1967-77 booklet was discovered displaying the original logo on the cover. The contents included the Bylaws and information on Westlake Village Garden Club, plus other regional and national club information. In 1980-1981, a fold over 8"x 5" laminated cover was designed with the WVGC Logo on the front and Freedom Square on the back. The Logo had been designed by the son of member Mrs. Vera Marlett in mid-1975. The calligraphy was penned by the husband of member Mrs. Virginia Detlie. (Their home was on the 1976 Garden Tour). Members were expected to keep the laminated cover for a minimum of 5 years. If lost, they could obtain a new one for \$3.00! Another change came in 2012-2013 when the year book went into full color production.

Scholarships: Once the Garden Club was established, members began to focus on supporting students who were motivated to study for degrees in environmental science, horticulture or related degrees. Fast forward from those humble beginnings in 1976 when two students were each awarded \$200 scholarships...to 42 years later where at our annual June installation luncheon, four students were presented with \$2,500 each. The criteria used for selecting students are strict with consideration given only to students that have finished community college and have been accepted to a 4-year university. Over the years, the Westlake Village Garden Club has been proud to donate many thousands of dollars to assist students in pursuing their degrees.

Technology Changes: In 2010, the Westlake Village Garden Club entered the digital age with a website that showcased the Club and announced its Garden Tours and meeting. President Lucy Hanley* created the Westlake Village Garden Club website and also held the title of Webmaster. (*deceased)

Then: Getting in touch quickly by "Telephone Tree" **Now:** Email or Text

Then: Licking stamps to place on newsletters sent by snail mail

Now: Opening up an email and clicking on the "Attachment"

Then: Reading the printed newsletter accompanied by a cup of tea **Now:** Scrolling down 24/7!!!

Then: President, Mrs. Bill Reiley (Waters)

Now: President, Jean Reiley

In Retrospect: The future Westlake Village, set in the Northern foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, was at the cusp of planned development in the mid 1960's. Many residents were young transplants from the East Coast, completely unaware of the gardening challenges of this formidable landscape. The Westlake Village Garden Club was formed in 1969, and for the next few years, began to set the foundation of the Club's objectives. Times changed with awareness to drought, floods, earthquakes, environment and the concern over water. Times changed with the knowledge that pesticides and plastic can be harmful and toxic to the environment. Some members wanted to learn about gardening. Some members were interested in meeting people. Some members became avid gardeners. Some members took on the responsibility of committees to becoming president not only of the chapter, but taking on the responsibilities of regional or national tasks. What is life? It is memories... The Westlake Village Garden Club, with over 100 members, is well poised in changing times and demographics, for the future. As one President said, we will continue "Learning together - sharing a lifetime of gardening knowledge."

Edited and expanded by Crystal Salapatas and Beverly Brune