



Autumn 2011

Jill Maroney,  
Editor

# TORRANCE HISTORIAN

*Newsletter of the Torrance Historical Society & Museum*



## Madrona Marsh, Explained

Adapted from an article by Tracy Drake

Over the past few years the Madrona Marsh Preserve has remained for the most part dry, even in the wet season. To understand this long-term effect of the recent drought, you have to understand the geology and geography of the Preserve. Even when one understands these things, a little imagination is helpful, because the Preserve is far more than what meets the eye.....

Imagine you are standing on what is now the corner of Plaza del Amo and Madrona Avenue – about 200 years ago. It is now the winter of 1811. The population of the United States is about seven million and James Madison is President. The land you see around you is part of Rancho San Pedro, owned by Juan Jose Dominguez. It is wet: a year of historic flooding. Looking to the north, you see the San Gabriel Mountains and perhaps a few settlements. Also, there are more than 1300 cows wandering about in the soggy, sandy soil. The Los Angeles River, of course, is not channelized at this time and often floods the area, and, as it periodically changes course, it leaves behind several feet of silty clay. At this time, like now, the cool westerly winds blow every afternoon – and in the winds, fine grains of sand blow in and settle – eventu-

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## The Little Museum That Could....

### PRESIDENT'S COLUMN: KURT WEIDIMAN

I am proud to be associated with an organization of volunteers that is not afraid to tackle “big idea” projects. Over the past few years, our Torrance Historical Society & Museum has initiated and completed several large, expensive projects not necessarily associated with a group of unpaid volunteers with an annual budget on the “low” end of five digits.

One such idea was the digitization of the old Torrance Herald and Press newspapers and city directories. These precious, historic documents were literally turning to dust in our morgue at the Museum. The Torrance Historical Society (in collaboration with Friends of the Torrance Library and the City of Torrance) was the focal point of this effort and now, everyone has the ability to access these historic documents.

Another large project was the transformation of our Archive Room into a modern, state-of-the art facility. This ambitious effort consumed countless hours of volunteer work and thousands of dollars, but was necessary in order to protect the documents, objects and ephemera collected over the years at the Museum – and now preserved for posterity.



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## President's Column

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Recently, THS embarked on a Historic Resources Survey – a grand project to document the significant housing stock and other structures that were built during the formation of Torrance. This monumental task of surveying over 2,300 units was only made possible by 55 community volunteers, who over three week-ends in September, trained and walked the streets of the original footprint of the City. To date, almost 90% of the Olmsted District has been assigned, with over 55% of the blocks complete.

Lastly, Dennis Kwong, a producer from TCTv 28, (Ch. 28), has been filming a documentary on our Names on the Wall project. This project includes interviews with our researchers and pictures from our archives. Look forward to an announcement on when this piece will air.

*"Big ideas are common – what's uncommon are people who'll work hard enough to bring them about."*

- Ashleigh Brilliant

## Names on the Wall

The Society's on-going research project to put a "Face" on each of the 146 names on the Civic Center Memorial Wall continues.

Veteran's Day reminds us of our debt to those who gave their All.

Each Name will have a permanent biographical file in the Museum's archives. We need stories, anecdotes – your help in bringing life to those Names.

Contact the Museum or [GTRonan@aol.com](mailto:GTRonan@aol.com).

## 100 Years of History



Premiering November 9th  
on CitiCABLE 3:

### *100 Years of History*

Centennial programming featuring people, places and things that make Torrance what it is today. Wednesdays at 7pm, repeated on Thursdays.

## 'Twas the Night Before Christmas

SAVE THE DATE, 'cause you're invited to a reading of . . .

### **'Twas the Night Before Christmas!**

Children of all ages and adults who are young at heart, are invited to the Torrance Historical Society & Museum on Sunday, December 11th, at 4:00 PM for a reading of the holiday classic - 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.

Former Torrance City Councilman Paul Nowatka will cozy down in an antique wingback chair and delight listeners with this magical tale. At the sound of sleigh bells ringing, Santa will pay a surprise visit. Each guest will leave with a treat (compliments of COSTCO), and one lucky winner will depart with their very own copy of 'Twas the Night Before Christmas. Other guests will also have an opportunity to win a teddy bear.

This free event runs less than one hour, is open to the public, and reservations are not required.

For details, call the Museum at (310) 328-5392 or visit: [www.TorranceHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.TorranceHistoricalSociety.org)  
Hope to see you there!



## Madrona Marsh

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ally completely covering the clay. In the years that follow, the hidden clay layer becomes like a saucer under a coffee cup, holding fluid on top, thus preventing water from soaking material below. The water is to perch on the clay year after year, annually keeping the area moist for several months. Eventually, wetland plants like willow and tules began to establish the coastal prairie – the same species of plants that we see in the wetland areas of the Preserve today. The clay layer is the hidden secret of the Preserve – the reason it became commonly known as Madrona Marsh.

The clay layer holds the secret as to why the wetlands sometimes do not completely fill after a good rain. An explanation lies in the fact that clay shrinks when it dries and large cracks form. The soil underneath the clay is El Segundo dune sand. It is exposed, and the water flows through the cracks in the clay and into the sand below. All of this happens without any of us getting even a glimpse of the process. Clay swells again when it gets wet, and, in time, the cracks will close and the clay will seal up. As a result, the wetlands will fill. Until then though, a lot of water percolates past the clay and into the sand below.

The people who “developed” the Preserve had excellent vision. They knew that the elevation of the lowest part of the wetlands is 15.7 feet below the rest of Torrance, and as a result, unopposed gravity had been enough to fill the wetlands with rain water. Further, they knew that with all the proposed residential and commercial development, not enough rain would drain to the Preserve and fill the wetlands, unless something was done.

Consequently, a sump (a large 80’ deep basin) was created on the southeast part of the property. Over two square miles of residential area run-off flows into the sump, and then is manageable. During small rain events, the rain is collected and one of our two small pumps is turned on. The pump moves the sump water eighty feet upward to the top of the sump, and then it moves via gravity through a pipe to the southern-most, or lowest part of the wetland. From there, the water can spread to the north and east, eventually filling the wetlands. This system is supervised by the City of Torrance Public Works Department. It is a pretty amazing system that is managed at all times of the year, but most critically during the wet season.

Thousands of cars pass the Preserve daily. Many of the people in these cars enjoy the view of the wetlands. They watch as winter turns to spring, and they see flowers begin to bloom. They enjoy seeing 100’s of brightly colored ducks floating quiescently in the water. If you are one of these people, next time you pass,



say a quiet thank you for the rain, for the process called bird migration, and also for the many people whose efforts help create such a beautiful landscape.



Torrance Historical Society & Museum  
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www.TorranceHistoricalSociety.org

## The Torrance Historian

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### COMING SOON: CITY OF TORRANCE CENTENNIAL EVENTS!

Come and see the  
**Torrance Centennial Tree**  
at the 28th Annual  
**Torrance Memorial Medical Center  
Holiday Festival**  
November 29th through December 4th



The City of Torrance  
**Centennial Rose Parade Float**  
will be featured in the **2012  
Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade**  
on January 2nd, 2012.  
Don't miss it!

### Torrance Historical Society & Museum Membership Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Adult - \$20       Family - \$30       Youth (<18) - \$10       Senior (65+) - \$15

Business/Organization - \$50       Individual Life Membership - \$350

Donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail this form with your check made out to "Torrance Historical Society" to:

**Torrance Historical Society**  
1345 Post Avenue  
Torrance, CA 90501