

THE MYSTERY OF THE HANSEN DAM BARRACKS ON THE HANSEN DAM PROPERTY IN PACOIMA, LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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This paper will consider evidence for a mysterious, long-ago-demolished group of World War II barracks once located on the Hansen Dam property in Pacoima, Los Angeles County, California. The barracks were first detected on a late 1940s U.S. Army Corps of Engineers aerial photograph. Initially the barracks were thought to be an unknown Japanese internment camp, a camp for a small World War II military unit, or housing for the Hansen Dam construction workers. The research into this mystery will be the topic of this paper. The results of the research will reintroduce a long forgotten San Fernando Valley community to the reader.

What you are about to read is, in my humble opinion, an amazing story that recently unfolded at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Los Angeles District office and Hansen Dam. This paper was written as a response to evidence for a mysterious, long-ago-demolished group of military barracks once located on the Hansen Dam property in the Pacoima/Lake View Terrace area, Los Angeles County, California. The barracks were first detected about three years ago by Roderic McLean, an L.A. District archaeologist, on a 1940s (probably 1947) U.S. Army Corps of Engineers aerial photograph (Figure 1). In another aerial, dated September 1940, the barracks are not yet present (Figure 2). The barracks stood on what is today the Hansen Dam Golf Course.

THE STORY

Initially, the barracks were thought to be a forgotten Japanese internment camp, or housing for the workers for the Hansen Dam construction project, or a camp for a small World War II military unit. One by one these theories dropped out in light of research. The Japanese internment camp theory dropped out early on. After reading several very comprehensive works on the subject (e.g., Burton et al. 2006), it became fairly clear that there was most likely never an internment camp at this location. The housing for World War II military personnel theory seemed unlikely since the barracks weren't in place in the September 1940 aerial photo (see Figure 2) and the only mention of a military unit in the area was of part of a searchlight brigade whose location was at Stonehurst Park and these troops were billeted in tents (Knight 2002:20). The Hansen Dam construction worker housing theory dropped out based again on the 1940 aerial photo in which the barracks were clearly not extant (see Figure 2). Construction on Hansen Dam was not scheduled to be completed until December 1941, but the dam was officially dedicated on August 17, 1940 (Brock et al. 1993:47). After two years of sporadic research into this question as part of the District's Historic Properties Management Plan (discussed below) for Hansen Dam, with minimal results, the mystery has been unquestionably resolved by pure coincidence. The results of this research have reintroduced a long-gone and forgotten San Fernando Valley community to the world.

Figure 1 (Top): The Hansen Dam Barracks in a 1940s (probably 1947) U.S. Army Corps of Engineers aerial photograph. Two structures appear to be under construction (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers).

Figure 2 (Bottom): Aerial photograph dated September 1940, the barracks are not extant (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers).



As mentioned, the aerial photo showing the barracks was found at the District during the course of project research about three years ago. When I transferred to L.A. District from New York, Steve Dibble, L.A. District archaeologist, brought the aerial photo to my attention since I was assigned as the archaeologist for Hansen Dam. This research would not have taken place and this paper would not have been written if it were not for a very important program that most federal agencies who actually manage and/or own property conduct. This program is called the Historic Properties Management Plan and is a five-year plan that essentially states that some research to better the understanding of and preserve some aspect of each property owned by the agency will be conducted each year at a level commensurate with available funding. Some properties are actually subjected to this research as a Section 106 requirement incurred by development of some sort on the property. Where the Historic Properties Management Plan benefits the property's cultural resources is when absolutely no development is taking place on the property. The Historic Properties Management Plan program is what enabled me to carry out the research necessary to write this article.

I thought it was interesting that no one, even at the District, knew anything about the barracks, and I pursued the questions surrounding the barracks while working on several different projects at Hansen for L.A. District's Construction/Operations Branch. Within a very short time after beginning research, I found that the barracks were turned into housing for displaced veterans and their families in a program that was supported by the likes of then Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron and U.S. Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas (Figure 3). Representative Douglas' first career was acting. She was seen in only one film, entitled "She" in 1935, but she was in numerous stage productions. Her husband was actor Mervyn Douglas.

I also found that the refurbished barracks were appropriately named Basilone Homes in 1947 after one John Basilone, a U.S. Marine who died while holding off a large enemy contingent on Iwo Jima

Figure 3: Helen Gahagan Douglas pictured behind donkey's head with a group of Pacoima Democrats in her 1950 Senatorial campaign against Richard Nixon (Courtesy of the Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma).



during World War II (Roderick 2002:121) (Figure 4). What I failed to discover was what the barracks were used for at Hansen Dam before the housing project (i.e., during World War II), the date when they were demolished or removed, and why they did not last longer after all the trouble and expense of the refurbishment.

THE RESOLUTION

The following provides the resolution for some of the questions posed with respect to the barracks. On December 22, 2005, the L.A. District Public Affairs Office received an e-mail through their web site from a gentleman by the name of David Moore who was seeking information on his childhood home which was actually at Basilone Homes on the Hansen Dam property (Figure 5). Public Affairs forwarded the e-mail to my colleague Steve Dibble, and Steve forwarded it to me. The system works! That very week before Christmas 2005, I began e-mail communication with Mr. Moore from home and we promised to speak by telephone after the holidays. On January 10, 2006, I spoke with Mr. Moore and received much information that answered questions about the barracks. The barracks were transported to the Hansen Dam location from Washington State for the express purpose of providing housing for displaced veterans, explaining why the barracks did not appear in the 1940 aerial (Roderick 2002:121). The barracks were actually in Washington State during the war. I asked Mr. Moore if he might have photographs of himself and his family on the site at Basilone Homes, and he e-mailed three wonderful snapshots (e.g., Figures 6 and 7). Moore told me that he resided at Basilone Homes with his family from 1948 to 1950. OK, Mr. Moore TOLD me he lived there and the images support the statement. That's great, but was his recollection of the dates correct? I know I have undated images of myself as a child that I can only guess at what the date may have been. As an archaeologist, I like to have documentary evidence for dates if possible.

Figure 4: A closeup of the Basilone Homes community at Hansen Dam, January 1947, dam in background (Security Pacific National Bank Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).





Figure 5: David Moore today (photo courtesy of D. Moore).



Figure 7: David Moore, Easter 1948? (note dam and barracks, photo courtesy of D. Moore).



Figure 6: David Moore and his sister (note dam and barracks in background, photo courtesy of D. Moore).



Figure 8: Mrs. Moore, David, his sister and her friend at Basilone Homes, Hansen Dam, January 11, 1949 (photo courtesy of D. Moore).

I knew I was destined to write this article, the conference paper it evolved from, and an upcoming newsletter article for L.A. District when I found the e-mail message with the images from Mr. Moore on arriving at my office on the morning of January 11, 2006. Why? Because on my drive to work the morning of January 11, the morning I received the images, the weather forecaster on the car radio happened to mention that there hadn't been snow in the L.A. area since this day, January 11, in 1949. When I looked at the three images Mr. Moore had e-mailed there was this photo of Mrs. Moore, David, his younger sister and her two friends (Figure 8). Guess what the date of the image is. You guessed it, January 11, 1949. Mr. Snowman clearly and amazingly gives it away. OK, NOW I was satisfied. Research at the Los Angeles Public Library indicated that on January 11, 1949 Los Angeles Unified School District declared its one and only Snow Day, dismissing classes. The Pasadena Independent Star-News referred to it as the Great Pasadena Blizzard." I also found images that when viewed alongside the images sent by Mr. Moore show clearly a vibrant community nestled up against the toe of Hansen Dam in Pacoima (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9: A Basilone Homes resident plants a garden (Security Pacific National Bank Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).



During the course of e-mailing and speaking with Mr. Moore and rummaging around the District offices, I managed to gather some great information which has helped date some of the events that have transpired on this portion of the Hansen Dam property since the early 1920s. For instance, construction of Hansen Dam, begun in 1938, was finished in 1940, as documented by the aerial photograph which shows the dam almost completed (Figure 2). This aerial photograph, dated September 9, 1940, also shows clearly that the barracks were not on the ground in 1940. According to Moore, the barracks aerial photograph in Figure 1 shows only about one quarter of the buildings that were actually on the property. In an attachment to a letter dated January 21, 1947, from a Gordon L. McDonough, M.C., 15th District, California, to U.S. Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas, the Basilone Homes Project is described as being 1,500 dwelling units, which supports Moore's statement that the aerial only shows a portion, possibly a quarter, of Basilone Homes. The attachment, which is a telegram from the Los Angeles Housing Authority to City of Los Angeles Mayor Bowron, alluded to the fact that possibly only 500-600 units would be completed. Moore stated that the barracks were broken up into apartments. I had assumed they were individual homes. The Moore family had a two-bedroom apartment. Add this to the fact that we have a beginning date of July 1946 for construction of Basilone Homes provided by the telegram from Los Angeles Housing Authority to Mayor Bowron and an approximate finish date for construction of 1948 provided by Mr. Moore's above images and we have a fair date for the opening of Basilone Homes. (The actual scheduled date of occupancy according to the documents found during my research was May 1, 1947.)

Mr. Moore's family left Basilone Homes in 1950. Moore revisited his boyhood home place after a tour of duty in England in 1960 and

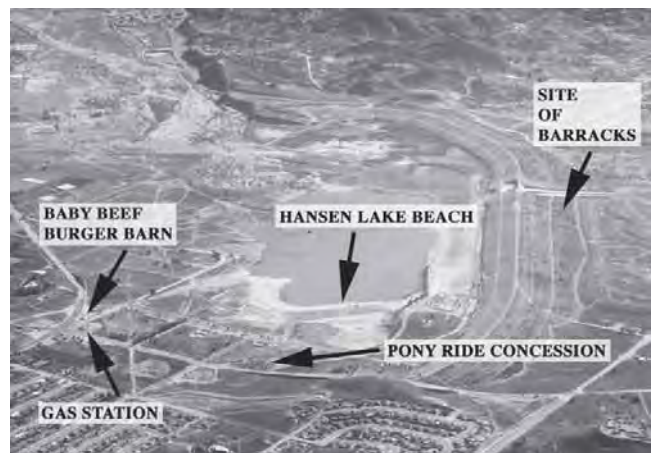
found only an open, desert-like area with the foundations of his home protruding out of the ground here and there. Sandy Margolis, Hansen Dam Golf Course starter, tells us that Hansen Dam Golf Course, the first nine holes on the west side of the spillway, opened in late 1960 or early 1961. By deduction, we can say that the homes were removed or demolished between 1951 and 1955, based on the evidence from the ca. 1955 aerial photograph seen in Figure 15.

THE HISTORIC CONTEXT

So, now I'd like to fit this small community into the story of suburbanization of this northeastern corner of the San Fernando Valley. In 1870, the northeast San Fernando Valley was basically barren desert, nearly impassable (Brock et al. 1993:18). In 1869 Charles MacLay, later a California senator, with two partners, bought the ex-Mission San Fernando Ranch from the last Mexican governor of Alta California, Pio Pico. By 1874, the entire tract was owned by MacLay. Also in 1874, MacLay founded the town of San Fernando, and about this time the Southern Pacific Railroad reached the town from Los Angeles (Brock et al. 1993:18; Knight 2002:11). The railroad made it through the San Fernando Pass by 1876 (Brock et al. 1993:18). By 1891 vineyards and orchards were contributing to the development of the valley. By 1895, however, there still was not one house with running water or electricity in the valley. In 1892, Dr. Homer Hansen came to the

Figure 10: Basilone Homes children participating in a May, 1948 Valley cleanup, dam in background (Security Pacific National Bank Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).





Clockwise: Figure 11 (top left): Location of “Pops” Willow Lake Resort on the north bank of Tujunga Wash (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers aerial photograph); Figure 12 (top right): A Stonehurst Home, built 1923 (photo by John J. Killeen); Figure 13 (lower right): The Hansen Dam vicinity, 1955 (barracks remnants barely visible, but no barracks) (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers); Figure 14 (lower left): 1940s Bathing beauties at Hansen Dam Swimming Lake Beach (Security Pacific National Bank Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).

San Fernando Valley and promoted development of the foothills behind the dam, which became Hansen Heights. Dr. Hansen’s house was just on the other side of the dam spillway from the Basilone Homes. The spillway is on Dr. Hansen’s land (Knight 2002:13).

Until World War II, this northeastern portion of the San Fernando Valley remained largely agricultural. In fact, the 1920s Callity Ranch (CA-LAN-2089H) citrus farm’s ranch house was located immediately to the north of the lake behind the dam and produced Valencia oranges until 1944 (Brock et al. 1993:40-42). The 1920s Mathilda Haack Farm (CA-LAN-2090H) was just on the other side of the dam from Basilone Homes and was displaced by the dam. The Haack Farm included the land on which Basilone Homes were ultimately placed (Brock et al. 1993:42). Pop’s Willow Lake Resort opened in 1931 and was located just to the north of the Basilone Homes (Figure 11). Pop’s Willow Lake Resort was the beginning of the Hansen Dam area becoming one of the 10 most popular recreational areas in the country by the early 1950s (Turnhollow 1975:251). Note, however, the lack of suburban development in Figure 11. Washed away in the 1938 flood, Pop’s was

rebuilt and frequented by a young local bathing beauty by the name of Norma Jean a.k.a. Marilyn Monroe and her future first husband during World War II. Marilyn was a student at nearby Van Nuys High School during the war (Roderick 2002:94).

The 1920s Stonehurst neighborhood, a group of quite beautiful houses built of waterworn cobbles from Tujunga Wash, which is just behind the Dam, was situated about half a mile away from the Barracks and, like Basilone homes, was part of the beginning of suburbanization in this portion of the San Fernando Valley (Figure 12). Unlike the Basilone Homes, many of the Stonehurst Homes are still with us. Some of the Basilone Homes residents no doubt purchased homes in the Pacoima area, contributing to the population growth.

By the early 1950s there was the Baby Beef Burger Barn stand and a gas station near the corner of Foothill Boulevard and Osborne Street seen on a 1955 aerial photo (Figure 13). Also on the dam property was a pony ride concession just off Osborne Street about 300 m south of Foothill Boulevard. There was also a miniature train ride and a bait

shop concession probably near the pony ride concession. It is not clear if Pop's Willow Lake Resort was still in existence in 1955. The aerial (Figure 13) also documents that the suburbs had clearly spread. In the 1950s, Hansen Dam Swimming Lake Beach, situated in the basin behind Hansen Dam, became a very popular destination, as seen in the 1940s era image of bathing beauties at the Hansen Lake Beach shown in Figure 13. This minor mystery has afforded us a peek into the beginnings of suburbanization of the today heavily suburbanized northeastern San Fernando Valley area.

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