



FULLERTON HERITAGE

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The mission of Fullerton Heritage is to foster an appreciation of our city's cultural history and to ensure the preservation of our historic architectural resources and environments.

America's Head Vase Craze

by Debora Richey

In the 1940s and 1950s, Americans developed a craze for lady head vases (ceramic representations of ladies' faces), followed by a whole universe of head vases—animals, clowns, babies, Santas, Madonnas, etc. The head-shaped vases were popularized by Fullerton artist Betty Lou Nichols, whose company Betty Lou Nichols Ceramics produced thousands of them from 1945 to 1962. Her work filled a void in the ceramics trade when imports from Germany and Japan dried up during World War II. The craze waned about twenty years later, but picked up again in the 1990s, and Nichols' vases now sell for hundreds of dollars at antique shows, conventions, and on the Internet. Her head vases can easily be found on Ebay. Nichols died in August 1995 at the age of 72, just as there was a resurgence in interest in the quaint ceramic vases that she started out making with clay and a rolling pin on her parents' kitchen table. The inimitable style of her head

vases are impossible to miss.

Born November 22, 1922, Betty Lou Renken was raised in La Habra (118 W. Francis Ave.), attending Fullerton Union High School from 1939 to 1940 (where in 1997, she was posthumously included into the Fullerton High Hall of Fame). She attended Fullerton College from 1940 to 1942, where she was an art major. She



*Betty Lou Nichols
Photo courtesy of the La Habra Historical Museum*

studied under Mary Hodgedon, considered one of the foremost authorities in ceramic work in California at the time. It was at Fullerton College that she began to develop her talents as a ceramist. Well-liked by her classmates, Betty Lou was also designated the class artist and cartoonist, and her work was often fea-



tured in the student newspaper, *The Weekly Torch*, and other campus publications. Family and friends called her B'Lou (pronounced "blue"), and she often just signed her early work as Blue or Blue Renken.

While at Fullerton College, engineering student John Nichols began to court Betty Lou, and the two married April 1943 in her

(continued on page 3)

Amerige Building Reaches a Successful Conclusion

by Terry Galvin

The Amerige Brothers Real Estate Office restoration project was successfully completed in time for the awards and recognitions at the June Fullerton Heritage Annual Meeting.

Volunteers, donors, and sponsors were given specially designed photographic documents. Volunteers received photos of the completed building and of the volunteer either sanding, scraping, or prepping; donors received photos of the completed building and the donated item or service; and cash



sponsors received photos of the building before and after the project.

For the most outstanding volunteers and donors, based on hours worked or value of items donated, a special award was created using original wood from the building, original square nails salvaged from the wood, and photos of the building on Spadra Rd. (Harbor Blvd.) and as it looks now.

The final tally of contributions to the project (continued on page 4)

Advocacy Issues

by Kate Dalton

On May 9, 2013 the Design Review Committee (DRC) approved a project on a vacant lot at 1219 Frances Ave. in the Skyline Park neighborhood. The project was initially heard by the Committee at its meeting on April 25 and continued to the May 9 meeting to give the applicant time to make revisions necessary for approval. There were concerns by many residents of the neighborhood about the design, primarily its size and mass compared to other homes in the area. The changes requested by the Committee dealt with these issues, but they were limited in what they could require because this historic area does not benefit from preservation zone protection, which has been proposed, but rejected by the property owners. If the Skyline Park area was a preservation zone, the outcome of this review may have been much different and more favorable to the concerned homeowners.

At its meeting on June 13, the DRC approved a project at 416 W. Malvern Ave. in the Jacaranda-Malvern Preservation Zone. The proposal included a 1,200 sq.ft. addition to the west and rear of the lot. The design was compatible with the original historic home and met the Design Guidelines, ensuring it will be an asset to the character of this important historic neighborhood.

On June 13, the DRC also reviewed a project to construct an addition to and conversion of an existing garage to a meeting room at the Gamma Phi Beta sorority house at 600 E. Chapman Ave. The property is listed in Fullerton's Historic Resources Register as a Significant Property, requiring DRC and Landmarks Commission approval. The design of the addition met necessary design guide-

lines for additions to historic structures and the DRC approved the project with few conditions. The only opposition to the project from neighbors involved concerns about parking problems on the street due to the proximity to Fullerton (Community) College. The Landmarks Commission heard the issue on June 26, and also approved the addition and conversion of the garage with a vote of 6-1. The same concerns were voiced by a couple of adjacent neighbors regarding parking problems. The Commission reviewed the parking plan submitted with the project and determined that it should be adequate and would be monitored for compliance by the City under the Conditional Use Permit for the sorority. The decisions of the DRC and Landmarks Commission were appealed (evidently by the two unhappy neighbors) to the City Council, which denied the appeal and approved the project.

On September 26, the DRC reviewed a project at 414 W. Jacaranda Pl. (Jacaranda-Malvern Preservation Zone) that was started without any permits or design review. The owner demolished the existing garage, removed windows and built a front deck before a code enforcement complaint was filed and the project was halted. The house has been significantly altered over the years without the benefit of review, but some of the original features remained. The DRC majority added conditions to the already-existing staff recommendations, including restoring all non-original windows to be period-and design-appropriate and removing the inappropriate wooden deck and replacing it with a concrete front porch with railings. The new garage will be compatible with the original house in design and materials. This property will be vastly improved thanks to the diligence of City staff, the DRC and the neighbors who are monitoring changes in their historic neighborhood.

Annual Meeting Recap

by Ernie Kelsey

Fullerton Heritage held its Annual Meeting on June 30, 2013 at the Red Cross building in historic Hillcrest Park. The skies were blue, the park was green, and about 50 Fullerton Heritage members attended to hear what had been happening with Fullerton Heritage for the last year.

Here are some highlights of the meeting:

Ernie Kelsey, President, welcomed all the attendees and introduced the Fullerton Heritage Board of Directors. Special mention was made of Kate and Tom Dalton being honored at tea given by the Victorian Society at the Fullerton Arboretum.

In addition to Fullerton Heritage's continued support for the Fox Theatre, ongoing advocacy for preservation zones and local

landmarks, participation in the College Connector Study Steering Committee and the Downtown Cores and Corridors Specific Plan, other major accomplishments of the year include:

The placement on the National Register of Historic Places of the:

- Commonwealth Post Office (1939), including the Paul Julian *Orange Pickers* WPA mural inside (1942)
- Leo Fender's Radio Service shop (1911)
- Firestone Building (1929)
- The recognition as Local Landmarks:
- Model Home of 1927
- West Valley View house
- Burdorf House

- J.S. Bradford House

We also led two Hillcrest Park Tours, which were new for 2013, four downtown walking tours, one Cub Scout tour of downtown and one BIG Home Tour. This was our inaugural home tour – and it was quite a success! (See article on page 4).

We also led the efforts to restore the Amerige Brothers Realty Office. This included coordinating all work, funding and donations. This was a huge undertaking and a huge success. (See article on page 1).

The following people were given awards for their individual contributions to local preservation efforts:

- 2013 Fullerton Heritage Scholarship Recipient: Nicholas Walker
- 2013 Fullerton Heritage Residential Preservation Award: Marshall Duell

(continued on page 4)

President's Corner

by Ernie Kelsey

Greetings Fullerton Heritage members,

It's hard to believe that the busy summer has come and gone and it's late fall already. The holidays are just around the corner and Fullerton Heritage continues to get things done!

The Inaugural Fullerton Heritage Home Tour, along with the Amerige Brothers Realty Office restoration project, consumed much of the year for Fullerton Heritage. These two very successful events consumed a lot of time and resources, but they were both well worth everything we poured into them. Please make sure you read the articles (and the annual meeting recap) to get fully up to speed about what these projects entailed. We should all be proud we were able to pull off these two amazing events. A big hearty thank you to all those members, donors, volunteers that helped make these events great successes!

These weren't the only things we got done however. We were able

to place four more significant structures on the National Register of Historic Places, designate four residences as Local Landmarks and continue our advocacy and support of local preservation efforts like the Fox Fullerton Theatre, College Connector Study and the Cores and Corridors Specific Plan. We funded photography projects, were interviewed on KNX Radio's "On Your Corner" community series, spoke about the history of Fullerton with CSUF students and led seven walking tours of downtown and historic Hillcrest Park.

I just want to say thank you all again for your ongoing support throughout this year. And, it's time to renew your membership. So, please take the time to fill out the enclosed form and mail in your renewal today. You'll be glad you did because 2014 is going to be another great year!

With warmest regards,
Ernie

Vase Craze

(continued from page 1)

parents' home. The couple, married for over fifty years, had a son and daughter, Michael and Luanne. Initially Betty Lou followed her husband John, who was in the army, around the country, but when he was posted overseas, she returned to live with her parents in La Habra. In 1945, at the site of her old backyard playhouse, and using a one cubic foot gas kiln, Betty Lou produced her first pieces of pottery. The kiln could handle five pieces of pottery at a time, but she soon created enough pieces to approach Bullock's Department Store in Los Angeles. Bullock's bought all her pieces and ordered more. Her pottery sold so well that she hired a woman to help her with the painting, and eventually employed four or five other workers.

It was during this period that Betty Lou developed her unique style. Her first elegant female figures were called "The Gay 90s" and featured large and heavily decorated hats of that period. All of the lady head vases had coquettishly downcast eyes, but no eyebrows, as Betty Lou believed they were a distraction. Elaborate eyelashes, curls, bows, and ruffles were individually affixed to the head, and the head vases were painted in periwinkle, plum, mint, and other soft

colors. Many of her production lines were given female names, such as Florabelle, Valerie, Louisa, Candy, and Rosita. What set her apart from other ceramicists was her use of everyday cooking and baking utensils—rolling pins, cookie and pasta cutters, molds, etc.—evident in her designs. She often incorporated five types of clay into each head vase. She liked the technique of using clay like fabric, and it became the signature look of her figurines and head vases, separating her apart from other artists of the period. The value of Betty Lou ceramics are based on the scarcity of the color combinations; the size and configuration of hats, bows, and ribbons; and the length of the eyelashes.

Betty Lou Nichols Ceramics was in full swing when John Nichols returned from the war, but then went into a period of rapid expansion. A factory was purchased on Central Avenue in La Habra and the business was relocated, with a retail store in front of the factory where "seconds" were sold. The Gay '90s figurines and head vases were followed by other lines, along with plates, mugs, decanters, and a variety of giftware items. The company also took special orders, including one from the Walt Disney Company to create figures from the film *Fantasia*. Produced for only a short period of time, only about 600 were made, and the Disney production

line is now rare and difficult to find. She also produced jam and syrup containers for Knott's Berry Farm and manufactured a huge Christmas line. Nothing was more popular though than the Flora-Dorable head vases, used to hold flowers for dozens of occasions from Mother's Day to birthdays to graduations. At its peak, the company employed thirty workers and two thirty-two cubic foot gas kilns.

The Nichols did so well that they were able to build their dream home for \$14,000 in 1950. Located at 840 Rodeo Road in Fullerton, the custom-built ranch house would be the couple's final home. The family also took vacations and spent time in their cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains. By the 1960s, however, the head vases began to go out of style, and Japanese companies flooded the market with cheap imitations of Betty Lou's pottery. Florists stopped ordering the head vases because they were too small for big bouquets, and collectors tired of them. Betty Lou Nichols Ceramics formally closed its doors on November 22, 1962. With her ceramics company out of business, Betty Lou turned to painting, branching into watercolors and oils. She served as art chairman of the Muckenthaler Cultural Center and donated her paintings to raise money for

(continued on page 4)

Home Tour Success!

by Ann Gread

After almost one year of planning, Fullerton Heritage held its inaugural 2013 Home Tour on June 8th. A first-ever for Fullerton Heritage, the home tour featured four significant properties in the historic Brookdale Heights neighborhood.

The tour was a great success and as such we reached many members of the community who didn't know about us. In total, Fullerton Heritage gained 25 new members because of the tour. We will continue doing home tours as part of acquainting people about specific and noteworthy neighborhoods throughout Fullerton. Our second Home Tour is coming in 2015.

Again, a big "thank you" to all our contributors who helped make this event such a great success: the homeowners, the tour committee, the FH board, and all our docents and members who volunteered their time and talents.

Fullerton College Pictorial History Available Online

Starting with the Fall 2013 semester, Fullerton College will be celebrating its 100 year anniversary. With support from Fullerton Heritage, the Fullerton College Library has completed an online history of the campus, Fullerton College: A Pictorial History. The extensive history is available on the Fullerton College Library website or at <http://libraryfchistory.fullcoll.edu/>. The photographic history contains shots of students, faculty members, major events, and shows how the campus has developed from 1913 to 2013. The history of the college often mirrored what was happening in the city, and the image collection provides a wonderful history of the Fullerton community.

Amerige

(continued from page 1)

includes the following:

- 19 volunteers donated about 850 hours of labor, with 730 of those hours donated by seven people.
- 19 businesses donated about \$22,500 in goods and services, with eight of those businesses donating \$18,900 of the total.
- Six businesses and organizations donated \$3,250 in cash for use on items not donated.

The City of Fullerton made the project possible by agreeing to save the building and to pay for the new foundation, utilities, and moving costs. The community made the project successful by its response to the request for participation by Fullerton Heritage. The Amerige Brothers Real Estate Office is once again a proud reminder of Fullerton's heritage.

Craze

(continued from page 3)

youth programs. When Nichols passed away on August 6, 1995, she thought that her head vases were passé, but during the mid-1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in her work. Suddenly antique dealers and collectors began snapping them up. In 2002, Maddy Gordon published a popular price guide, *Head Vases, Etc., The Artistry of Betty Lou Nichols*, spurring further interest in her work. In retro head hunting, including the annual Head Hunters Convention, Betty Lous and celebrity heads are among the most valued prizes. Collectors know her vases without checking for her signature at the bottom. Betty Lou's work has also been shown at museums, including recent exhibitions at the La Habra Historical Museum. Her daughter, Luanne Shoup, continues to promote her mother's work and also repairs pottery, including her mother's figurines and head vases (Ceramic Repair by Luanne).

Recap

(continued from page 2)

- 2013 Fullerton Heritage Local Landmark Preservation Award: Robert Peterson, Burdorf House
- 2013 Fullerton Heritage Preservationist of the Year Award: Terry Galvin, Amerige Brothers Realty Office restoration project

The meeting concluded with a slide show by local photographer Edgar Lara, who had recently completed a Fullerton Heritage funded project to photograph local buildings and residences for the Fullerton Community College archives and the Local History Room at the Fullerton Public Library.

Everyone then enjoyed some sweet treats and good conversation. Make sure you come out to the 2014 Annual Meeting – it's a fun and informative two hours!



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