



# San Bernardino

## Scene sleuths discover San Bernardino photo's origin



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**10:00 PM PST on Thursday, November 22, 2007**

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**The Press-Enterprise**

Call it CSI San Bernardino.

Only, there were no bloody bodies, no swabs of unmentionable fluid. In fact, no crime at all had been committed.

But there was a mysterious photograph: an aged black-and-white image of a rain-soaked street crowded with Model-T Fords and other canopied roadsters. It was supposed to have been taken in San Bernardino, but the owner didn't know where or when.

The intensive detective work by local historians and history buffs may not have involved the scientific expertise required for TV character Gil Grissom and his CSI crew to tease apart their whodunits, but the discovery of clues, and the subsequent search for the facts, proved intriguing nonetheless.

Tom Marek works in the city of San Bernardino's information technology department and is in charge of the city's Web page. He remembers Mayor Pat Morris presenting the photo at a meeting of the city's bicentennial committee.

"He held up the photograph and said he received it from Councilman John Roberts in Fontana and that Robert's grandfather had taken the photograph," Marek said. "All he knew was that it was taken in San Bernardino."

At first glance, the photo shows little more than a busy street scene. But a closer examination reveals some telling details. There are the names of the businesses on the street: J.C. Penny, Chaffee's Grocery and the Sunset Hotel. A set of streetcar rails curves across the photo's lower left corner. Among the cars on the street are two covered wagons and a man on a horse in American Indian dress.

Marek said Steve Shaw, with the San Bernardino Historical Society, began examining the photo.

"He looked at some of the names on the buildings," Marek said. "He sent me an e-mail that night and said it was (taken) sometime between 1915 and 1934. That was a start."

Marek next took the photo to the reference experts at the Feldheim Library's California Room, an archive for historical material. There, some magnification revealed the biggest key in the photograph.

"As we blew the picture up, we saw in the background there was a banner that said, 'Fred A Wilson for Mayor,' " he said. A subsequent search of City Council records showed that in 1925, Wilson (no relation to Fred A. Wilson, the current city manager) ran against Grant Holcomb for the city's top job. Holcomb won.

The election was April 13, so the photo had to have been taken prior to that.

Reference librarian Paul Garrity began scouring microfilm from the newspapers of the time. He found a story about a March celebration by the Native Sons of the Golden West. They planned to have a three-day recreation of Hangtown, a Gold Rush-style event, at the National Orange Show fairgrounds.

The Native Sons, Garrity said, "had a meeting with the Pioneer Society and they decided, 'Why don't we have a parade?' "

The Pioneer Society donated two covered wagons it had on hand for the March 26 event. A Comanche Indian in full headdress rode ahead of them. Also in the parade were city officials.

What the parade didn't seem to have was much of a crowd. In the photo, a few people can be seen standing sheltered from the rain beneath the awnings of the businesses on what is the north side of Third Street between E and F streets. One man stands on the south side, near a sign for the Pacific Electric station for the city's streetcars. And while the parade is moving toward the camera, cars are also moving in the opposite direction.

"It didn't even stop traffic, or anything," Garrity said.

Fontana Councilman Roberts said now that he knows more about the where and when of the photo, he's sure that his grandfather, Evan Davis, took the image from his second floor photography studio on the corner of Third and E streets.

"It looked to me like he just took a shot out of his window." Roberts said.

Roberts said he inherited vintage camera equipment and boxes of photographs when his grandfather died. Davis was primarily a portrait photographer, said Roberts, and shot the school portraits at San Bernardino High School for many years.

But he also captured some scenes of the day.

"We found when we opened (Fontana's) time capsule a few years ago, most of the photos in the time capsule he had taken," Roberts said.

He is impressed that researchers were able to pinpoint the exact date and approximate time -- the parade started at 2 p.m. -- the photo was taken.

So is Marek.

"A lot of people got involved trying to identify all the pieces in this picture," Marek said. "We put a lot of time into trying to solve this little mystery but it was a lot of fun."

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