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Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

THERE ONCE WAS A BARN.....

On the south side of South Grade Road in Alpine, just east of Tavern Road, sits a most historic barn—certainly a landmark in Alpine’s history. Joanne Findel Nichols Talamantes is the owner of the barn which sits on a large parcel of land that has been in her family for almost seven decades. Joanne was kind enough recently to share with me some family history.

Widowed and left with three children, the youngest being one-year-old twins, Mary Bacon Findel worked each day at San Diego Trust and Savings Bank in downtown San Diego. Mary’s parents, aware of the difficulties encountered by a working single parent, felt it would be a good thing for Mary to raise her children, son Jerry and twins Joanne and Johnny, in the country. They decided on the community of Alpine and purchased a 150-acre parcel of land in our mountain community in 1943.

Mary’s father, John L. Bacon, was mayor of San Diego from 1921 to 1927. Mayor Bacon was born in 1878 in Illinois. By 1914, he was in San Diego, when he was on a Panama-California Exposition committee. He was a structural engineer and helped lay out the aquatic features of the San Diego Zoo. Speaking in behalf of the construction of the San Diego Zoo in 1922, he said, “I would rather see 100 tourists come to San Diego, spend a month or a season, be busy every minute with healthful, outdoor entertainment, and go back home to tell their relatives and neighbors that San Diego is the greatest town in America than to have 10,000 tourists come, stay 24 hours, and go away ‘knocking’ because they had a dull time.” One of the important issues during his tenure was the construction of water projects to enable San Diego to grow and prosper. He served as president of the Boulder Dam Association, a group that promoted funding for the construction of Hoover Dam, and was seeking a share of Colorado River water for use by Southern California cities. He died in 1961. Joanne reflects that her grandfather served as her father figure—he was her hero.

The mayor and his wife, Florence, provided \$100 per month so that their daughter could quit her job and move her family to Alpine. Mary resided on the property until her death in 1994. The ranch, purchased from the West family, also included a home, once occupied by Henry Styles, a smaller house that rose out of a chicken house and the barn. Built in the 1930’s, the buildings have endured and are still standing. But it is the barn that catches ones eye when driving along South Grade Road.

The old barn originally was home to Mary’s two horses and later a cow that provided milk for the family. The Findels had no electricity until after World War II—then electricity was brought into the property. During the war Mary supplemented her income by boarding horses. Over the years the barn was also used to house cattle when Mary’s son ran a cattle ranch on the property. The hay barn, built when the cattle ranch was operating, was burned in the Laguna fire of 1970 that devastated East County. Following Mary’s death in 1994, Joanne and her husband Tom Nichols returned to Alpine and Tom turned the barn into a machine shop. This project was in progress when Tom died and, eventually, Joanne got rid of all the machinery, accumulated over 54 years of marriage, and cleaned out the old barn. Over the years, many people suggested to Joanne that the barn would make an excellent church, so she proceeded to borrow the necessary funds to create a lovely sanctuary. Today the old barn is the scene of regular Sunday church services provided by several Presbyterian pastors.

Mary, her parents, and her sons are all deceased; however, Joanne, her husband Johnnie Talamantes, and her son and daughter-in-law, Arturo and Talitha Nichols, continue to live on the property. Johnnie and Joanne were childhood friends in Alpine, but as a teenager Joanne was much more interested in her older brother’s friends than someone her own age, so she and Johnnie waited until both were widowed before pursuing romance. Be sure to look for the old barn the next time you drive on South Grade Road—it’s a treasure.

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