

Living Large in Long Beach



BACK IN THE DAY: A 1936 aerial photos shows Rancho Los Alamitos in Long Beach surrounded by groomed fields. The discovery of oil in the area created jobs but also led to sprawling housing developments, drill towers and population growth.

Jonathan Bixby had 26,000 acres in what is today Long Beach. But as car travel pushed oil exploration, it went from sprawling ranch to oil supplier and, eventually, to the 7½ acres that remain.

By Sam Watters, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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It is August when spacious skies soar above amber waves of grain in fields stretching from sea to shining sea. It is the month of the fruited plains and purple mountain majesties that inspired Katharine Lee Bates to write her anthem, "America the Beautiful," and that lured families west for a better life.

Jonathan Bixby from Maine was one of those folks, and he hit it big. In 1881 he picked up 26,000 acres in what is today Long Beach. The property was Rancho Los Alamitos, part of a Spanish land grant earned by an intrepid soldier who marched north from Mexico in the 1760s.

Bixby made a lavish spread for himself and his family. A thousand head of cattle, 8,000 sheep and 300 milk cows roamed fertile lands. He drained marshland along the Pacific for 500 acres of corn, and he planted fields in low lying hills to the east with barley and alfalfa. Cheese from his creamery was legendary.

By the time Bixby died in 1888, a new breed of land seeker was profiteering in the Southland: the real estate huckster capitalizing on transcontinental railroad expansion and industrial wealth. A land boom ensued, and the Bixby clan, with power banker Isaias Hellman, set aside almost 5,000 acres of rancho land for home sites. Bixby's widow, Susan, inherited 7,300 acres and an adobe where she and her two children lived until her death in 1906. Then her son Fred and his wife, Florence, took over the property that came with the name Rancho Los Alamitos.

When an air photographer snapped his shutter in a fly-over of Fred and Florence's ranch in 1936, time seemed to have stood still. Groomed fields surrounded their home, nestled into a shady grove of pepper trees around a patio designed by local plantsman Paul Howard. South of the house was Florence's formal terraced garden by the landscape firm Olmsted Brothers. Sturdy farm buildings were to the west.

Time, however, had not stopped. What looked like a ranch was in fact a gentleman's estate, no different from hundreds of American homesteads that began as self-sustaining farms. As an agricultural depression, debt and taxes burdened land management in the 1920s, the Bixby family stayed solvent, developing properties along the Pacific. Fred Bixby protected his house by transferring it and 148 acres to a 1931 trust, supported with rent from his development company that managed the balance of his inheritance. Additional income came from limited farming, but the bucks that saved Los Alamitos gushed from oil.

What the air photographer framed out of his pastoral vista was nearby Signal Hill, with 240 of the acres spun off for development. By the 1920s car travel was pushing oil exploration, and the lessee of Signal Hill, Shell Oil, struck black gold in 1921 at derrick Alamitos No. 1. Thousands of gallons a day from this well and the dozens that followed on Signal Hill and at nearby Seal Beach transformed a Spanish rancho into a supplier to global petroleum markets.

With oil came thousands of men seeking work at the fields in the new city of Signal Hill, incorporated in 1924 to avoid taxes and zoning restrictions imposed by Long Beach. Living in shanty bungalows and duking it out in whiskey halls crowded with prostitutes and bootleggers, the laborers built a "Blade Runner" landscape of drilling machinery and towers. Signal Hill became an environmental inferno. The night skies flashed with natural gas flares, causing explosions, blowouts and fires lasting days. At first oil erupted naturally in a roar of rock and mud, but when pressure subsided, companies drilled wells 5,000 to 7,000 feet deep.

The Fred Bixbys got rich, but so did the region. And with Long Beach prosperity, the family lost its ranch. Government seizures of land for a munitions dump, naval hospital, state college, schools, flood channels and freeways whittled away Rancho Los Alamitos to its present-day 71/2 green acres around the old adobe, preserved by the city of Long Beach as a historic oasis in suburban sprawl.

America has been a nation of Bixbys seeking progress through farming, development and natural resource exploitation. Consequently, like Fred, Florence and their heirs, we've squashed our historic buildings with horizonless development and leased our lands for deep well exploration, only to see America the Beautiful become America the Polluted.

Katharine Lee Bates knew that patriotism alone would not protect her beloved country, and so with her vision of alabaster cities rising from the wilderness, she called forth what many are just beginning to summon: the spirit of brotherhood, a god to mend our flaws and the confirmation of our souls in self-control.

Watters' column on Southern California social history as told through homes and landscapes forever changed appears on the first Saturday of every month. Past columns: latimes.com/lostla.

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