

## **Famous Celebrities of the San Gorgonio Pass**

Because of the location of the Pass between Los Angeles and the Desert resort areas, Beaumont and Banning were natural stopovers for those traveling between the two areas. Before the completion of the I-10 Freeway travelers were forced into the downtown areas as the highway stopped along the main intersections. It would be more difficult to find a Hollywood celebrity who didn't at one time or another stop in the San Gorgonio Pass. Some celebrities became regulars at their favorite restaurant or overnight retreat. The library received numerous responses to this question. Here are a few:

Long-time Banning resident Mary Sartin relayed the story of William Powell and Jean Harlow having a retreat on the Banning Bench, just above the hairpin turn coming up San Gorgonio Avenue. Mary's aunt lived at a residence on Indian School Lane during the mid-1900s that was the site of frequent parties attended by those in the entertainment industry, including one of San Gorgonio Pass' most fascinating residents, Sadakichi Hartmann. Sadakichi Hartman was a magnet for Hollywood visitors when he lived in Beaumont in the 1920s and near the end of his life on the Morongo Reservation. One story tells of drinking buddy, W. C. Fields, searching for Sadakichi in Banning and eventually finding him for a weekend of revelry.

In the late 1940s Bob Hope broadcast several of his NBC radio programs from the Banning Theater (currently the Banning Fox Cineplex Theatre) and had numerous entertainers as guests on his show. Les Brown and his orchestra accompanied the performers. When interviewed after a February 26, 1948 broadcast Hope said the audience was one of the best he had had and that he hoped to return to the Banning Theater for more performances. One of Hope's joke lines was about the healthy climate in Banning. He wisecracked, "When somebody dies in Banning they don't bury them-they make them move!" Another broadcast starred Doris Day. One photograph in the Banning Public Library Photograph collection shows the cast from one of Bob Hope's broadcasts. Among the cast members posing with Hope on the stage of the Banning Theater are Natalie Wood and Dean Martin.

On Memorial Day, 1949, Frank Sinatra performed at the Annual Barbecue and Fiesta at the St. Boniface School. The audience of 2000 enjoyed his performance and that of Janet Leigh, who also sang several numbers. Does anyone remember some of the other entertainers who performed at the St. Boniface Annual Barbeques?

Former Banning Public Library Children's Librarian Virginia Mills raised her family at the end of Whitewater Canyon on the grounds of the Rainbow Rancho Trout Hatchery. Virginia remembers numerous Hollywood celebrities, including Roy and Dale Rogers, visiting the area now called the Whitewater Preserve.

Ida and Melvin Ellis used to visit the Banning Public Library with stories of some of their celebrity friends. The Ellis ranch on the Banning Bench was often visited by Robert Young and John Wayne who enjoyed horseback rides along the trails on the Bench. The Ellis' worked at a Western Wear store in Palm Springs and met other Western actors and hobbyists, including Spiro Agnew, through their contacts there.

One politician who spent time in the Pass during his early political career was Richard Nixon. Nixon was in Banning on May 8, 1950, campaigning for his senate race from his "Woodie" station wagon at an assembly gathered on South First Street.

Judy Barron of Hemet, California emailed the library and mentioned the cast of "Tell Them Willie Boy is Here." Robert Redford, Robert Blake, Katherine Ross and Susan Clark were all in the Pass area during the making of the film in 1968. After the release of the film in 1969 they served as Grand Marshalls for Beaumont's annual Cherry Festival Parade. Judy's parents told her the story of Frank Sinatra and an actress, possibly Janet Leigh, being in Banning for the dedication of Highway 243 between Banning and Idyllwild. Judy also remembers seeing Esther Rolle at the old Coronet's store on Ramsey Street.

Joyce McRae, resident of the Pass since 1968, remembers having dinner with her husband and children at Jimmy's restaurant in Beaumont in the mid-1970s. Seated next to them at the table were Red Skelton and a "lady friend" of his. She remembers them having a friendly conversation throughout dinner and when Mr. Skelton left the restaurant he gave the children a caricature he had drawn of himself. Red Skelton was a familiar face in Banning. He once performed at a house party at Nellie Coffman's house in Banning where 1400 guests were in attendance for a fund raiser for WWII troops.

Ana Maria Fultz contacted the library and told the story of Henry Fonda visiting her parent's restaurant, Sergio's Mexican Food, located at 1675 W. Ramsey Street in Banning. Her parents, Sergio and Olga Figueroa and their daughter Monica, took a picture with Mr. Fonda who was working on a film at the time, about 1976, and was on his way to Palm Springs. Sergio's was a very popular restaurant in Banning and was sold in 1997.

Author, historian and Cherry Valley resident Betty Meltzer mentioned the story of Albert Einstein staying at times at the Highland Springs Resort during the 1930s. Betty also mentioned that numerous well known American artists, including Millard Sheets, Robert E. Wood, Rex Bryant, Chen Chi, and Ed Betts visited Banning and Beaumont as guests of her husband, renown watercolor artist Robert Hiram Meltzer. Mr. Meltzer brought artists to the local schools to give art workshops during the 1970s and 80s.

If anyone else remembers celebrity encounters in the Pass please contact the library with your stories and we will add them to our files. Thanks to all who participated in our research this week! (Banning Record Gazette, March 4, 2011, by Bill Bell)

**Photograph Captions For Article:**

**#1** - "Bob Hope and other entertainers on the stage of the Banning Theater during one of Hope's NBC radio broadcasts in the late 1940s. Among the cast are Bob Hope, Natalie Wood, Dean Martin and some of Bing Crosby's sons."

**#2** - "Roy and Dale Evans showing off their catch of trout at the Rainbow Rancho Trout Hatchery in Whitewater."

**#3** - "Sergio and Olga Figueroa with their daughter, Monica, and actor Henry Fonda at the family's Sergio's Mexican Food Restaurant in 1976."

**#4** - "Photograph from the Banning Live Wire Newspaper showing Richard Nixon in Banning in 1950."