

Western Hotel Museum: Self-Guided Tour

Welcome to the Western Hotel/Museum – one of the Antelope Valley’s most visible links to our past heritage. We hope that you will enjoy your visit and encounter nostalgic recollections when you see photographs and artifacts that depict the history of the people who built, worked, and lived in early Lancaster. Admission to the museum is free, but we accept and appreciate all donations. While you look around you’re welcome to take photos (without the use of flash), however we ask that you **do not** touch the artifacts on display or have any food or drinks in the building. If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to ask a docent or contact us at whm@cityoflancasterca.org.

Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Western Hotel was a vital part of local culture as its clientele ranged from muleskinners to British lords, land speculators and weary travelers; playing host to numerous parties and socials, from quilting bees to saloon fights and card parties, Progressive Movement meetings, as well as other business and club gatherings within its walls.

Prior to 1874, and the Southern Pacific Railroad, Lancaster did not exist beyond a train stop from Bakersfield to the metropolis of Los Angeles. Round trip, the train ride would have taken around four and a half hours and cost \$7.50! A prominent real estate promoter, Moses L. Wicks, bought the town’s property rights and sold his holdings to various investors.

James P. Ward, a businessman, entered the scene when he bought a large number of lots from Wicks in transactions recorded in 1888/89. One of these lots, fronting on what was then Tenth Street (now present-day Lancaster Boulevard), would be the site of our Western Hotel. During this time, Lancaster was not much different than other old western towns – full of hard work, sweat, the occasional drama, and laughter.

Tentatively dated to 1888, skillful workers anchored wooden beams with square nails to construct the two-story building. The earliest ad concerning the Western Hotel is in the *Lancaster Gazette* (August 23, 1888), when it was known as the Antelope Valley Hotel. Plagued by fires, droughts, floods and other circumstances, the Hotel lived on and experienced several name changes as its ownership and tastes changed including the Gillwyn Hotel, and Hotel Western.

By 1905, another absentee owner, the Los Angeles Brewing Company, had obtained the property and mortgage. This German immigrant brewing business then sold the property to George Webber in 1908. George was an Englishman who immigrated to the States in 1885. Working for the London Daily Telegraph, he came to our Valley to investigate the possibility of developing Joshua Tree pulp as a paper source. When this ambitious project failed in 1886, Webber decided to remain in California; it is said that he tried his hand at engineering in Los Angeles and even helped lay out the City of Santa Monica.

Myrtle “Myrtie” Eveline Gibson Sullivan moved to the Antelope Valley in 1908, quite ill, and stayed as a guest within the Hotel while she recovered. Once her health was regained, she began working at the Hotel and married George in February of 1910. Myrtie’s main job was taking care of the dining room (until it closed in the 1920s), preparing meals on a four-hole stove using petrified Joshua tree wood – she was also known for her apple pie. During the 1930s, the Depression hurt the entire nation; the Hotel could be full of guests, but when kindhearted Myrtie went to collect the money, she could not collect a cent from those she was providing room and board.

While the Webbers were associated with the Hotel, numerous events took place within its rooms. The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce was formed here in 1902, and the Hotel acted as the headquarters for aqueduct, electrical, gas, petroleum, and paving crews. Business improved so much that the Webbers gradually enlarged the Hotel and even bought out their competition (the Lancaster Hotel), in hopes of making an additional annex, however a fire quickly put an end to this endeavor in 1919.

In July, 1934, George Webber died and it was up to his wife to continue running the Hotel. Myrtie was described as a strong-willed and sturdy pioneer – slight of frame with twinkling blue eyes. Myrtie (like George) was civic minded and always ready to assist the sick and needy. During the influenza epidemic that hit the valley in 1918, the Hotel was turned into a hospital and Myrtie acted as a volunteer nurse along with Mom Evert and Dr. Arwine.

Myrtie operated the Hotel until the 1960s, though there were many agents who wanted to buy the land. However, her life was completely tied to the Hotel until old age forced her to relocate to Mayflower Gardens convalescent hospital in 1971. Myrtie died in 1978 at the age of 110, as the Antelope Valley’s oldest citizen.

After Myrtie’s death, Los Angeles County deemed the building unsafe and marked it for destruction but local residents rallied to save the dilapidated structure. This resulted in the establishment of the Western Hotel Historical Society, formed for the purpose of restoring the property and developing a museum. Eventually, the Lancaster City Council initiated restoration action in 1983, and work started once funds for the project were approved in December of 1987. The restoration process, which included both aesthetic and functional improvements, was completed the following year and in August, 1989, the City of Lancaster opened this museum for visitors to enjoy artifacts and memorabilia presented in dynamic displays.

Downstairs you will be able to find original pieces of the building that have been recovered (door locks, nails, original railings, etc.). You can also view historic photos of the town and of the Webbers, and even some of Myrtie’s accolades. On the floor, there are seats from the Valley Theatre which was once leased by Frank Gumm – it was at this theater that Judy Garland (then Frances Gumm) and her sisters would entertain local audiences through song and dance – and mail slots from the town’s early Post Office.

Hotel Bedroom: As you continue down the hallway, notice the room on your right. In its heyday, this room would have cost \$1.00 per night or \$6.00 per week – this price also included daily meals.

If you were staying as a guest in the hotel during the early 1900s, this is representative of how it may have looked. When the hotel was fully operational, it could house up to 28 guests; each room was about this size and similarly furnished. Early on, the only bathroom facilities available were a separate shower building and outhouse, therefore you were provided a wash basin and chamber pot. The bed featured in this room belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Angell; Mrs. Angell was once a Rosamond post-mistress, while the whiskey-style vase with roses was made by the town's blacksmith, George Black. We also have a mantel clock on the dresser that belonged to Ezra Hamilton, who you will learn more about upstairs.

Please proceed up the stairs, but be sure to watch your step!

Antelope Valley's Prehistory (first room on the right):

The Antelope Valley was an important trade hub that connected tribes along California's coast with more inland tribes from Northern and Central California, as well as the Southwest cultural region.

There were six major Native American nations in the area prior to European contact including the Kawaiisu, Kitanemuk, Tataviam, Serrano, Vanyume and Chemehuevi; these tribes inhabited the foothills and mountains surrounding the area, would come down to the valley floor to utilize seasonal resources.

In the display case you can see various projectile points, along with a slate that was used in the Fort Tejon Indian Reservation School, established by General Edward Beale (the Superintendent of Indian Affairs) in 1853. Beale was also appointed by President Lincoln to serve as the United States Surveyor General for California.

Natural history is the scientific study of plants and animals through observation. We have a small display of plants (flora) and animals (fauna) native to the region – these include a desert tortoise shell, a horn of a bighorn sheep, and deer antlers; we also have a bobcat and coyote specimen and a few framed plant specimens. The local plants on display would have been used for a variety of things, including for food and use as a natural dye.

Weaving and basketry was also very important and utilized various plant species; on the floor, there are stone tools, such as manos and metates, that would have been used for grinding a plethora of seeds and nuts, and a winnowing basket which was used by Native Americans to roast them.

Other plants important to the Antelope Valley are the well-known California Poppy and Joshua tree, along with Pinyon pine trees. Pine nuts would have been harvested as they're a large source of protein.

The Antelope Valley also has an extensive geologic history and has undergone many changes, some of which can be attributed to the relative placement to active fault lines. On display, we have a variety of the most common rocks and minerals within our local landscape including but are not limited to: rhyolite and chalcedony, obsidian, and minerals such as quartz and gold.

Industrial Room (second room on the right):

Mining has been an important industry to the Antelope Valley since the late 1800s. Ezra Hamilton was the first pioneer to strike gold in the area in the 1890s. Ezra had been working in Los Angeles manufacturing pottery, clay pipes, tile and bricks which led to his purchase of Tropico Hill. Prior to the development of Rosamond, Tropico Hill was being mined for clay by Dr. L.A. Crandall who obtained the land in 1882.

Ezra renamed the site "Hamilton Hill" and discovered gold during his course of clay-mining activities. The portrait of Hamilton on the wall was taken shortly before his death (c. 1914) at Willow Springs, a town he founded and developed. Rumor has it that Ezra once had so much excess gold that he made a whole set of teeth out of gold nuggets! Having changed names again, the then "Lida Mine" was sold to the Antelope Mining Company in 1908, and again to the Tropico Mining and Milling Company in 1909. Eventually the mine was acquired by former employees of the company, the Burton brothers, in 1912.

Gold and silver were both mined from nearby Rosamond until the 1930s-1940s. You can also find borax which is still mined out on the western edge of the Mojave Desert today. Between 1883 and 1889, over 10,000 tons of borax was carried out of Death Valley via twenty mule teams. Although the teams only ran for six years, they have made an enduring impression of the Old West. This is primarily due to a successful advertising campaign promoting 20-Mule-Team Borax Soap, a widely used cleansing agent, as well as an antiseptic, preservative, and water softener.

Other items on display include a very interesting mining oddity – a piece of clay conglomerate which has a visible drill hole through it which was drilled for the placement of dynamite. The dynamite did its job, as it was placed much deeper than this portion of conglomerate, however this piece of conglomerate survived along with a portion of the fuse.

Together with mining, the railroad industry is what initially brought numerous settlers to the Antelope Valley, many of which stayed at the Western Hotel. As mentioned previously, prior to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company constructing a line through the Valley in 1876, Lancaster was largely barren land. Southern Pacific housed many of their workers in Lancaster, making them the settlement's first residents.

In 1882, Santa Fe Railroad ran a line westward out of Barstow toward Mojave and built a water stop at the edge of an immense dry lakebed, roughly twenty miles southeast of Mojave. The lonely water stop was known simply as "Rod," and the lakebed was then called Rodriguez Dry Lake. By the early 1900s, "Rodriguez" had been anglicized into "Rodgers," which was then shortened to "Rogers." Rogers Dry Lake is the primary resource associated with and responsible for establishing Edwards Air Force Base and the Dryden Flight Research Center (now known as the NASA Neil A. Armstrong Flight Research Center) making it the scene of important developments in the history of aviation.

In 1910, the Corum family had settled near the lake. Clifford Corum, his wife Effie, and his brother Ralph were homesteaders and were the earliest known settlers of this region. Seeking to attract others to the area they built a combination store and post office, however the Postal Department rejected the name because of its similarity to another California town. The Corums then decided to reverse the letters in their name and Muroc was born. On the shelf, you can see original railroad spikes and nails, as well as artwork representing the Muroc post office.

Agriculture was another industry important to the history of the Antelope Valley. During the early years of Lancaster, many people made their livelihood through growing crops and raising animals. The most common crop grown in the Antelope Valley, throughout its history and even today, is alfalfa. This practice inspired and is celebrated annually during the Antelope Valley Fair and Alfalfa Festival.

Cattle farming was important from 1886 to 1910, however most local ranching operations were small scale. Dairy farming was also very common with several dairy operations located locally. The Valley was frequently promoted as "The Milk Bottle of Los Angeles" during the 1920s.

Dining Room (first room on the left):

The table in this room belonged to Myrtie Webber, and is dated to the early 1900s. This chair set represents one typical of the early 1900s; the upholstery is still original. This table and chairs were used by the Webbers and many hotel guests over the years, however it was originally downstairs in a room that connected directly to the kitchen. The dresser holds a Victorian chandelier lamp, a coffee grinder and an aluminum coffee pot. The dresser and coffee grinder are the oldest pieces, dated to the 1880s. while the coffee pot and Victorian lamp are thought to be from the early 1900s.

When chocolate entered the European continent from Mesoamerica, hot chocolate was a luxury beverage and remained so until the middle of the twentieth century. The blue and white china set is actually a set used for the service of hot chocolate. The pitcher-like piece is a chocolate pot with a slightly different shape than pots for coffee and tea; this chocolate pot and accompanying dish set are dated to the 1910s. The silverware is also dated to the 1910s, making these and the chocolate dishes the most recent artifacts in the room.

Housewares Room (second room on the left):

This room holds various household items including cooking and cleaning supplies. The vacuums you see in this room belonged to Myrtie Webber and were used to keep the rugs and carpets of the Hotel clean. The irons on display are also Myrtie's, and show the advancements throughout the years.

Cast iron, which is formed when melted iron is poured into a mold, could be for anything from a skillet to a novelty pan. Well-maintained cast iron cookware can last for several decades. Some examples of cast iron cookware on display from the early 1900s to mid-1950s that include a skillet, waffle iron with stove ring, a pot and a griddle.

The display case houses a collection of kitchen tools including several graters, a juicer, and a wooden butter mold. This style of butter mold was patented in the late 1800s, after the cream was poured into the mold and it solidified, you lift the metal bar on the mold and the mold becomes four separate sides and a bottom. Enamelware was also popular in the late 1800s to early 1900s, as it was cheaper, lighter and more resilient than china. Many pieces of enamelware were lost during WWII, with the dishes being melted down in scrap metal drives.

Lastly, on the floor you can find a taffy cutter from the local Jazz Candy Store of the 1920s. The shop was located on Antelope Avenue (now Sierra Highway) and was a popular hangout spot for teenagers, including a young Judy Garland, as it was located near the Valley Theatre.

Myrtie's Room (last room on the left):

This room is set up as a mock-display of Myrtie Webber's bedroom, furnished with a variety of period objects and many of her personal items. These include the upholstered vanity stool, the rocking chair, a wooden trash can and the standing lamp, as well as one of her many hats.

Myrtie's original bedroom would have been located directly to the right of this one, at the end of the hall. This room is one of the only rooms that still has the original ceiling intact and if you look through the window above the door, you can see the intricate lathe rosette detailing.