



History

From cow town to boom town to Tinseltown.

TEXT: WILL FULFORD-JONES

Now the second most populous city in the United States (after New York), Los Angeles has achieved that status against all odds. The fact that it is built on arid land prone to tremors, fires and floods has proved no boundary to the nearly four million people who call the area home. That's not to say that life here has ever been easy: in its 230 years LA has seen oil shortages, water shortages, earthquakes, riots, police brutality, gruesome murders, suburban sprawl and deflating house prices, and even during the city's various boom decades, riots and racial tension were commonplace. Maybe that's par for the course in a place where nearly half the citizens are 'outsiders' looking for a community to settle down in (more than 40 per cent of LA's population is foreign-born). The reality is that Los Angeles may have attracted its fair share of chancers and hustlers, but those who manage to make it here, regardless of their ethnic background, are here for the long haul.

EARLY SETTLEMENT

Given the city's recent developmental history, perhaps it's appropriate that settlement in Los Angeles began with a series of single-family suburbs scattered haphazardly across its landscape. Prior to the arrival of Spanish colonists in the latter part of the 18th century, what is now metropolitan Los Angeles was populated by 30,000 Native Americans. But they weren't farmers: instead, they relied on hunting and native plants for food. And, unlike the Iroquois and other tribes in North America, they hadn't yet organized themselves into strong political confederations. Instead, they lived in small settlements surrounding the area's few rivers, each group adopting a separate identity.

Backed by military muscle, the Spanish arrived and began to establish a string of Franciscan missions along the coast. The first was established in San Diego during 1769; two years later, the San Gabriel Mission marked the initial Spanish foray into what would later become Los Angeles County. The missionaries' supposed ambition was to spread the Christian faith, but life on their new missions proved feudal and even brutal. The reluctant Native American converts were rounded up from their small settlements and virtually enslaved by the Franciscans. Thousands died, leading the missionaries to head deep into the surrounding countryside in search of more 'converts'.

A PLANNED PUEBLO

The history of Los Angeles as a city begins in 1781, the year the British surrendered to George Washington in Virginia and effectively ended the War of Independence, when the Spaniards decided that they needed a settlement (or pueblo) in Southern California to serve as a way-station for the military. At a site nine miles east of the San Gabriel Mission, where the Los Angeles River widened, governor Felipe de Neve laid out a plaza measuring 275 feet by 180 feet (84 meters by 55 meters). Around it were marked a series of lots, each with a 55-foot (17-metre) frontage on the plaza.

De Neve commissioned his aides to recruit 24 settlers and their families from Sonora, more than 350 miles north. On 18 August 1781, after a forced march of 100 days through desert heat, the 12 men, 11 women and 21 children who survived the trip arrived at the plaza. Thus did El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula begin as it has always since grown: not with a hardy band of motivated settlers, but with a real estate agent looking for customers. (The remains of this early settlement stand just north of modern-day Downtown LA, on now-touristy Olvera Street. They were designated a California State Historic Landmark in 1953.)

Although other missions were established in and near the region, among them San Buenaventura, San Fernando and San Juan Capistrano, De Neve's new settlement remained, literally, a dusty cow town for decades: the population in 1800 was made up of 315 people and 12,500 cows. However, after Mexico declared itself independent from Spain in 1821 and annexed California during the following year, the Spanish-born priests were ordered out of the area. The mission system soon broke down, and powerful local families, eager to exploit mission land, received dozens of large land grants from the Mexican government. Most of these *ranchos*, which were typically several thousand acres in size, were recognized as valid claims of title when California entered the United States in 1850. Many remained intact into the 20th century, one of many factors that allowed large-scale, mass-production land development to occur in the region.

Americans had been informally colonizing Los Angeles throughout the era of Mexican rule, as wandering opportunists arrived in the town, married into prominent 'Spanish' families and renamed themselves 'Don Otto' or 'Don Bill'. The transfer of the cow town into US hands occurred during the forcible annexation of California that triggered the Mexican-American war of 1846-48. On 13 August 1846, Commodore RF Stockton landed at San Pedro with 500 marines and started his march to the pueblo. With political support from the 'Dons', he captured the settlement without firing a shot. The US-Mexican treaty of 1848 confirmed US dominion over California; on 9 September 1850, it officially became the 31st state of the Union.

BOOMS AND BUSTS

Los Angeles grew steadily but somewhat unspectacularly over the next 20 years, becoming a center of California's 'hide and tallow' trade: farmers would raise cattle, then sell the hides for coats and the fat for candle-tallow to trading companies from the East Coast and Europe. Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), California's first literary masterpiece, includes descriptions of the author trudging through the shallow waters of San Pedro harbor with cowhides on his back. But when the gold rush hit Northern California, the cattle barons of Los Angeles discovered they could sell the cows for beef at \$30 a head to the gold fields, rather than at \$3 a head to the traders.

Man About Town

Charles Fletcher Lummis's LA story makes a colorful museum trip.

Charles Fletcher Lummis is today chiefly remembered, if he's remembered at all, as the founder of the (now closed) Southwest Museum. However, the New England-born, Harvard-educated Lummis was one of early LA's most colorful characters, a literary adventurer who helped shape the city simply because he could never sit still.

Lummis's Californian adventure began in 1884 when, while working as a reporter in Cincinnati, he was offered a job with the *Los Angeles Times*. He began a 143-day solo tramp across the country, submitting weekly reports on his misadventures to the newspaper. Harrison Gray Otis, the paper's owner, put him to work as its city editor on the morning after he finally arrived in LA; Lum didn't sleep for more than two hours nightly until three years later, when he woke up partly paralyzed after a stroke.

Recalling his happy travels through the pueblos of the Southwest, Lum moved to New Mexico, where he willed himself well while learning the local lore and language. While recuperating, he continued to write, and soon made powerful enemies through his investigative journalism. One man was even moved to shoot at Lummis: he would have died but for a well-timed yawn, which left him with only a minor wound rather than a shattered jaw. Lum also risked death journeying south in an attempt to photograph the secret rites of a mysterious local Catholic cult as they reenacted Christ's

Crucifixion, but he escaped unharmed and eventually returned to Los Angeles.

Back home, Lum turned his hand to construction, building El Alisal (see *venue index*), a rough-hewn home made from Arroyo river rock. He also founded a literary magazine, took a job as the city's official librarian, collected Indian artifacts, founded the Landmarks Club in a bid to save the deteriorating missions and built the city's first true museum (see *p85*) on the hill above his Highland Park home. And after his Harvard classmate, Theodore Roosevelt, became president, he used his influence to advocate for Native rights.

Lum was made of sturdy stuff, but not even he could continue to expend such energy. As he aged, Lum suffered physical and emotional trials, and eventually became estranged from his second wife, Eva, after she objected to the young 'secretaries' he kept on hand at all times. His final years were spent at a much-diminished El Alisal, with infrequent visitors. But upon his death in 1928, at the age of 69, Lummis left a legacy of respect for native peoples and traditional mores that places him among the most influential figures in the Southwest.

His home still stands as a symbol of his abiding love for the region, and it is planned to display his museum's collection in new Southwest Museum galleries under construction at the Autry National Center in Griffith Park (see *venue index*).

In 1883, the transcontinental railroad from New Orleans to Los Angeles was finally completed, bringing with it the long-expected boom. A price war broke out among the railroads, and the cost of a one-way ticket to LA dropped from \$125 to a mere dollar. Naturally enough, more and more people took the westbound railroad: in 1887, the Southern Pacific Railroad transported 120,000 people to LA, at the time a city of just 10,000 residents. The instability of the local economy meant that the real estate boom didn't last: one of the reasons that LA's population had grown so dramatically was that many immigrants simply couldn't afford to leave. But despite the crash, the 1880s transformed Los Angeles from a cow town into a fast-growing hustlers' paradise.

After the short-lived prosperity of the 1880s, the land barons and real estate operators who came to dominate LA became determined to lay more solid foundations for the city's expansion. Forming the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in 1888, they took the unprecedented step of embarking on a nationwide campaign to attract new immigrants to the region, sending advertisements, brochures and even quasi-evangelical speakers to spread the word of the Golden State in the Midwest. It was this commercial offensive that led journalist Morrow Mayo to conclude that LA was not a city but 'a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouthwashes.'

Still, the charm offensive had a tangible effect. As commodity prices rose in the first decade of the 20th century, thousands of Midwestern farmers sold up, moved west and set in motion the wheels of a new boom. Encouraged by the influx of new residents, the city's land barons soon pulled off one of the most audacious and duplicitous schemes ever devised to ensure a city's greatness.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

In 1904, former Los Angeles mayor Fred Eaton travelled to the Owens Valley, a high-desert region 230 miles north of Los Angeles. Claiming that he was working on a dam project for the federal government, Eaton began purchasing land along the Owens River. But after he'd bought huge swathes of the area, Eaton revealed his true purpose: to divert the Owens River through an aqueduct to LA.

Whipped into a frenzy by trumped-up fears of a drought in 1905, Los Angeles voters approved a bond issue that called for the construction of an aqueduct from the Owens Valley to the city. LA had enough water to serve the population at the time, but not enough to enable its growth. As William Mulholland, the city's water engineer, put it: 'If we don't get it, we won't need it.' Mulholland, a self-taught Irish immigrant, went on to direct one of the great engineering feats in US history. A century after its completion, his 230-mile aqueduct still operates without electrical power, entirely on a gravity system. 'There it is,' Mulholland told the people of LA when the floodway opened in 1913. 'Take it.' The aqueduct didn't actually come to the heart of Los Angeles: it went only as far as the San Fernando Valley, an adjacent farming region. But in the last and perhaps most masterful part of the scam, it turned out that LA's land barons had secretly bought the valley on the cheap, annexed it to the city and then splashed irrigating Owens Valley water on it, all in a successful attempt to increase its value. Today, the San Fernando Valley, population 1.5 million, is the prototypical US suburb, and its people chafe under the Los Angeles city controls that brought water to their valley in the first place.

MOTORS AND MOVIES

With its water supply in place, Los Angeles boomed in the 1910s and 1920s like no other American city. The expansion was partly dependent on real-estate speculation, but it was also due to the rise of three new industries: petroleum, aircraft and movies. With little natural wood and almost no coal, the city suffered regular fuel crises that, in some cases, were as severe as its water problem. However, the discovery of oil in metropolitan LA between 1900 and 1925, particularly around the La Brea Tar Pits, in

Huntington Beach and at Santa Fe Springs, put an end to the troubles. The result was a plentiful supply of oil that enriched the region and helped to fuel the city's growing love affair with the automobile.

Its residents scattered far and wide, Los Angeles took to the car more readily than any city except Detroit. Car sales were high: the city soon developed its own thriving oil, automobile and tire industries, each with its own monuments. In 1928, Adolph Schleicher, president of the Samson Tire & Rubber Co, constructed an \$8-million tire plant modeled after a royal palace once built by the king of Assyria. The plant (5675 Telegraph Road, City of Commerce) has since been reborn as a shopping mecca.

Movies and aircraft came to Los Angeles during the 1910s for the same reasons as its incoming residents: temperate weather, low rainfall and cheap land, the last of these providing the wide open spaces that both industries needed in order to operate. In 1921, Donald Douglas founded his aircraft company, a predecessor to McDonnell-Douglas, at Clover Field in Santa Monica (now Santa Monica Municipal Airport); the Lockheed brothers moved their business from Santa Barbara to LA in 1926; and Jack Northrop, who had worked with both Douglas and the Lockheeds, started his own company in Burbank in 1928. Together, the three firms later formed the foundation of the US's 'military-industrial' complex.

Filming began in Los Angeles around 1910, moving to Hollywood in 1911 when the Blondeau Tavern at Gower Street and Sunset Boulevard was turned into a movie studio. At the time, Hollywood was being marketed as a pious and sedate suburb, and the intrusion of the film industry was resented. The business was never really centered on the neighborhood: Culver City and Burbank, both home to a number of studios, have stronger claims on the title of the industry's capital. Nevertheless, Hollywood became the financial and social center of the film world, as the area's population grew from 4,000 in 1910 to 30,000 in 1920 and 235,000 in 1930. The wealth that defined the period is still visible in the magnificent commercial architecture along Hollywood Boulevard between Cahuenga and Highland Avenues. However, the town's earliest movie palaces were built not in Hollywood but on Broadway in Downtown LA.

PROGRESS OF SORTS

During the 1920s, a decade that saw the population of Los Angeles double, the city became a kind of national suburb, where the middle classes sought refuge from the teeming immigrant groups so prevalent in other large metropolises. Civic leaders worked hard to build the type of edifices and institutions that they thought a big city deserved: the Biltmore Hotel and the adjacent Los Angeles Central Library, Los Angeles City Hall, the Los Angeles Coliseum, the University of Southern California and Exposition Park. And with the creation of the Los Angeles Stock Exchange (now the Pacific Stock Exchange), LA became the financial capital of the West Coast.

However, this process of making Los Angeles the great 'white' city served to marginalize the minority groups that had long been a part of local life. The Mexican and Mexican American population, which had grown rapidly and had provided the city with a much-needed labor force, was pushed out of Downtown into what is now the East LA barrio. And the African Americans, who had previously lived all over the city, found themselves confined to an area south of Downtown straddling Central Avenue, which became known as South Central. Both of these mini-migrations laid the foundation for serious social unrest in later decades.

Despite these problems, Los Angeles in the 1920s had an irrepressible energy. The arrival of so many newcomers created a rootlessness that manifested itself in a thousand different ways. Those in need of companionship were drawn to the city's many cafeterias (invented in LA), which served as incubators of random social activity. Those in need of a restored faith had, and still have, their choice of any number of faith healers. And those searching for a quick profit were drawn to the tantalizing

The Hollywood Sign

How nine letters stole the city's heart.

It seems wholly appropriate that the most famous landmark in Los Angeles wasn't built out of civic pride or in an attempt to improve the environment, but as a wildly ostentatious piece of advertising. Stuck for ideas as to how best to promote their new real-estate development in the Hollywood Hills, *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler and Keystone Cops creator Mack Sennett hit upon a solution. Some 50 feet tall, 450 feet wide and lit by 4,000 light bulbs, their unmissable HOLLYWOODLAND sign was unveiled on 13 July 1923.

The sign was meant to stand for just 18 months, but it remained long after Chandler and Sennett had sold their properties. It briefly returned to the news in 1932, when 24-year-old British-born actress Peg Entwistle threw herself off the top of the 'H' after her dreams of stardom dissolved around her. But the sign was otherwise left to rot: into the late 1930s, when vandals laid waste to its lights, and the mid 1940s, when ownership of the land slipped into the hands of the local government.

Only when the 'H' collapsed in 1949 did the authorities start to realize that they had to do something about the sign's decay. Some lobbied to get rid of it, while others campaigned to keep it. In the end, a compromise of sorts was reached: the last four letters were removed, but the first nine were given a refurbishment (albeit without their lights). HOLLYWOODLAND was dead; hooray, instead, for HOLLYWOOD. Still, the decline was stemmed only temporarily: despite being granted landmark status in



1973, no effort was made to protect the sign. Graffiti was scratched on it, some parts of it were stolen, and, in 1977, an arsonist tried to torch the second 'L'.

It took an unlikely figure to restore a little star power to the landmark. When the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce estimated that a new sign would cost \$250,000, Hugh Hefner hosted a fundraising gala at which individual letters were sponsored, to the tune of \$27,700, by the likes of Gene Autry (the second 'L'), Andy Williams (the 'W') and Alice Cooper (the middle 'O'). The old sign came down in 1978, and was sold to a nightclub promoter named Hank Berger for \$10,000. Three months later, the new version, its letters 45 feet tall and between 31 and 39 feet wide, was unveiled to much fanfare. It's this incarnation that still looks down over LA.

In 2005 the sign received its first all-over refurbishment in a decade. In the same month, a gentleman named Dan Bliss put the original sign up for sale on eBay, having bought it from Berger two years earlier. The sale netted \$450,400, roughly 20 times what the sign had cost to build 82 years earlier. Bliss's reason for selling? He needed to raise funds to invest in a movie.

Less than five years later, however, a proposed development of the land around the sign put it in danger once again. In February 2010 a campaign to raise the \$12.5 million necessary to buy and protect the land was launched, and for a few months people were on tenterhooks, worried that the unthinkable – the possibility of the city losing its best-known landmark – could actually happen. Gradually, donations began to trickle in. It was only at the end of April, however, that fans of the sign were able to breathe a sigh of relief when the last of the money was raised. Who had stepped in at the last minute with the final \$900,000? LA's favorite playboy, Hugh Hefner.

'Most Japanese Americans on the West Coast were interned in camps by the federal government during World War II.'

claims of local oil companies in search of investors. Indeed, nothing captures a sense of LA's primal energy during the 1920s like the rampant oil business.

With a steady supply of gushers, often in residential areas, oil promoters had a ready-made set of samples with which to promote their products. And with an endless stream of equity-rich farm refugees from the Midwest, they also had a ready-made pool of gullible investors. The most skilled promoter was a Canadian named CC Julian, who attracted millions of dollars to his oil company with a string of newspaper ads that had the narrative drive of a soap opera. When it became clear that he couldn't deliver on his promises, he was elbowed out of his own firm by other swindlers who continued the scam, issuing millions of bogus shares and bribing the district attorney in a bid to stay out of trouble. The end came in 1931, when a defrauded investor opened fire in an LA courtroom on a banker who had been involved in the scam. The failed investor had ten cents to his name when he was arrested. The crooked banker's pockets held \$63,000.

GROWING UP

As was the case elsewhere in the US, the 1930s proved rather more sober than the roaring '20s in Los Angeles. With the boom over and the Depression in full swing, the city's growth slowed, and the city's new arrivals were very different from their predecessors. Instead of greeting wealthy Midwestern farmers, LA now attracted poor white refugees from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma and Texas, the 'Okies' made famous in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. These unskilled workers wound up as farm laborers and hangers-on in the margins of society.

Dealing with these newcomers proved difficult for Los Angeles, but the problem was intertwined with another conundrum: how to handle the equally poor and unskilled Mexican and Mexican American population. After farm owners chose to hire Okies over Mexicans, LA County became overwhelmed by the cost of public relief. The authorities resorted to repatriating even those Mexicans who were born and raised in Los Angeles.

The arrival of the Okies and other hobos caused a nasty public backlash. But it also built a liberal political mood among the have-nots, which culminated in the near-election of reformer and novelist Upton Sinclair as California's governor. In the early '30s, Sinclair wrote a diatribe called *I, Governor of California, and How I Ended Poverty*, before going on to found the End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement and eventually winning the Democratic gubernatorial nomination for the 1934 elections. Only a concerted effort by reactionary political forces, aided by movie-house propaganda from the film industry, defeated his bid. After his failure, Sinclair followed his original pamphlet with a book entitled *I, Governor of California, and How I Got Licked*.

The region also had other problems with which to contend: the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, for example, the first major tremor to hit the city after its expansion. But optimism gradually returned, with a handful of developments lending the locals some new-found pride. Held at the Coliseum, the 1932 Olympics saw the expansion and aesthetic redevelopment of 10th Street: the street was renamed Olympic Boulevard and lined with palm trees, thus setting the fashion for palms in LA. Seven years later, the first local freeway was built: the Arroyo Seco Parkway, now the Pasadena Freeway. And in 1941, a new aqueduct brought water from the Hoover Dam along the Colorado River, helping to cater for the city's continued growth.

World War II caused the single biggest upheaval Los Angeles had seen to that point, laying the foundations for the modern metropolis it went on to become. Already at the forefront of aviation, the city rapidly grew industrialized during the war, becoming both a major military manufacturing center and a staging ground for the American fight against Japan in the Pacific. More than 5,000 new manufacturing plants were built in LA during the war, mostly in outlying locations. Dormitory communities sprang up to accommodate the workers, many of them 'model' towns sponsored by industrialists or the military. These new settlements helped to establish the sprawling pattern of urban development that came to characterize LA in the post-war years.

COLOR CLASH

The population of Los Angeles diversified still further during the '40s. During the war, more than 200,000 African Americans moved to the city, mostly from Louisiana and Texas, to take advantage of the job opportunities. But the restrictive property laws meant that the South Central ghetto didn't expand geographically in order to accommodate these new arrivals, and the area became seriously overcrowded. It wasn't until 1948, when the Supreme Court threw out restrictive covenants and paved the way for an exodus of middle-class blacks west into the Crenshaw district, that the South Central's burden began to ease.

In desperate need of laborers, Los Angeles welcomed the return of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans who had been pushed out a decade earlier. However, tensions between white Angelenos and Mexicans were widespread and constantly threatened to boil over. In 1942, roughly 600 Mexican Americans were arrested in connection with a murder in the city. No fewer than 22 were charged, and, in January 1943, 17 were eventually convicted following a trial thick with racial epithets. The worst, though, was still to come.

When a white sailor on shore leave was injured during a group brawl with a number of Mexican Americans in May 1943, more than 100 sailors left their ships and stampeded into East LA in search of Latinos. A number of Mexicans were injured in the ensuing skirmishes, which became known as the Zoot Suit Riots after the baggy suits favored by Mexican American men at the time. A national civil rights outcry ensued and a committee was set up to investigate the trouble. However, no punishment was ever meted out to the sailors, and some sections of the local press even praised their actions. On 2 October 1944, the 17 Mexican Americans found guilty at the 1943 murder trial each had their convictions quietly quashed at appeal, but the tensions nonetheless remained.

Discrimination against LA's growing Japanese community was even more pronounced. Most Japanese Americans on the West Coast were interned in camps by the federal government during World War II, no matter how patriotic their attitude to their new home. (Indeed, in a supreme irony, some young men were permitted to leave the internment camps to join the US armed forces, which many did enthusiastically.) Most Japanese lost their property during these years, much of it concentrated in the Little Tokyo area of LA just east of City Hall. It took decades for the neighborhood to return to prosperity.

When the African Americans, Latinos and Japanese who fought for the US during the war returned to continued housing discrimination, police brutality and the general Angeleno attitude that they were not 'real Americans', their sense of alienation grew further. But because Los Angeles was a highly segregated city, most whites were able to ignore the race problem – especially after the war, when the city reaped the benefits of industrialization and a new suburban boom began.

AFTER THE WAR

The post-war era in Los Angeles is often recalled as an idyllic spell of prosperity and harmony. In fact, it was an unsettled period during which the city struggled to keep up

with the demands of massive growth. Taxes rose in order to fund new facilities and heavily oversubscribed schools went on 'double-sessions', teaching two classes in the same classroom.

In the decade after the war, the entire LA region devoted itself to building anything and everything. Freeway construction, which had been stymied by the war, exploded in 1947 after California imposed an additional petrol tax to pay for a new road network. Over the next two decades, virtually the entire freeway system was constructed, a marvel of modern engineering and the driving force behind the city's unstoppable expansion. The new road network opened up vast tracts of land for urban development in outlying areas: chief among them were the San Fernando Valley and Orange County, linked to Los Angeles by the I-5 (aka the Golden State Freeway). A crucial event in the success of this suburbanization was the opening, in 1955, of Disneyland, the world's first theme park.

Other leisure attractions helped to establish Los Angeles as a major city during the same period. In 1958, the city achieved 'major league' status by luring New York's Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team to the West Coast. But, as so often in LA's history, even this event was marred by racial tensions. In order to attract the Dodgers, the city gave them a spectacular site in Chavez Ravine, overlooking Downtown LA. Located in a low-income Latino neighborhood, the site had been earmarked for use as a public housing project. The project, though, was never built; Dodger Stadium still stands today.

As suburbanization continued in the 1950s and '60s, some areas prospered but others were left behind. On a hot summer night in 1965, the pent-up frustrations of the black ghetto exploded into one of the first and most destructive of the US's urban disturbances. The Watts Riots began after an African American man was pulled over on a drink-driving charge. By the time they were over, dozens of locals had been killed and hundreds of buildings had been destroyed; some estimates pinned the cost at around \$40 million, a huge figure for the time. For many Angelenos living in their comfortable suburbs, the riots were the first indication that all was not well in their metropolis.

ONWARDS AND OUTWARDS

After the Watts Riots, Los Angeles began to struggle with its image problem, as national newspapers and magazines began to proclaim the end of the California Dream. Under a series of hard-line chiefs, the Los Angeles Police Department continued to treat minority neighborhoods as if they were occupied territories. As they did so, a violent gang culture gradually began to develop in pockets of South Central LA.

In 1966, despite having no previous political experience, former actor Ronald Reagan was elected as the state governor on a law-and-order platform. But despite his efforts, the city continued to grab the national headlines in a number of undesirable ways. Three years after Reagan's election, the Charles Manson cult killed actress Sharon Tate and others at a home in Benedict Canyon, disturbing the sense of tranquility that permeated the high-end Beverly Hills suburb. And in 1971, the city suffered its worst earthquake in 38 years, escaping a high death toll only because the quake struck at the early hour of 6am. Out of this troubled period, however, emerged a towering political figure: Tom Bradley, an African American police captain who had grown up in the segregated world of Central Avenue and who later held his own in such white-dominated enclaves as UCLA and the LAPD.

While at the LAPD in the '50s, Bradley was assigned to improve relations with beleaguered Jewish shopkeepers in black neighborhoods, an opportunity he used to help forge a cross-racial political alliance that sustained him for years. After retiring from the police, Bradley was elected to the City Council and, with strong support in South Central and the largely Jewish West Side, ran for mayor. He lost in 1969 but won four years later, becoming the first African American mayor of a predominantly white city (according to the 2000 census, the black population of the City of Los



1994 earthquake. See p26.

Angeles is only 12 per cent, and that of Los Angeles County a mere 10.5 per cent). By moving into the mayor's mansion, Bradley helped desegregate the Hancock Park neighborhood, which had violently resisted the arrival of Nat 'King' Cole some years before.

A low-key man with a calming personality, Bradley successfully ruled the city for 20 years through the power of persuasion. During the 1970s, he sought to heal the city's long-open racial wounds. And in the early 1980s, he turned his attention to development, reviving Downtown and courting international business: the 1984 Olympics were to prove his greatest triumph. Bradley's efforts also benefited from a huge flow of Japanese capital into Los Angeles real estate in the 1980s. However, his popularity levels fell in the early 1990s, due in part to his handling of the Rodney King affair, and he was replaced as mayor by Richard Riordan in 1993 after deciding not to seek a sixth term in office. He died five years later.

TROUBLED TIMES

For all the optimism engendered by Bradley's work, the period during which he led the city offered only a partial respite from LA's chronic social and racial tensions. Public opinion in the region became more polarized in the 1970s, as affluent whites grew more conservative and found little in common with the immigrants who were turning LA into a melting pot. The decline of agriculture in Latin America made the city a magnet for legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere, while political strife in Central America led to the arrival of thousands more new arrivals. The city's position on the edge of the burgeoning Pacific Rim also attracted people (and capital) from Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The vast central areas of Los Angeles were re-energized by these newcomers. Tourism, trade and the garment industry boomed, as did the rapidly expanding Koreatown. But as the neighborhoods changed, so friction grew. Latin American immigrants began crowding into historically black South Central, creating a culture clash with middle- and working-class home-owners. African Americans, in particular, felt more alienated than ever.

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These tensions turned Los Angeles into a social tinderbox at the beginning of the 1990s. The arrest and beating of black motorist Rodney King by four LAPD officers in 1991, captured on tape by a home video enthusiast, proved to be the turning point. When a jury acquitted the officers of assault in 1992, it touched off a three-day riot during which 50 people died and 1,000 buildings were destroyed by fire and looting. The events were more widespread and destructive than the Watts disturbances of 1965: indeed, it was the worst urban riot in US history. A natural event, the 1994 earthquake, caused further damage to the city's infrastructure. Then, in 1995, the trial of OJ Simpson, an African American football star accused of killing his white ex-wife and another man, gripped the city. Simpson's acquittal stunned white residents, but reassured doubting black locals that the legal system could be on their side.

INVENTING THE FUTURE

Yet despite racial tensions, an economic renaissance that began in the mid 1990s brought new life to LA. As the aerospace industry declined, so the entertainment industry rapidly expanded. In 1997, house prices started to rocket once more, just as they had in the 1970s and '80s. Meanwhile, the Latino community grew into the dominant racial group in Los Angeles County, a dramatic demographic change that affected everything from shopping malls to city government. Latinos are now the pivotal voting group in the city: for evidence, look no further than the triumph of Antonio Villaragoisa in the mayoral elections of 2005. By defeating incumbent candidate James Hahn in a run-off election, Villaragoisa became the city's first Latino mayor in more than a century, and went on to win a second term in 2009.

But Los Angeles moves into the second decade of the 21st century with uncertainty. The good news is that serious crime is at a near-historic low: 2010 witnessed fewer than 300 murders in the city, a figure in line with the 1967 level (2010 also witnessed the arrest and charging of a suspect in the notorious 'Grim Sleeper' killings, which took place in LA between 1985 and 2007). The bad news is that LA, like the rest of the state, is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The city didn't escape the worldwide economic meltdown of recent years; in fact, it currently has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, plummeting house prices, as at early 2011, show no signs of rebounding, and budget cuts have affected everything from schools to museums to the fire and police departments. So what does the future hold? Perhaps Jerry Brown, who began his third (non-consecutive) term as Governor of California at the beginning of the year, holds the answers. The straight-talking former mayor of Oakland, whose campaign slogan was 'Let's Get California Working Again', took over from bodybuilder-turned-actor-turned-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger with a promise to provide 'a sober assessment of what's ahead.' Here's hoping he has something big up his sleeve.

IN CONTEXT

