**7 things you probably didn’t know about Bill Hart**

by John Boston

I used to get such a big kick being the lower case emcee, getting up before *Silents Under the Stars* to share a few stories not too many people knew about Newhall’s most famous citizen, William S. Hart. I’ve got nearly a million, but let’s start with 7 tidbits not often shared by the mansion’s plucky tour guides:

1) Darryl Zanuck bought the rights to William S. Hart’s life’s story. Zanuck hired producer Sol Siegel and Cy Bartlett to write an epic screenplay about our Western superstar. Small problem. Zanuck bought the rights from Hart’s son, Bill Jr., who didn’t *OWN* the rights. The estate of his father would be embroiled in lawsuits for about a decade. No movie has ever been made about the amazing life of one of the most influential cowboy stars in movie history.

2) Both Bill Hart Sr. and Bill Hart Jr. started their families late in life. Hart Sr. had Bill Jr. at 60 and Bill. Jr. fathered a daughter when he was 59 and a son when he was 63.

3) Legendary icon and Signal editor Ruth Newhall shared a story with me long ago about an unusual golf three-some from the 1930s. Seems William S. Hart, comedian W.C. Fields (who lived across Market Street on 8th for a while) and one of the most famous entertainers of his day, Charlie Mack, used to go golfing together in Newhall. There wasn't any course in town then, but the trio would take a bottle of whiskey, a few clubs and a bag of golf balls. They would wander up and down the hills of Newhall, using distant tree stumps and fence posts for “holes.” I used to play that very same game in the early 1960s with my best pal, Phil Lanier. We used to call it Hobo Golf.

4) Here’s some trivia I’m betting the tour guides don’t know. Before the George Babcock Smith ranch here in the early 1920s and teens, the county fire department had a huge fire look-out tower right where the mansion sits today.

5) On Dec. 16, 1941, Hart returned from having successful eye surgery. He gets to his Newhall mansion only to realize the town was under strict black-outs due to the start of World War II. An interesting coincidence - Hart's operation was called an iridectomy. Hart had burned his eyes under the fiercely hot studio lamps while filming a movie. The iridectomy was a procedure invented by New York doctor C.R. Agnew in the 1870s. The first patient to be undergo an iridectomy? Nicholas Hart, Bill's dad. Story goes that Nicholas was chiseling some rock when a small particle of steel chipped off and went into his eye. After three unsuccessful operations and now being blind in one eye, Nicholas went to Dr. Agnew, who débuted the pioneering surgical technique. It restored Bill’s dad's eyesight.

6) In 1925, workers were also busy constructing a small rustic cabin (the little museum/ranch house today) at the base of the road to the castle for Walter King. Mr. King, by the way, was an accomplished saddlemaker, silversmith and cared for Hart’s horses. Some locals chuckled over building a rustic cabin “with the bark still on.” The little cabin only cost $600 to make.

7) Hart was one of the most famous people on earth and locals were stunned when he showed up here (Two-Gun didn’t live here then) in September of 1922 for his premier of *The Return of Draw Egan*. Hart personally bowed and greeted every patron to the old Hap-a-Land Hall (the Courthouse Building on Market today).

*John Boston is a historian, author, former editor of The Signal and has been named, several times, best columnist in America.*