**Happenin’s Round the House**

*Rachel Barnes, Education and Volunteer Coordinator*

Every summer, the heat would drive Mary Ellen Hart out of Newhall and to the cool comforts of Santa Monica. But if she were here today, I doubt she would head to the beach this year, when we have some exciting things planned for our volunteers this summer at the Hart Mansion.

One of the many perks of being a volunteer here with the Hart Museum are the programs and field trips we coordinate with them, just for them.

**Movie Night**

We’re going to kick off summer right with a Movie Night right here in Bill Hart’s backyard. We have invited our volunteers and their families to pack a picnic dinner, bring up their blankets and lawn chairs, and relax outside, in the Mansion’s back yard, under the setting sun. Once the food has been eaten, the drinks have been drunk, and the sun has set, the evening will round out with an outdoor screening of Bill Hart’s 1920 flick, *Sand*.

The film, in which Hart plays rail station agent, Dan Kurrie, was noteworthy for a few reasons: first and foremost, it marked Fritz’s return to the films. Hart had “retired” his beloved pinto horse after the release of 1917’s *The Narrow Trail*, purportedly because of his deteriorating relationship with his longtime producer, Thomas Ince. Hart had grown increasingly frustrated with Ince over the years because the latter was rather, shall we say, unscrupulous in his use of Hart’s hard-earned salaries. After years of underpaying the world-famous star, Ince also allegedly retained funds from Hart’s salary for studio operating expenses. Operating expenses for a studio in which Hart had no affiliation! The actor was especially furious when he discovered this, and it is at that moment, according to some sources, that Hart decided to pull Fritz from the movies so Ince would not earn another dime from the horse’s stardom.

There is a second tale that may have prompted Fritz’s retirement – while making *The Narrow Trail*, a scene called for Fritz to carry Hart across a gorge via a fallen log. It was a tenuous and dangerous scene and during one of the takes, Fritz lost his balance and he plunged into the gorge with Hart on his back. Neither were seriously hurt, but according to some sources, Hart was so distraught that Fritz could have been hurt, he decided to give Fritz a break from movie-makin’.

Whichever it was, Fritz had been off screen for almost 3 years, and the public sure missed their favorite equine movie star. The return of Fritz in 1920 in the film *Sand* was all the more poignant for contemporary audiences: in the movie, Dan Kurrie is reunited with his favorite horse (played by Fritz, of course), and movie going audiences were reunited with theirs.

Secondly, *Sand* features another dangerous stunt: Hart, on Fritz, racing up to the edge of a cliff and then taking a plunge into a wild river below. As many guests will know, there is a painting currently on display in the Hart Museum’s Guest Hallway that captures a similar stunt … possibly this very stunt. The painting is one in a series in the Guest Hallway, all of which portray stunts Fritz and Hart performed in the movies together, and were then used in the charmingly-titled book, *Told Under a White Oak Tree,* authored by none other than Fritz himself. It has not been determined with 100% certainty if that last painting in the hallway – one that alarms guests as well as fascinates them – is capturing this scene from *Sand* or a scene that may have appeared in Fritz’s last film (and Hart’s penultimate one) *Singer Jim McKee*, but either way, the flick *Sand* does show the two in a daring jump off a cliff!

Now, it must be clarified that regardless of which film the painting in the Guest Hallway actually hails from, Hart loved his pinto horse entirely too much to let Fritz jump off a cliff and into a river. A sawdust horse was used for the actual jump, ensuring that Fritz would be safe and well for many years to come.

**Becoming Los Angeles and Endeavour**

And after our fun evening out in Hart’s backyard, the volunteers will also be venturing into downtown Los Angeles later this summer to check out the brand new *Becoming Los Angeles* exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Opening in July, this new 14,000sq ft. exhibition chronicles the history of Los Angeles, from the pre-Spanish era through the 21st century, and will feature, among others, artifacts from the museum’s extensive early Hollywood collection, including Walt Disney’s animation stand – the very stand he used to film *Steamboat Willie!*

After touring 200 years of history, the volunteers will walk down the road a few and visit the space shuttle Endeavour at the California Science Center. Yes, I did spell that correctly. The Endeavour does have that British “u” in it because the shuttle is named after the *HMS Endeavour*, the ship James Cook captained on his voyage of discovery from 1768 – 1771. And while visiting the famous orbiter may not have much connection with Hart, it does have a connection to Southern California – Endeavour was built in Palmdale … about 40 miles north of Bill Hart’s own home here in Newhall.

**Trainings**

And when they aren’t out having fun in the sun, the volunteers continue to attend our monthly refresher sessions. We are in the midst of a series on … the Hollywood horse! While Fritz may be the first in the line of famous equine movie stars, he was certainly not the last. And his partnership with Bill Hart forged a path for many of the later horse stars, including Champion and Trigger.

Which brings up an interesting bit of trivia: did you know there was more than one Champion? And there was more than one Trigger? It makes a certain kind of sense because both Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were very devoted to their horse pals, and the rigors of making movies, making television shows, appearing in public, touring, AND still having time left over to munch on all the grass they could get, would be entirely too much for one horse to handle. Autry had Champions that he used in different aspects of his career: Champions in his movies, Champions in his television shows, and Champions that made public appearances.

In 1940, one of Autry’s public-appearance Champions made aviation history when he became the first horse to fly across the United States! Autry needed this Champion in New York for a rodeo at Madison Square Garden, so “Lindy Champion” (named for Charles Lindbergh because the horse was born on the very day the pilot made his historic flight across the Atlantic Ocean) boarded a specially converted TWA plane at Burbank Airport and settled in for the long flight.

And as with Champion, Roy Rogers had multiple Triggers. The original Trigger was extremely talented, but his successor, Little Trigger, had one up on his famous namesake: he was housebroken! Rogers often utilized Little Trigger at public appearances, since the horse could be counted upon to keep the area clean, while the original starred in the films and television shows.

**Thank YOU!**

Of course, all the fun the volunteers have, and the new material they learn, is made possible because of your support. Thank you for helping to ensure the Hart Volunteers have an amazing experience and helping us keep them engaged in their work for this historic site. Thank you, thank you, thank you 100 times over!