Mrs. Christian’s Birdbath

by John Boston

Someone once said we only die after the last person remembers us. It’s the holidays and we are focused on Christmas trees and menorahs, eggnog recipes and surviving the insanity of holiday shopping and travel. For about 20 years, I’ve been meaning to ask for a present from you people of Santa Clarita. I suppose I’ve dawdled because, for some reason, the timing didn’t seem right.

Or maybe it was just the wrong audience.

Hart Park has given me much over the years. I’ve wandered the hills and dusty roads since I was a single-digit kid. The castle grounds are a big part of what makes me, well — me. I remember hiking with my dad on a back trail just so we could watch the midday total eclipse of the sun. We weren’t alone. On the trail, unaware we were standing only a few feet away, was a bobcat, mesmerized by the spectacle. I’ve climbed atop tall horses here to lead off the 4th of July parade, lectured about the importance of Mr. Hart’s and our Western heritage. I’ve given countless campfire classes over the years, sharing the marvelous story of this valley. My daughter today climbs trees here, and, I hope one day, her children will love this place as much as I.

For all the improvements, entertainment, quiet spots for reflection and joyous gatherings, old Two-Gun Bill’s place is missing something terrible important.

We need a birdbath for Dick Lindsay.

Let me correct myself.

We need to replace Dick Lindsay’s birdbath that someone threw away more than a half-century ago.

Years ago, there used to rest a huge deodar tree very close to where the “Welcome to Newhall” wagon wheel sign sits today. The grounds weren’t even a park yet. It was 1940 and one of the world’s most famous and influential actors, William S. Hart, still lived in his mansion atop the Hill of the Winds. Every day, for most of the 1930s, a lonely old man, the jailhouse janitor on 6th Street, would sneak onto the property.

Mr. Lindsay was a most fearsome-looking town character. Signal newspaper editor Fred Trueblood painted a colorful description of the man: “...as forbidding an individual as you would ever see. He had a heavy, stocky frame and a face that looked as thought it had been hacked out of real granite. He always looked as though he was ready to bite nails in two. So grim and severe was his aspect that folks were scared of him and gave him a wide berth when they passed by.”

What adventures he survived only the angels know. He was born during the Civil War and from the 1920s, he lived by himself in the old Cozy Court on San Fernando Road. Hardly anyone in town realized that behind this rough and shocking exterior beat a heart big as all outdoors for animals.

For companionship, Lindsay kept a small monkey (who died from overeating) and a puppy. The puppy grew and was his constant companion. By the 1930s, Lindsay was an old man. When his dog died, it broke up Lindsay pretty bad. He turned his attention to the birds at Hart Park. Lindsay would spend hours, feeding, watering and being a good steward to God’s little flying critters.

Except for the ranch hands, his good deeds went mostly unnoticed. But there was this one woman.

A beautiful young nurse at the old Newhall hospital, Mrs. Ruth Christian, sort of adopted Lindsay in his latter years, watching over him, feeding him and finally, bringing him into her home and caring for him long through his final illness.

After he died in 1940, Ruth used her small savings to bury him. She also got Hart’s permission to plant the young deodar tree and installed a birdbath with the simple brass plaque:

**In Memory**

**DICK LINDSAY**

**1863-1940**

**“He Loved The Birds”**

Years and civic improvements later, that deodar tree was uprooted. The birdbath and simple brass plaque is buried yards deep in some landfill.

Dick Lindsay?

Mrs. Ruth Christian? (Could that name be more perfect?)

It’s the 21st century and the sad thing is that it’s not that these two souls are a gossamer thread away from being forgotten.

No.

It’s their story that is in danger of extinction.

It is the very heart of Santa Clarita and defines who we are. It defines us more than any street named after a politician or school honoring a murderer and road agent. It is simple, boundless and profound. It is first the fable of a lost and lonely soul who is of service to the lowliest of God’s creatures, a man who did not seek reward or limelight, who served in ordinariness.

My heavens, if only in some small portion, could I be like him.

Secondly, in Ruth Christian, here is also the story of being thy brother’s keeper. In a thousand different ways, we reenact this play daily in the Santa Clarita. We volunteer. We do silent good deeds. Dear me, we love our neighbor — even when they look like 20 miles of bad dirt road.

In these haywire times, we need the simple and immortal reminder of loving our neighbors — be they birds or town characters — more than ourselves.

My Christmas wish?

This missive goes out to all the dear friends of Hart Park.

I think — *no*.

I firmly and confidently — *know* — that there is more intrinsic value wrapped up in that tiny plaque and sparrow pool than in all the artifacts, buildings and antiques of Bill Hart’s Mansion. And Hart’s entire professional life was dedicated to spreading that very message to the world.

It’s time.

Not for a blue-ribbon panel to study the issue for an epoch. Not for a launch of government paperwork of Old Testament proportion. Not for nodding of heads followed by a bout of collective amnesia.

There are many movers and shakers in The Friends of Hart Park. Amongst them, is there one who could grant a Christmas wish?

It’s time to bring back Mrs. Christian’s birdbath.

*(John Boston has more than 100 major writing honors, including the Will Rogers Lifetime Humanitarian Award. Look for his weekly Mr. Santa Clarita Valley column every Sunday in SantaClarita.com and for his John Boston Report and Time Ranger SCV history column in the scvbeacon.com.)*