**Happenin’s 'Round the House**

*by Museum Education and Volunteer Coordinator, Rachel Barnes*

Weddings. Movie screenings. Speaker series. Sit-down dinners. Public programs. Corporate and government meetings. Memorials. Receptions. And more.

Not bad for a place that got its start as a maintenance shed for some rusty farm machines.

Yes, it is hard to believe, but the delightful William S. Hart Banquet Hall – known today simply as Hart Hall – started as a pole barn in 1986 to shelter farm equipment, like tractors and a hay baler, from the elements. “It was erected so that the farm equipment could be refurbished, and thus protected,” notes Hart Park Superintendent, Norm Phillips. “However, the building was too high and the wind blew the rain onto the equipment … and there wasn’t anyone who wanted to spend the time refurbishing it [anyway].”

The equipment in question did not belong to the famous cowboy movie star, William S. Hart, and a 1963 photograph of the property shows the area where Hart Hall is currently standing: it was grazing corrals for horses! Lots of wide open space then for the County to build a type of structure specifically developed in the 1930s to go up quickly, cheaply, and still manage to shelter large farm machinery.

And the farm machinery languished in its structure until an accident in October 1993 prompted the machinery’s move to the Historical Society (where it is still located to this day). “That must have happened for a reason because in January 1994, the Northridge earthquake hit, and FEMA needed a place to process everyone’s claims,” Phillips said. The empty pole barn area was a perfect location. The open-air structure was wrapped in plastic tarps, a few heaters were added, and a Disaster Assistance Center was ready to go. “When everyone saw the pole barn as one big room, a light went off, and the concept of enclosing the pole barn into a usable building was born,” Phillips continued.

Six years later, that concept was realized when the brand new William S. Hart Banquet Hall opened its doors. Capturing that western feel with a wood façade and central tower reminiscent of Newhall’s Old Southern Hotel (which sat at the corner of Market and Railroad until it burned down in 1888), Hart Hall is essentially one giant room with a set of bathrooms, a kitchen, and a couple of small side chambers. It also features the original 1986 poles around the exterior, creating rounded points in the building’s façade, and opens onto a lovely patio with gazebo and meadow leading up to the final resting place of the beloved Fritz, Hart’s pinto pony.

Today, Hart Hall is the driving economic force in the Park. Fees collected for renting the Hall go straight in to the Park’s deferred maintenance budget, and have made recent renovations projects, like the 2010 replacement of the Hart Mansion’s roof, possible. The addition of new features, like the acoustic ceiling, have broadened the Hall’s potential as a venue, and with the coming of brand new, state-of-the-art audio / visual equipment, that potential is only going to expand.

Most importantly, though, Hart Hall has introduced new patrons to the Park. According to Phillips, “people who attend functions in [Hart Hall] usually come back to visit because they didn’t know the Park existed.” And so, really, that is quite the accomplishment for an old barn that sheltered some derelict farm equipment.