**Betcha You Didn’t Know This About Bill…**

By John Boston

Newhall’s most famous citizen is William S. Hart. He was the silent film star who created the modern model for the movie cowboy. I’ve got tons of little tidbits about the SCV’s legendary actor, but let’s start with a dozen 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) A certain plucky local satirist and Camille Stuart, the granddaughter of legendary Hall of Fame cowboy Liandro (Andy) Jauregui came up with quite the prank in the mid 1970s. Posing as a film production studio, complete with a Beverly Hills phone and address, they notified Newhall’s 4th of July Parade committee that they were making a mini-series on the life of William S. Hart. Could the two stars (Signal humorist and Cammy) possibly ride in the parade? Officials were giddy. Of course! Quickly, the prank got out of hand. Locals called the BH number and asked if the “actors” would mind being division marshals, then, a day later, co-GRAND MARSHALS. The fake movie company called to apologize and report funding for the project had dried up.

3) 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 children when he was 59 and again when he was 63. Both men lived to age 81.

4) 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.

5) 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.

6) 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.

7) In 1925, workers were also busy constructing a small rustic cabin (the little museum/bunkhouse 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.

8) 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).

9) In the 1930s, a strange man showed up late one night, knocking at the Hart mansion. Hart answered the front door, armed with two loaded pistols and told the creep to vamoose. The man drove around the SCV for several hours and ended up in Honby, where he murdered two people.

10) Hart made $125 a week for “The Disciple” in 1915. Two years later, he made $150,000 for “The Narrow Trail.”

11) There are stories, some that are head-scratchers, that Hart owned the future Spahn Movie Ranch in Chatsworth. Hart reportedly bought the 160-acre spread in 1920 to store stunt and movie horses. Some sources said he sold the place in 1948, which would have been tricky because he died in 1946. The ranch is most famous for being the home of Hollywood cult murderer, Charles Manson and his “family.”

12) Before he died in 1946, Hart left all his belongings to the County of Los Angeles, ordering that his huge ranch and castle be a gift to the people. As — AS — Hart is about to be rolled into the crematorium fires, his son, Bill Jr., runs into Forest Lawn, waving a court order over his head to stop the funeral pyre and demanding his father’s brain for autopsy. Hart Jr. would begin a decade-long series of colorful and controversial trials to get his dad’s estate. His last Hail Mary was in 1956 when his lawyers pressed that the will was null and void because the Treaty of Hidalgo granting California to the U.S. was illegal. Hart Jr.? He ended up being a local real estate appraiser, driving past his father’s holdings worth at their highest estimate at $250 million.

*(John Boston has penned more than 11,000 essays, columns, blogs and features, making the most prolific humorist in world history. He has earned 119 major writing awards, including The Will Rogers Lifetime Achievement Award. He’s been named Best Humorous and Best Serious newspaper columnist in North America, the United States, California and Los Angeles, several times.)*