

*Camarillo Neighbors
Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan*

Thank you Wyatt McCrea, Camarillo family and friends

Research Team

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by
Beth Miller

There was a time if Camarillo residents wanted to catch up on local news, they simply gathered at the post office and with a neighborly greeting they learned family news, farming concerns and general local happenings. Adolfo Camarillo's daughter, Carmen, often picked up the mail and heard the latest news. Perhaps the townspeople would do some shopping and have lunch at Judy's Sandwich Shop, the 'Home of Lima Bean Soup,' for a bowl of lima bean and ham hock soup. It was a comfortable and friendly small town routine.

Yet there was also a Hollywood sparkle to that day-to-day routine that delighted the residents with pride and esteem.

Famous actors would come into town, not as Hollywood stars, but as caring members of the community. Joel McCrea, his wife Frances Dee, and Walter Brennan greeted their neighbors while they, too, did their errands. Joel and Frances, shopped at one of the two small markets in Camarillo on Ventura Boulevard. Camarillo cousin, Adele Flynn Stuebing Walsh, remembered seeing the celebrated couple as she and her mother did their shopping. "They were very friendly and unaffected" by their fame. "Joel always wore a cowboy hat," said Adele. "As they passed the chapel, he always doffed his hat. Even when he was driving."

And though they have since passed, both Joel and Walter continue greeting their Camarillo neighbors. In 1999, the City of Camarillo decided to capture that small town feeling with some Hollywood stardom by commissioning bronze statues of Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan to be displayed in the center of Old Town Camarillo. The figures look as if they are saying "Howdy!" "Come sit a spell!"

Walter and Joel had a very close friendship having made several films together. Later they both owned land that reached around the rolling hills of Santa Rosa Road at the eastern end of the Norwegian Grade. Walter's land was considerably smaller

than Joel's ranch of nearly 2,400 acres. The cities of Moorpark and Thousand Oaks had not yet stretched to their ranches. Walter grew some crops including citrus.

Walter Brennan achieved the remarkable acting accomplishment of three Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor. He was a highly regarded character actor who later moved into television roles including the very popular Amos McCoy in "The Real McCoys." Like Joel, he starred in classic western roles. He was honored in the Hall of Great Western Performers at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma in 1970.

One year earlier Joel had been honored at the museum and inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers. Throughout his long acting career, Joel had preferred making westerns. He was truly a rancher.

Walter had a ranch in the San Fernando Valley and eventually settled on a small ranch on a hilltop above Joel McCrea's land. His daughter and Joel's son were close friends. Walter was still very busy making movies and television programs, including "The Real McCoys." Because his work day began early and ended late, the studio sent a car. "He was nothing like the TV show character, said lifelong resident of the Tierra Rejada Valley, Jeanne Lapeyre Canty. "He was a dignified man." Jeanne also recalled that "Mrs. Brennan was at home and volunteered a lot. I remember she was on the water board."

In the very early days as the Camrosa Water District was being organized, Walter offered the members of the committee the use of his plane to fly to Sacramento to meet with state officials. Don Latham said that his father-in-law, Thomas Ventura Hernandez, a Camarillo cousin, had extensive knowledge of the division of property on the Camarillo Ranch. His expertise explained the water rights and helped the committee to organize the water district. The neighborly use of Walter's plane allowed the farmers to make fast trips to the state capital.

It wasn't just farming that concerned Walter. He and his wife, Ruth, took an interest in Camarillo history. Long time volunteer, Liz Daily, remembered that the Brennans made a donation to the Pleasant Valley Historical Society "and I believe we held a reception for them."

Walter enjoyed Christmas, and later in his career, recorded Christmas albums in which he narrated stories in his charming and folksy way. After retiring from “The Real McCoys,” Walter became the favorite Camarillo grand marshal for the Christmas parade. He led the parade since its beginning in 1962 until just prior to his death in 1974. One year, he made the parade a star-studded event with other Hollywood favorites including Jody McCrea, Chuck Connors, Jimmy Durante, Fred Astaire and Chill Wills and more. Many of these actors starred with Walter at various times in his long career.

In 1970, the Christmas parade was entitled “Camarillo Salutes Walter Brennan.” When he passed, the parade honored his memory with The Walter Brennan Memorial Trophy that was awarded to the marching band displaying the most spirit during the parade. After his passing in 1974, Mrs. Brennan left their ranch and moved to Camarillo.



Walter Brennan in Camarillo Christmas parade on Arneill Road (date unknown)

Joel had been part of the local community since 1933 when he built his ranch home for his wife Frances Dee, also a popular film star, and their boys. It's been said that Joel raised beef, barley and boys. Crops on the McCrea Ranch included oats, barley and grain. As was common, dry farming was practiced. There were approximately 125-200 head of cattle and 6 to 12 horses. Joel had several favorite horses, chief among them was Dollar who performed in four or five motion pictures with Joel. Another favorite horse was Sandy. From time to time, Meliton Ortiz, from the Camarillo Ranch, helped out with the horses at the McCrea Ranch.

Townpeople knew that Joel's work clothing was not a costume. Just one look at his hands revealed the level of daily strenuous work. Joel was one of their hardworking neighbors. On his income taxes, Joel had declared his occupation as

a rancher, but the IRS agent questioned the man whom he knew to be a famous actor. Joel simply proved his point by showing his hands. The McCreas sometimes came into Camarillo to relax and watch a movie at the little local theatre.

Hidden in the far corner of the McCrea Ranch was the family home. Some may have thought it was a secluded Hollywood party house. It was actually the cows that directed Joel to the best location to build his home. On the ranch, temperatures can soar to over 100 degrees. Joel had noticed a few cows in a particular area resting comfortably. Being a good rancher, Joel always paid attention to his livestock. Had Joel no longer wanted to continue his acting career, master architect John Byers had designed a cozy California ranch-style home that would be affordable. Over the years, the house has been lovingly preserved and only very slightly altered.

Prominent Hollywood actors and directors did come to the McCrea Ranch, but maybe just one or two at a time to visit. There were no grand parties but simple get togethers with friends and neighbors. Frances had made it even more inviting when she planted numerous trees and flowers. She had been a city girl who adjusted well to ranch life.

The couple became active at the Santa Rosa School where their sons, Jody and David, attended. Younger son, Peter, did not attend school at the same time as his older brothers. Santa Rosa School was an independent school consisting of a two-room schoolhouse. The two classrooms were divided by grades. First through third grades were in one room. Fourth through eighth grades were in the other. Santa Rosa School would later join the Pleasant Valley School District.

The McCreas paid a teacher's salary for one year when the school was not able to do so. "I loved it," said Mary Joe McPherson recalling her school days. "Mrs. Kerr, our teacher, had very few students." Joel served on the school board and coached the softball team. When needed, he also drove the kids to games. Joel and Frances invited the students to swim at the McCrea Ranch pool.

Frances directed school plays. "She used film language. She'd say 'this is a closed set,'" said Jeanne Lapeyre Canty joyfully. "There were so few children. We could all participate."

Both classmates recalled the Halloween party that Frances helped organized as well as other events. "The Halloween parties were in the barn" said Mary Joe and everyone took turns hosting. "There was bobbing for apples," added Jeanne. At school, Frances along with Mary Joe's and Jeanne's mothers set up the Maypole Dance. "The McCreas participated a lot," noted Jeanne. Mexican history and culture were also important at Santa Rosa School. "We learned about Mexican culture from the (Latino) parents. We learned the Mexican Hat dance and ate Mexican food."

Jody and David, liked riding their horses to school. With their good friends and classmates, Mary Joe and Jeanne, the children would spend the day on horseback exploring the hilly countryside. They'd pack a picnic and ride or hike to the area that eventually would become the home of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Joel encouraged the children to ride. "We'd get on a horse and ride all day," said Jeanne.

"He wasn't a movie star and neither was his wife. Their kids were normal kids." But when a new movie starring Joel or Frances was released, "all the kids and their families went to see it," said Jeanne. "I'll always remember his wonderful speaking voice."

The neighbors often gathered at the different ranches for little get togethers. "Frances sat with the children at our table," recalled Jeanne. As the Santa Rosa students matured, Frances stayed close to them. "She helped me with my going to high school hair cut," said Jeanne. "Frances took me to a Beverly Hills salon."

It was not just the Santa Rosa School children that the McCreas aided. The couple often supported community activities that helped a wider circle of children. In Camarillo, they helped the Boys and Girls Club. The organization had outgrown the Barry Street home that El Tecolote restaurateur, Mike Loza, had donated. Loza's support continued through his fundraising efforts of Viva La Comida.

Joel was a major donor for a new Boys and Girls Club located on the corner of Temple and Ponderosa. Later when a major remodel was underway at the new location, Joel was honored by having the gymnasium named after him. A stage was named in honor of Frances. A portion of Joel's original land was donated to the

YMCA in Thousand Oaks. Another 75 acres became the Joel McCrea Wildlife Preserve along the Norwegian Grade.



Board of Boys and Girls of Camarillo in the Joel McCrea gymnasium.

In his 2007 book Camarillo and other Remembrances, The Honorable Stanley J. Daily, Mayor Emeritus, City of Camarillo wrote the following:

"I rode horses with Joel McCrea and his son Jody McCrea. Joel and his wife (Frances Dee) were great supporters of the Camarillo area. It was with his help and continued support that our Boys and Girls Club of Camarillo has prospered over the years. As Mayor and Councilman of the City of Camarillo, I was fortunate to have been able to work with Mr. McCrea until his passing several years later. It was a sad day for the community when we lost him, for in Joel we had all known a true friend."

Joel was also friendly with his neighbor on the other end of Santa Rosa Road. From time-to-time, he and one of his sons would visit with Adolfo Camarillo where

he and Joel would talk about crops and cattle. Once when Joel marveled at the size of the Camarillo Ranch crew, Adolfo simply explained, "They need me more than I need them." Meliton Ortiz frequently shared his vast knowledge of horses with Joel and McCrea Ranch hands. Adolfo's daughter, Carmen, also sought Joel's help with fundraising.

The Camarillo Ranch hosted a "fiesta setting for a crippled children's party" in May 1964. Joel was pictured giving buggy rides to the guests attending the benefit for the Ventura County Society for Crippled Children.

Joel McCrea (center photo)

Fiesta held on Sunday, May 24, 1964.

Oxnard Press-Courier dated Tuesday, May 26, 1964 [1 of 3]

TUESDAY, MAY 26, 1964 THE PRESS-COURIER—PHONE 463-1101 PAGE THIRTEEN

Camarillo Ranch presents fiesta setting for crippled children's party

EAGLE DANCERS ENTERTAIN FIESTA CROWDS
The Camarillo home, which has seen much history, was the setting for a bit of old California Sunday when the Camarillo Ranch opened its grounds for the benefit of the Ventura County Society for Crippled Children.

JOEL MCCREA GIVES A FELLA A RIDE
Mr. McCrea, Belle Holloway, center, of Thousand Oaks, and Mrs. Ted Bousher of Oxnard, join a fascinated youngster, little three year old Jerry Krebs of Oxnard, for a tour around the ranch.

BOSSES JOIN IN THE FUN
Mrs. Carmen Camarillo Jones, left, daughter of the late Adolfo Camarillo, and Mrs. William Clark of Oxnard, take time out from their hosting duties Sunday afternoon to enjoy a bit of fiesta fun. Mrs. Jones is enjoying a taco of course.

At the Ventura County Fair, Joel always supported the youth sale of cattle and tried to buy at the auction. If he couldn't make it to the auction, he'd arrange to have someone bid for him.

Frances and Joel's grandson, Wyatt, along with the McCrea family, carry on the McCreas' philanthropic endeavors for the Boys and Girls Club of Camarillo, the Conejo Valley YMCA, the National Museum in Oklahoma City to name just a few.

The connection between the Camarillo Ranch and McCrea Ranch continues today. The Camarillo Ranch docents and McCrea Ranch docents have visited each other's historical sites and continue to exchange information and research findings. Wyatt has visited the Camarillo Ranch and shared his family stories to docents and guests at special events.



McCrea Ranch docents visited the Camarillo Ranch.



The Camarillo Ranch docents visited the McCrea Ranch



Center: Joel's grandson, Wyatt McCrea

The Camarillo statues of Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan were announced in the Congressional Record on October 18, 2000 by Congressman Elton Gallegly. "I rise to pay tribute to the two stars from my home in Ventura County, California, who made their mark on the world as screen legends and in Ventura County as good neighbors," announced Congressman Gallegly.

Today, both Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan continue to be good neighbors in Camarillo. Just walk down Ventura Boulevard and there is Walter Brennan with a tip of his hat greeting of "Howdy!" And across the street sits Joel McCrea. Just as he invited visitors to sit on his bunkhouse porch, the invitation to "Come sit a spell" also continues in Old Town Camarillo.

Joel McCrea was born in 1905 and died in 1990 at age 84.

Frances Dee was born in 1909. She passed in 2004 at age 94.

Walter Brennan, who was born in 1894, died in 1974. He was 80 years old.



"Howdy!" The Walter Brennan statue on Ventura Boulevard



Walter Brennan as Amos McCoy from "The Real McCoys"



“Come and sit a spell.” The Joel McCrea statue on Ventura Boulevard



Joel and Frances Dee McCrea resting on their front porch
Photo from: Vintage Stardom

Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan

by

Donna Morgan

From 1999 through 2000, Vice Mayor Mike Morgan and Councilmember Charlotte Craven worked on the Millennium Committee and presented their ideas to Mayor Leibmann and the other city officials. The City of Camarillo had been improving and beautifying Old Town on Ventura Boulevard. This included landscape improvements with the addition of many trees and several statues of significance to Camarillo's past.

The statues of actors Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan were unveiled on the city's birthday, October 22, 2000. Mike recalls that Joel McCrea supported the Camarillo Boys and Girls Club and was often seen there. Mike also remembers watching Walter Brennan ride in the Christmas parade on Ventura Boulevard. As part of the millennium celebration, a time capsule was dedicated. Some photos were included in the time capsule.

In order to commemorate Don Adolfo Camarillo's birthday on October 28, a statue of Adolfo riding his favorite horse, Sultan, was unveiled at Dizdar Park. These memorable events included friends, family, and music.



Walter Brennan at Carmen Drive and Ventura Blvd. Camarillo Ranch collection



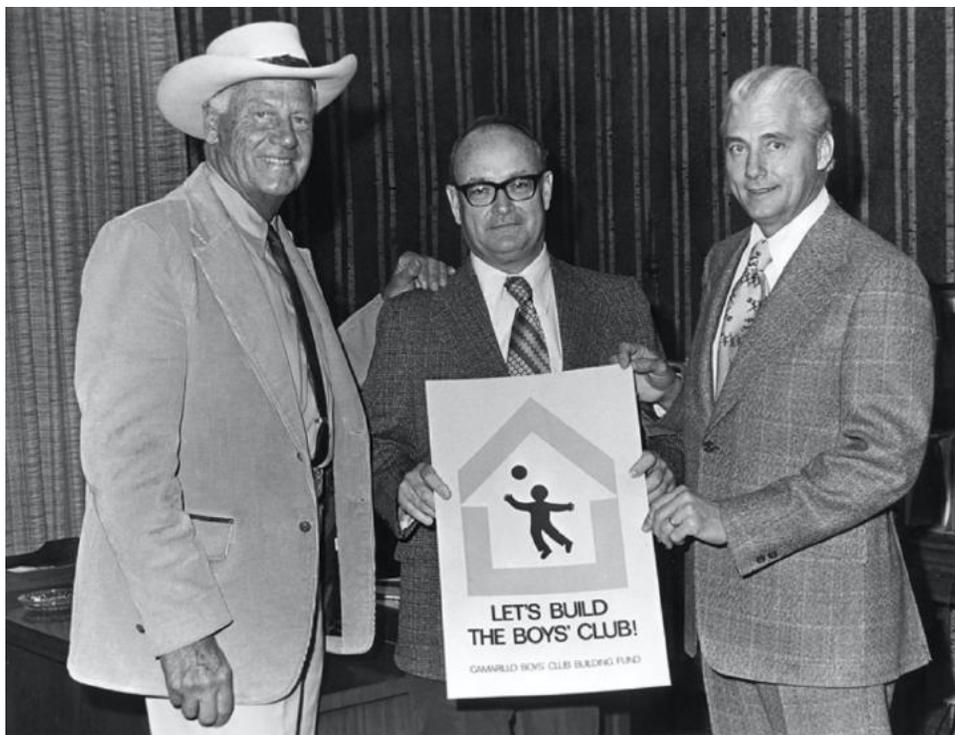
Neighbors

Research always leads to new connections and new friends. By “visiting” with our neighbors, Joel McCrea and Walter Brennan, we reconnected with old friends and made new ones. Over the coming months, we will share the insights and remembrances of our new friends and continue calling upon our long-time friends. Ventura County has a treasury of untold stories!

Thanks to Alice Sweetland and to her brother rancher Rob Frost who answered the question “do you remember...” with a story and a list of friends who remember, too!

Do you have a story you’d like to share?

Please email Karin Farrin kg.farrin@gte.net with your contact information.



Joel McCrea, Doug McAvoy and George Taylor kick off the building campaign in 1973.

Photos from the McCrea Ranch



Joel presenting Walter with the Hall of Great Western Performers award.