

1989 Walk in the Canyon by Gene Felder

Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield for thirty years had been concerned about the environment in Laguna Canyon. Being artists, they used their photographic talents. A number of projects commenced with perhaps, the most significant being "The Tell". It was the focus of "Save the Canyon" and the terminus of the "Walk in the Canyon" in 1989.

During the spring of 1989, Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield gathered support including from the City of Laguna Beach to have a collaborative art project constructed at Sycamore Flats (now the Jim Dilley Preserve) along Laguna Canyon Road. All they needed was funding, and materials including about 100,000 photographs which many people throughout Orange County and beyond donated. The artists used the colors to draw the pictures with the knowledge that over the summer the colors would fade.

On November 11, 1989, the "Walk in the Canyon" started at Irvine Bowl Park and ended at "The Tell" at Sycamore Flats. The Los Angeles Times reported that approximately 7,500 people attended this event where they demonstrated their concerns about development in Laguna Canyon. The cry was "Save the Canyon". A direct result was stopping the Irvine Company's 3,500 housing unit Laguna Laurel development in Laguna Canyon, the City of Laguna Beach negotiating to purchase the property, and Laguna Beach citizens passing Measure H a \$20 million bond measure with a nearly 80% yes vote.

The Laguna Canyon Conservancy was the key driver sponsoring the "Walk in the Canyon". However, it was co-sponsored by the Laguna Greenbelt, Village Laguna, the Laguna Beach Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Laguna Beach. The support of the City of Laguna Beach was indispensable. The city council at the time was comprised of Mayor Bob Gentry, Mayor Pro Tem Lida Lenney, Martha Collison, Neil Fitzpatrick, and Dan Kenney. The cooperation of City Manager Ken Frank and then Police Chief Neil Purcell was exemplary.

The Laguna Canyon Conservancy was founded in 1988 dedicated to "Save the Canyon". It was founded by Lida Lenney, and had many founding members including Maren Blacketer, Mark Christy, Johanna Felder, Simon

Frazer, Ricard Harris, Sharon Heath, now Councilwoman Toni Iseman, Beth Leeds, Marielle Leeds, Kay and Andrew Ogden, Jim and Linda Rushing, and Carolyn Wood among others. There were three main threats to Laguna Canyon: 1) massive grading and realignment of Big Bend, 2) the San Joaquin Hills Transportation Toll Road, and 3) the Irvine Company's Laguna Laurel housing project. Environmentalists had recently won the Big Bend battle with a favorable ruling from the California Coastal Commission. Thus, in 1989, the imminent threat to the canyon was the Irvine Company's housing project which included their idea of open space in the canyon – a golf course! (Although to be fair, there was acreage which was to be dedicated for passive, natural open space in addition to the golf course).

Artists Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield were asking for assistance from the public to make a major work of art at Sycamore Hills in the canyon. "The Tell" a 636 foot long mural that used over 100,000 individual donated photographs, and was constructed throughout 1989 starting May 1st to draw attention to the plight of the canyon.

Lida Lenney suggested that the LCC picket Irvine Company President Donald Bren's home at the entrance the Linda Isle in Newport Beach, and picket on Laguna Canyon Road near the El Toro Road intersection. Harry Huggins was one of the people to notice the picketing and stopped his car to find out what was going on. Despite living in Laguna Beach for some years, Harry was just learning the unthinkable prospects, and dedicated himself to doing something about it.

Luckily, the LCC's outreach program reached Harry Huggins. He had unbelievable support from his employer Charles Michael Murray. Harry put together an organizing effort with his committee working day and night for two months putting the spectacular event together. Committee chairs included Richard Henrikson, Kurt Cornell, Joel Easton, Linda Eckman, Ken Kube, Camille Bertolet, Jim and Linda Rushing among others. The LCC had one sole employee Executive Director Mike Phillips, a former newspaper reporter, who made many contributions.

Harry & his committee did stellar work garnering great publicity for "The Walk" getting Jose Feliciano and Don Henley of the Eagles to do public service announcements that were played on a number of radio stations and shown on cable television.

November 11th was chosen as it is Armistice Day which fell on a Saturday in 1989, and we were in need of a peace settlement to save the beauty and tranquility of the natural open space in Laguna Canyon. There was significant outreach to other environmental groups who lent their name as “The Walk” was dedicated to save all the canyons in Orange County.

It turned out to be a beautiful day. We thought things were going well, but how successful would it be? It was quite exciting to be there as wave after wave of concerned citizens came to meet at the Festival of Arts grounds at Irvine Bowl Park. Not everything went perfectly. The plan was for a large group of children to lead “The Walk”. Actually, at neither the designated time nor at any signal, “The Walk” started. The printed program had songs printed in it. Despite numerous efforts, the Walkers were not in a singing mood. The actual mood was celebratory, and at the same time somber.

I like to say that “The Walk” brought the Irvine Company to its negotiating knees. It certainly is true that such an outpouring of public support brought them to the negotiating table. Paul Freeman (later a two-term Laguna Beach City Councilman and Mayor) was hired as a facilitator and skillfully led the City and the Irvine Company to an agreement. Taxpayers were able to look at their property tax bills and see the entry originally raised their property tax approximately 6%. This was authorized by the Laguna Beach city voters and raised \$20 million to make part of the initial payment via Measure H passed in November 1990. Environmentalists had previously secured \$10 million by getting qualifying signatures for State bond measure Proposition 70 receiving a \$10 million line item for expanding the Laguna Greenbelt. The County of Orange kicked in \$10 million. Thereafter the search was on other funding, made a bit easier as we had stepped up making our own sacrifice. The newly formed Laguna Canyon Foundation organized this effort.

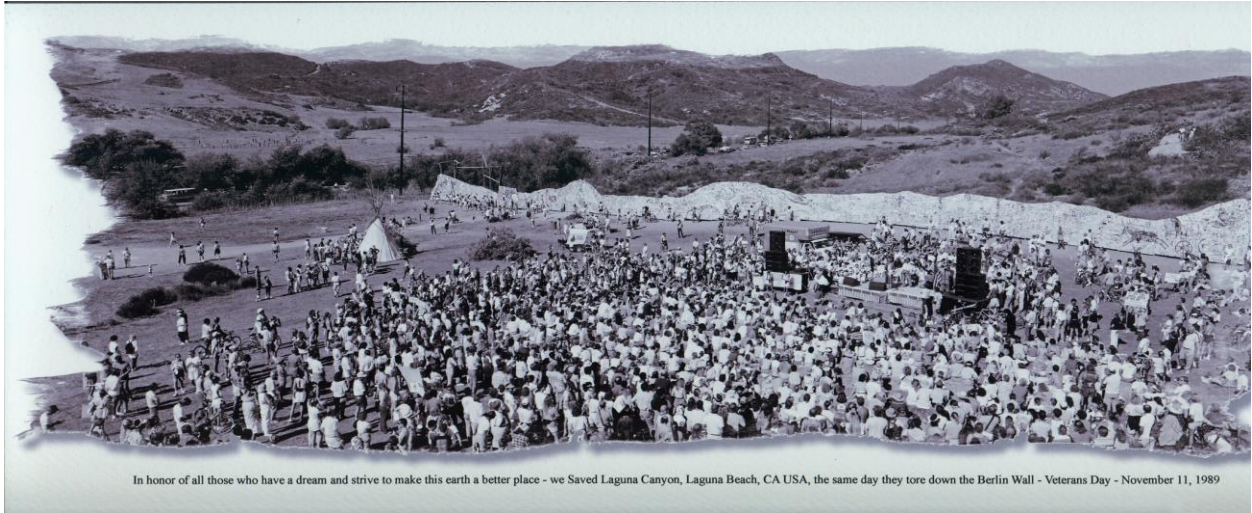
After such a successful event, it's been suggested many times, let's do it again. This is easier said than done. We had a very successful Toll Road Awareness Day on February 29, 1992. 1,500 people was a great turnout, but it paled compared to “The Walk's” success. For many years there was a sign near Sycamore Hills stating that the City of Laguna Beach opposed the toll road that would be 40 feet high and 800 feet wide along Laguna Canyon Road. Go there now, and we can see that we lost that battle.

The City was only able to make payments for four of the open space purchase agreement's five parcel options. The remaining parcel five was the smallest, about 300 acres, however, the Irvine Company retained development rights to construct about 1,500 housing units there. That why it was so crucial for Donald Bren and the Irvine Company to announce in 1998 that it was gifting this and many thousands of acres of Orange County open space set aside to be kept natural forever.

The environmental battle to save the canyon continues. The Laguna Canyon Conservancy of course continues to work and build upon the irreplaceable work of Jim Dilley and the Laguna Greenbelt organization which was founded in 1968. Both are members of the Laguna Canyon Foundation having representatives serving on the Foundation's Board of Directors.

After completing the Laguna Laurel purchase, other efforts to save the canyon included monitoring toll road mitigation measures, and monitoring the realignment of Laguna Canyon Road which had the environmental benefit of taking the road out of the lakes. The lakes had for years suffered from run-off from Laguna Canyon Road and erosion caused by cattle grazing on the land. The lakes are the only natural lakes in Orange County and provide a nesting habitat for water birds such as mallards and night herons. Largemouth bass swim in the largest lake, and the lakes are an important water source for deer and smaller mammals. An ongoing goal is removing invasive plants from and pursuing the restoration of a natural Laguna Creek.

The Laguna Canyon Conservancy (LCC) is a volunteer environmental group dedicated to save Laguna Canyon and preserve it as natural. See website at www.LagunaCanyonConservancy.org. We also sponsor educational meetings to highlight our community and the wilderness parks surrounding Laguna Beach. The Laguna Canyon Conservancy is a non-profit organization; however, donations are generally not tax deductible. Since we do take positions on issues of public policy, the LCC is not a 501 (c) 3 organization, but rather a 501 (c) 4. California Corporation Number (CCN) 1428036 and Federal Employer Identification number (EIN) 33-0294068. Contributions can be sent to Laguna Canyon Conservancy, P.O. Box 1383, Laguna Beach 92652.



In honor of all those who have a dream and strive to make this earth a better place - we Saved Laguna Canyon, Laguna Beach, CA USA, the same day they tore down the Berlin Wall - Veterans Day - November 11, 1989

Charles Michael Murray Photo "The Tell" & Walk in Canyon November 11 1989