

Development of Bixby Knolls

"The Wilshire District of Long Beach?"

From Lima Beans to Beverly Hills? They Certainly Hoped So!

By Mary Hancock Hinds

What we today know as Bixby Knolls, with its impressive homes and manicured lawns, was originally part of Jotham Bixby's Los Cerritos. By the time of Jotham's death in 1917 much of the land had been leased to farmers and dairies. As the financially flush 1920s roared along, Jotham's heirs began developing the 3,500 acres around the Rancho.

In 1929 their attention turned to the 120-acres the family called Bixby Knolls. Formerly a humble lima bean farm, known unglamorously and unimaginatively as the Bean Ranch, the Bixby family sought to transform the area to "the most attractive residential section of Long Beach."

Timing is everything and certainly that was true for Bixby Knolls. On October 17, 1929, the front page of the *Long Beach Press Telegram* announced the Bixby family's plan for a residential area that would "be to Long Beach what the Wilshire section is to Los Angeles." One week later, on October 24, 1929, the New York Stock Exchange collapsed; and ushered in the Great Depression. But,

the Bixby wealth was in land, so plans continued to convert this tract into what the *Press-Telegram* described as "a high class residential district."

Landscapers and engineers were engaged to beautify the area. The Deeble-Chapman Corporation, a real estate development firm, was hired to sell lots, starting at \$2,750; the average income at the time was \$500 a year.

Opening day was March 9, 1930. Hopes were literally sky high as the "Ace of Sky Jumpers," Harold Whitby, jumped from a plane's wing at 3,000 feet underscoring the promise of their first ad: "Your New Home Can be so Distinctive in Design that Passers-by will Stop to Admire."

Roy E. Deeble, principal in Deeble-Chapman, promised to "safeguard the entire tract from unsightly structures. Rigid architectural control is being exercised over all buildings." An architectural jury reviewed each home's plan to ensure the high-end aims of the developers.

The depression was taking its toll: by September 1930, sales needed prodding. Deeble-Chapman built the first exhibition home at 4252 Lime Avenue; a seven-room, one-story Spanish style home designed by Raymond Sites.

Throughout 1931 only a few homes were built, but they reflected a range of architecture, from Monterey colonial to English Tudor. Two more exhibition homes went up but the Depression,



Farmers on the bean ranch, 1918

the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and its reconstruction aftermath caused Deeble-Chapman to cease sales.

In August 1935, the New Deal's FHA loan program reopened sales. Lot prices were halved to \$1,375 and began to sell. Over the next two years, more than 30 homes would be built each with a distinctive and impressive architectural style. The buyers were the prestigious community leaders envisioned in 1929. Many of the homes were designed by Kenneth S. Wing including his own residence at 4320 Olive Avenue.

Carson Street was the only area zoned for multiple-unit housing with design approval still required from the architectural jury. As World War II was beginning in 1941, stylish apartment buildings began appearing along Carson.

In the early 1950s, businesses that matched the high-end homes came to Atlantic Avenue: the multi-million dollar Bixby Knolls Shopping Center, Ray and Eddie's Market, Victor's China Shop, Tate-Wier Camera Center, Welch's restaurant, the Crest and Towne Theatres, and Harris Furs, the future location of the HSLB.

The Bean Ranch's transformation was complete, maybe not the Wilshire District but a modest approximation.



Opening night at the Crest Theater, 4275 Atlantic Ave, January 23, 1947