



Helping Surveyors Remember the Past

For many years, my office was located just north of Mission Valley and Curt Brown's office in "Old Town" San Diego. As we were working on various projects together, he used to drop by, unannounced and when he did, I always made time for him.

At the time we delivered the lecture noted below, we had completed a small book entitled "The History of San Diego Land Surveying Experiences." We had two objectives in writing the book. The first was to highlight problematic areas of San Diego. I remember many instances where local surveyors would call me to thank us for keeping them out of trouble; if not for the stories we had written about, these other surveyors

would have not been aware of problem areas of town. How gratifying is that?

Another goal, and one that Curt felt strongly about, was commenting on other surveyors he worked with and knew. As with all surveyors, some are good and some are not. This section of the book is noted clearly as being solely authored by Curt, thank God, as he didn't pull any punches. Needless to say, after the book came out, I was the one who took the heat and I did it with a bit of sadistic glee. He was right and he said what had to be said. In the end, the surveying community benefited by knowing which surveyors got caught fabricating records and moving monuments around. Sadly, such conduct *is still* encountered today.

—Michael J Pallamary, PS

San Diego, California, 1988

Mike Pallamary and I had been ruminating over past San Diego County's surveying history, and as a result we prepared a little booklet entitled *San Diego County Surveying History and Experiences*. He and many others have often asked how come that I, a non-lawyer, wrote books on the legal elements of Land Surveying? So I will give a brief explanation: I knew nothing about it and became curious. I read Clark's book on the legal elements of surveying in Michigan, mostly a treatise on the sectionalized land system. Also Hodgeman and Skelton, both good but not filling the needs for California.

Going back a bit in my background, my father, fresh from Auburn, Maine in 1908, got a job as a chainman on a San Diego County Surveyor's crew. In those days the County Surveyor was an elective post and he often did more private work than County work. If you are wondering why there were few county surveying field book records prior to about 1930, just remember the records belonged to the elected County

Surveyor, a non-county employee. In 1936 San Diego County hired Earnest Childs, the last elected County Surveyor, as a full time employee, and from that time on we see the start of a better

ground until I had need for it sometime later when surveying.

After World War II I got a job as a Chief of Party for a surveyor who was just starting up. Unfortunately, I knew

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system of accumulation of San Diego County Surveyor records.

Going back a bit, in 1925, at the time I was a junior in High School, I took a commercial law class from an attorney. He assigned me the task of reporting to the class the common law of a prize fighting situation. The only instruction he gave was to go down to the County Law Library and ask the librarian how to find the information. So I did. My partial knowledge of how to do legal research then slumbered in my back-

almost nothing about the legal elements of boundary surveys and my boss knew slightly more.

I was just as confused as the little boy was who lost his chewing gum on the henhouse floor. Each morning I was handed a bundle of maps with a minimum of instructions and was told to monument the land described in a deed. But I had one advantage, when I got in trouble I would spend the evening at the Law Library soothing my ignorance in legal books. Eventually I got enough

information together to publish my first book on Boundary Control for Surveyors of California. The book was such a success that I got the notion to put out one for the entire United States. It was an immediate good seller.

The subject of the legal elements of boundary location was not taught in colleges prior to about 1960; there was no suitable text available. As a result of my text, we now see many colleges offering classes in Boundary Control. In the eastern United States, where the sectionalized land system is unknown, the text was not exactly applicable, so I asked Walter Robillard and Donald Wilson to add in their thinking. Like in a nudist camp, we aired our differences. The principle difference between eastern law and western law lies in the order of importance of distance and bearing. In California, by statute law, distance when in conflict with direction is always considered as more important than direction, whereas in New England and other east coast states the reverse is generally true.

Personally I was lucky to start private surveying practice at the close of the world war; many of the old time surveyors were still alive, and I was able to find out how little they knew about the legal elements of land surveying. If any of you were around in the twenties, there was the great depression starting in 1929 and ending after the Second World War about 1947. During these 18 years almost no new Licensed Surveyors were added to the ranks; there was no need for them because of the scarcity of work. Also those that came into the profession prior to the depression were getting quite old. Bill Rumsey, John Covert, Will King, [David] Loebenstein and others were in their sunset years. At least I got to talk to them about their surveying problems and experiences. To me the saddest chapter in the history of surveying was when 5,000 plus were grandfathered in the Civil Engineer's act and given the right to practice their ignorance of surveying on the general public. I have a number of horror stories written. While I have never killed anyone, I have read several obituaries with pleasure.

One thing I forgot to mention, when I entered college I flunked the dumbbell English test twice and after taking a special course twice I passed it. When I transferred to the University of California, I had to take the test again

and flunked it. After two more classes in remedial English I finally passed the test in time to graduate. My problem was in spelling. I never could and still have the same problem. You know something is wrong with your vision when you spell s-e-x as s-i-x. Now I have 15 books in print, mostly due to my excellent secretaries. They could spell, type, punctuate and never miss a period.

Of course, after a few publication successes and a fairly good practice I started to feel my oats and swelling up rather than growing. Deflation soon arrived. One day my wife and I were headed for a convention and I had a flat tire adjoining some large institution. There was this fellow looking out from a solid locked gate; obviously an inmate in an asylum. I jacked the wheel up, took off the hub cap, took off the wheel nuts and set them in the hubcap, pulled the wheel off and stepped back on the edge of the hub cap. The hubcap flew up and all the nuts went down a nearby storm drain. So I started down the street to the nearest service station. The observer behind the gate asked where I was going. To my reply that I was going to get some more nuts, he looked at me and said "Why don't you take one nut off each of the other wheels, put on your spare tire and drive there?" I asked what he was doing locked behind a locked gate. His reply was, "I am here because I am crazy, not because I am stupid!"

So it is with Land Surveying, you can be crazy to be one, but you can never be stupid. The court records often disclose the incompetent's name in the damage award's book. As we know, surveyors are supposed to follow the footsteps of the original surveyor, but how can this be done without knowing what the old time surveyors did? This book is supposed to record past events so as to enable future surveyors to have some knowledge of what has happened in the past. Someone should write a brief history of what has happened in all counties of California.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that I was born in Maine, conclusive proof that I am a Maineack, but I hope I never get caught for being stupid. *AS*

Author **Michael Pallamary** has compiled the writings and lectures of the late Curtis M. Brown. These works are published in *The Curt Brown Chronicles*.

AdIndex

Advanced Geodetic Surveys www.agsgps.com	51
Cadastral Consulting www.cadcon.com	51
Carlson Software www.carlsonsw.com	BC
Curt Brown Chronicles www.amerisurv.com	42
Champion Instruments www.championinstrument.com	3
Hemisphere GPS www.hemisphereGPS.com	19
InterGEO www.intergeo.de	42
JAVAD www.javad.com	33-40 (Wingfold)
Laser Technology www.lasertech.com/asm	23
Leica Geosystems www.leica-geosystems.us	35
Microsurvey www.microsurvey2013.com	45
NSPS (CST Program) www.nsp.us.com	47
Optech www.optech.com	37
Seiler solutions.seilerinst.com	51
Sokkia www.sokkia.com	IBC
STAR*NET www.microsurvey.com	53
Surv-Kap www.Surv-Kap.com	6
Surveyor's Rendezvous www.surveyorsrendezvous.org	41
Tiger Supplies www.tigersupplies.com	7,9,10
Topcon www.topconpositioning.com	IFC-1
Trimble www.trimble.com/r10showcase	5