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# Pioneer Memories of the Santa Ana Valley

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PIONEER MEMORIES  
OF THE  
SANTA ANA VALLEY

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MRS. F. E. COULTER

BESSIE BETH COULTER  
First Curator  
Charles W. Bowers Museum

by

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COVER: China Dolls at a National  
Doll Show, Charles W. Bowers  
Memorial Museum, Santa Ana,  
California.

Bessie Beth Coulter, the first curator of the Charles W. Bowers Museum, was born Bessie Beth Randall in the state of Nebraska. The family lived in the small town of Chapman where she graduated from high school. She then went to Denver and graduated from the Manual Training High School. She also graduated from the Douglas County Training School of Nurses in 1909 and Dr. Taylor's School of Civics and Philanthropy in Chicago in 1913.

Bessie Beth then became the superintendent of the Visiting Nurses' Association of Omaha and established a school of nursing. Her ability was widely recognized and she was asked to reorganize the dispensary of the Creighton Medical School. Later she also reorganized the dispensary of the Medical School of Nebraska University.

On July 5, 1918, in St. Joseph, Missouri, she was married to Dr. Frank Coulter of Santa Ana. He brought her back to Santa Ana where he built a spacious California bungelow style home for her on South Ross.

Mrs. Coulter soon entered into the social life of the city. She became a member of the First Presbyterian Church, served on the first board of directors for the Y.W.C.A., and was elected vice president of the P.E.O.

It was in 1927, just before the doctor's death, that Mrs. Coulter accepted the presidency of The Ebell Society of the Santa Ana Valley. She served during the years 1927-29. This task proved a godsend as it helped her over a most difficult time of adjustment after the doctor's death.

In searching for a program for the years of her presidency, Mrs. Coulter, with her board of directors, decided it was time for the club to branch out to more cultured programs. As she arranged for these programs, she met Mr. L. E. Behymer of Los Angeles who helped her secure talent. He later proved a valuable friend and aid in arranging and procuring artists for the Sunday afternoon concerts and receptions at the museum. Among the artists were Mischa Elman, Carry Jacobs Bond, Alice Gentle, Don Blanding, and Capt. William A. Macquire. These famous artists were always entertained in the Coulter home, and many of these events became cherished memories for Mrs. Coulter.

Mr. Coulter died in 1927. His estate was left in trust at the First National Bank at Fourth and Main Streets in Santa Ana, the same bank that handled the trust for the Bowers. Mrs. Coulter was made executor with the trust officers of the bank for the doctor's estate. The trust officers were especially kind to her because of her husband's aged mother who was now left in her care.

Mrs. Coulter was well-known in the community through her work with the Disabled War Veterans, Salvation Army, Ebell Society, the Y.W.C.A., Red Cross, the Women's Auxiliary to the California Medical Society, and the Women's Auxiliary to the Orange County Medical Society. She served as first president for the latter, helped organize it, and then went on to the presidency of the state organization.

The Trust Officer of the bank, Mr. Prichard, knew of her activities and

especially of the work of establishing the artist courses at the Ebell Club. One day in 1931, while having an appointment about the doctor's estate, Mr. Prichard made a comment about the fact that the museum had not been completed nor a curator named. Never dreaming that it would be taken as anything but a comment of interest, Mrs. Coulter said that she thought the position of curator would be a challenging job. Mr. Prichard immediately called Mr. Williams, the president of the bank, and Mr. Stephenson, the president of the historical society and the chairman of the board of trustees for the museum. Mrs. Coulter received the appointment.

She went to the museum in 1934, only to find that nothing had been done to the inside of the building. It stood completely empty with not even one display shelf! She was given W.P.A. help which included two secretaries, an archeologist and a clerk. However, some of the other W.P.A. workers were very unskilled, but with them Mrs. Coulter was able to get the museum ready to open to the public by September 15, 1936.

Mrs. Coulter strove constantly to develop an atmosphere that would inspire a desire in the viewers to go on to discover for themselves more about the wonderful heritage of Santa Ana, Orange County, and California.

From the beginning, the board and Mrs. Coulter visualized a museum that would be like a book--a book which would not only tell the history of the area but would give a special feeling for that history and then make each visitor feel as though he were

actually a part of that particular phase of history. This was to be a place of culture --"a place where old men may dream dreams and where young men may catch visions."

Mrs. Coulter realized that the museum must touch the children if it was to be a living part of the community and she made a special effort to invite school groups to the museum. Since she had difficulty getting publicity through the Santa Ana newspaper, she sent invitations to the schools throughout the county. This belief that the museum must touch upon the lives of the school children was so strong that she searched her mind for a way to intrigue them. She conceived the idea of teaching history through the use of dolls. "You can teach anything with the use of dolls," she said.

The P.E.O. RECORD of May 1952 contained an article about Mrs. Counter. It stated that she had made the museum a forceful educational factor in the community by conducting more than two thousand children annually to view particular exhibits. Added to this was the statement that she spared no pains in securing significant exhibits. With her knowledge of what was important in showing, with her unusual tact in obtaining the loan of valuable articles, and with her meticulous care of exhibits, she soon built a reputation for the museum which brought people from far and near. The article also mentioned that it was through her efforts that a foundation had been established insuring perpetuation of the exhibits.

One of the problems confronting Mrs. Coulter was that of securing enough money to insure the continuation of new exhibits

for the museum. It was soon evident that the city council, because of pressure brought to bear, would not levy a tax which would pay these expenses. Mrs. Coulter wrote to many museums which were city and county owned. All of them, including the Father Serra Museum of San Diego and the County Historical Museum of Los Angeles, advised her to establish a foundation.

Acting on the advice of the curators of the various museums, Mrs. Counter began her campaign to establish the foundation. In 1947, the Articles of Incorporation for the foundation were written by Attorney Charles W. Swanner and signed by George S. Smith, Herbert P. Rankin, R. B. Newcom, Lulu M. Minter, E. B. Sprague, Stella May Nau, and Dr. Harriet Cline Bigham on October 17, 1947.

These seven people who became the first board of directors of the foundation had been personally interviewed and asked to serve by Mrs. Counter. Dr. Bigham said she did not know how Mrs. Coulter arrived at these choices but she always felt that Mrs. Coulter had a great natural ability for choosing the right people. Dr. Bigham also stated that Mrs. Coulter had an analytical mind and was very methodical in what she did. Dr. Bigham further stated that the foundation was Mrs. Coulter's child all the way, and that she acted in 1947 to get it started toward procuring the Sherman Stevens art collection. Mr. Stevens was unwilling to leave the art to the museum because it was city owned and he was afraid the city council would feel that the members owned the art. However, he was willing to leave the pictures to the foundation provided the collection was kept intact.

The foundation was a non-profit corporation formed mainly for the purpose of purchasing and acquiring or receiving and accepting gifts of real and personal property and to construct places for the preservation and housing of the exhibits.

The task of procuring and displaying relics and artifacts was not only the most interesting of the jobs connected with the museum but it was the most exacting and time consuming; however, this was just the kind of work Mrs. Coulter considered worthwhile. This was work that was interesting and exacting, and it required the giving of herself for others.

Almost everything that had to be brought into the museum was brought by Mrs. Coulter in her own car. She drove a large Chrysler car with a large trunk. In the trunk she carried things in which to pack the objects. It was one of her cardinal rules that people's priceless possessions should be handled with the utmost care and she packed things accordingly. Even for a short trip things were wrapped and wrapped. Always in the trunk of her car were all kinds of wrapping and packing materials even to a down comforter.

Dr. Bigham, who served as secretary for the foundation for twenty years, said Mrs. Coulter believed she could not ask people for things if she did not take good care of them. It was because of this careful handling and the methods of proper display that the museum got off to such a good start. In this regard, Dr. Bigham wrote this to the writer:

*Mrs. Coulter's dignity of character and personality was particularly exemplified in her attitude towards all who visited the museum.*

*She spoke a common language of friendship and giving of herself whether the museum guests were seven or seventy.*

*The planned method of group displaying of related articles gave emphasis and significance to their historical value and to the early saga of Orange County.*

*She prepared each exhibit with the same care and skill which a gem smith might use in preparing his gems.*

*It was this care and attention to details such as the little memorandums which accompanied many of the exhibits that prompted early settlers to part with their historical possessions and artifacts.*

*During her more than twenty-five years as curator there were very few articles at the museum which she had not brought in her own car, and there were more than thirty thousand articles at the museum during her curatorship.*

*Our county as well as Santa Ana owes Mrs. Coulter a debt of gratitude for the permanent record of the early years of Orange County which may be found at the museum.*

Mrs. Coulter told the story of an old silk party dress given to the museum by the Yorba family. It had been stored away for many years. Fearful that an iron might hurt it she and her secretary, Mrs. Thomas, pressed it by carefully running their hands over the folds again and again. In the pockets they were surprised and delighted to find confetti almost surely from the cascarnes (confetti eggs) which were so often used by the Mexicans at their parties.

One of the most valuable and interesting artifacts in the museum is the statue of Saint Anthony de Padua. This hand-carved wooden statue was presented to Don Tomas Yorba by the mission at San Juan Capistrano in appreciation for the help Yorba gave the mission. He had helped to replenish the mission herd after the 1830 drought. The statue was placed in the chapel of the Yorba home.

Saint Anthony was a healing saint. Whenever anyone was ill a small silver piece representing the part of the body that was afflicted was attached to the rope around the waist of the statue. Each milagrosa was put there as the person afflicted approached the altar with bowed head and then knelt in prayer asking for a quick recovery. Indian workers as well as members of the family brought the silver pieces to the altar.

These silver pieces are still on the statue although the original rope had to be replaced. At that time, Mrs. Coulter, who always strove to do things in the proper manner, felt she must have a Catholic priest bless the rope. She asked Father Joseph Thompson, a Franciscan father and the great grandson of Don Jose de la Guerra y Noriago, to bless the new rope. This seemed a fitting ceremony for the Saint Anthony statue.

When Mrs. Coulter first heard of the statue she approached the Yorba family about the possibility of its being on display at the museum. It was eighteen years before the family consented. At that time it was presented to the museum by Rosita Yorba Locke, the granddaughter of Don Tomas.

Mrs. Coulter decided the best way to display the statue was to put it in a niche in the main corridor flanked by a pair of antique torchiers. These torchiers were bought by Mrs. Coulter from a Pasadena antique dealer who had a consignment from the Hearst collection which was to be sold at auction. As she was most anxious to have this particular pair, they were bought by making an offer before the auction. Then Mrs. Coulter, the perfectionist, again reached into her own pocket and spent thirty-five dollars to have the torchiers restored to perfect condition. To get the proper candles for the torchiers Mrs. Coulter drove to Olvera Street and ordered beeswax candles especially made. To her surprise each candle weighed twelve pounds, as she soon discovered when she experienced difficulty in carrying the two candles from the shop to the car in the parking lot.

Now, at last, the precious Saint Anthony would be displayed in a setting befitting its history.

As the school children stood before this statue in the museum, Mrs. Coulter somehow conveyed the feeling of antiquity and cultural heritage that went with it. As they tramped into the Spanish room all the children of Spanish and Mexican background were given special attention and told how proud they should be of their background. It was not unusual to hear at that time some child who had been ashamed of his background state that he was a descendant of the Dominquezes, the Yorbas, or the Sepulvadas. One could see these shy children hold their heads a bit higher and walk with a prouder step.

In order to get more publicity for the museum Mrs. Coulter felt she must catch the interest of the school children. She did not recall just what gave her the idea but she decided to have a doll exhibit, an exhibit in which the dolls would be dressed in costumes of all nations. She would invite the school children and personally guide them through the rooms. The invitations, or notices, were to be made as sparkling as possible to attract the children. Her talk as she conducted the children through the museum began with Mexico because Mexico was the mother country of California. She lectured the children as if they were on a trip, even telling them to pretend that they were in deck chairs on a ship. Then she proceeded to give the children a mental picture of the history and geography of sixteen different countries.

This first doll exhibit held in the spring of 1941 was such a success, and she enjoyed the work with it and the reaction of the children so much, that she repeated it in 1942. And from then on as long as she was at the museum, it was an annual event with the exception of the war years when with the help of the Eighth Air Force Base Headquarters in Santa Ana she had displays and gave talks on identifying airplanes.

She became so enthusiastic about the dolls that she spent long hours studying and researching for displays. If she was going to display dolls, the exhibits must consist of fine dolls as viewed from a collector's point of view.

About this time she read in a magazine that Helen Armitage, an Altadena woman, did hand crafted miniature furniture. She called

Miss Armitage and, after seeing her exquisitely carved furniture, knew that she must have some for her exhibits.

In one respect, Mrs. Coulter and Miss Armitage were alike--in personality. Both were perfectionists and were not satisfied with work until it was correct in every detail. This likeness in character attracted the women to each other and their friendship lasted all their lives.

On one occasion Mrs. Coulter read of a Los Angeles man who had made some wax figures of Queen Elizabeth of England. She asked if she might display one. Permission granted, she placed it in a large glass case in the first room. The thought then came to her that the Queen might like to see a picture of the display. Mrs. Coulter sent one and the Queen wrote her a letter in appreciation.

Shortly after World War II ended, Lady Montbatten wrote asking for information on the display of dolls. She wanted to have a doll exhibit in London to raise money to aid the blind. Somehow, even in England, people had heard of Mrs. Coulter and her doll exhibits.

The doll exhibits brought many people to the museum. One day, Halle Blakely, a young lady in her early thirties, came in looking for someone who might buy her dolls. She carried about twenty of them in a big cardboard box. She was very nervous and high strung though obviously of an artistic nature. Mrs. Coulter later learned that Miss Blakely had worked in the art department of Barker Brothers big furniture store in Los Angeles. The war had caused her to lose her

position as there was no longer need for the kind of work she was doing. She had gone to work in a war plant, a job for which she was unfit. This work had caused her to have a nervous breakdown. While in the hospital her friends had brought her pieces of bright colored silk. The colors helped but it was mostly the feel of the material that comforted her. She soon conceived the idea of fashioning dolls from the pieces.

When Miss Blakely came to the museum Mrs. Coulter sensed she needed help. The dolls were made of cloth and were not of the quality that Mrs. Coulter required for her exhibits. However, she was spared the necessity of telling Halle that because the doll exhibit was over for the year. Mrs. Coulter felt she must somehow help this young woman. She remembered a lady in Anaheim of whom she had heard. This lady collected dolls. She was simply interested in dolls and not in superior quality. As Mrs. Coulter made the phone call the thought kept repeating itself, "She is asking for bread and I am offering her a stone. She is asking for bread and I am offering her a stone. . ."

The lady in Anaheim was interested and she did buy the dolls. But before Miss Blakely left the museum, Mrs. Coulter suggested that she try making dolls of ceramics.

Miss Blakely acted on the suggestion and the next year came back with a doll which was of superior quality. This one was displayed and before the exhibit was over she had orders for 100 dolls at sixty-five dollars each. The first doll, however, was given to Mrs. Coulter, who prized it highly.

From this beginning, Miss Blakely went on to open a shop in Hollywood and became one of the leading doll makers in the United States. In January 1955 the magazine ANTIQUES printed an article on DOLL RARITIES IN AMERICAN COLLECTIONS. The article contained pictures of doll exhibits sent to them by Mrs. Coulter. Included were pictures of the Halle Blakely figures of Napoleon and Josephine which were exhibited with a miniature carriage that had belonged to Napoleon and had been exhibited in Paris.

After World War II the Doll Clubs formed the United Federation of Doll Clubs. The Eighth Annual Convention of the Federation was to be held at the Sheraton Palace Hotel in San Francisco from August 7 to August 11, 1957. Before final arrangements were made for the West Coast, the committee wrote to Mrs. Coulter to ask her to hold over the spring show until August so that the members could come to Santa Ana to see it.

The Fourteenth Annual Convention of Doll Clubs was held from August 14 to August 18, 1963 in Los Angeles. Mrs. Coulter, to her surprise and pleasure, was asked to be guest of honor for the five days. On page fourteen of the program for that year was Mrs. Coulter's picture and an article headed "A Treasured Friend of all Doll Collectors." This honor was paid to her three years after her retirement from the museum in 1960.

And so Mrs. Coulter, who in the beginning had used dolls to intrigue the children of the area, ended her career as an authority in the world of dolls. Through the respect doll lovers had for Mrs. Coulter she inadvertently gained something else she earnestly desired--publicity for the museum.