

Step back in time! The war was over. Thousands of servicemen were searching for a home...a new life. Orange County, California became their mecca. Acres of orange trees disappeared. The boom was on. Thousands of homes, new cities and real estate offices sprung up overnight. The author takes you there. Meet the "Boom Builder" with his challenges and a unique cast that includes winners, losers, competitors, romance and heartbreak.

Boom Builder

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BOOM BUILDER

C. ROBERT PERRYMAN



The inside stories of California's great postwar housing boom. Heartbreak, success and failures. Follow the fascinating journey... gas is only 15¢ a gallon.

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Chapter One

The last two weeks of August, 1953 were important dates in the history of Orange County. Events started into motion that were to change forever the pristine 40,000-acre county that lay between the metropolitan centers of Los Angeles and San Diego. The county's old timers would point to the grape infestation that wiped out the wine crop in Anaheim in the mid-1800s as an important milestone in the county's history. Others would tell about the plague that eliminated acre upon acre of giant walnut trees from the agricultural scene and gradually brought about the introduction of sweet smelling Navel and Valencia oranges as the area's number one crop.

Before this date in late 1953, Orange County was just that, an orange growing capital. There were 6,500 acres of orange trees throughout the well-named county that August morning. The area was 80% agricultural with small, rural towns and little industry. There was an influx of newcomers right after the end of World War II but, for the most part town-by-town, growth was static.

This date would mark the end of that era. Very soon everything in Southern California was going to change – and change dramatically. The historians would hail the decision by the Japanese warlords to send Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto and General Minoru Genda in to attack Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 as significant as any milestone in the country's history. That day in December an entire nation and its people were changed, and Orange County was not left unscathed.

The war would come ever closer to the quiet, rural area when only a few months after that “day of infamy.” With the nation fused into a growing war machine, the Defense Department selected a flat, drab 150 acres of lima bean land between Santa Ana and Newport Beach as the site for the Santa Ana Air Base.

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While no aircraft ever flew from the base, some 300,000 young, impressionable “air cadets” did. Here, during their short stay, they learned the rudiments of air warfare, celestial navigation, and other skills that were to ultimately lead them into combat in the skies above Germany, England, France, Africa, Italy and those tiny islands and atolls in the Pacific.

These same young men in their clean tan uniforms and closely cropped GI haircuts also enjoyed a rich taste of Edenesque Orange County. They marveled at the endless Pacific Ocean, tranquil Newport Bay, pretty Balboa Island, the bright lights of Los Angeles, Hollywood with that Hollywood sign on the hill, that funny round Capital Records building, Hollywood Boulevard and all those pretty blondes. They gazed in wonder at the bright red, yellow, black and cream convertibles, their tops down under bright warm skies that seemed to extend without end through the summer and into eighty-degree days in November and December. For most of the young warriors to be, they had never seen anything quite like this – warm weather, balmy nights, tall palms, acres of orange trees, fields of green, those beautiful women and endless summers. When they left for those battlegrounds against Hitler and Tojo there was no question that the lucky ones would be back and they would tell others.

Ultimately, that sprawling training base, and the news that day in 1953 that Walter Disney had selected little Anaheim for the site of his Disneyland venture, would come to thrust the county into revolution. A dynamic growth pattern that started on VE Day would slowly and inexorably swallow up the rural groves, the strawberry, sugar beet and bean fields and move Orange County into a new kind of lifestyle.

Someone had written that the events of December 7, 1941 marked the “first day of tomorrow.” Then, the announcement in the Los Angeles *Times* that warm summer morning that Disney was to build his giant theme park in the center of one of Anaheim’s quiet, pungent orange groves was the signal for the “first day of today.”

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Although the wave of immigration that was to engulf previously untouched Orange County immediately after the war was a new phenomenon, a steady stream of newcomers had been a part of Southern California's history since the area called California was first wrested from the Spanish around 1810. Over the years they came to the fledgling little town of Los Angeles in a steady flow. Sometimes in great waves, like the 1880 railroad rate war when the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific lines cut their fares from \$125 to just \$25. Twenty-five dollars from St. Louis to Los Angeles!

Later it was the discovery of oil that beckoned. Then came the war years. The shipyards around San Pedro and the aircraft factories drew legions from far and wide. They were unskilled, but they learned fast and invented new words like "swingshift" and "Okie." Jobs were easier to find than homes or apartments. A whole new city sprung up in the shadow of the Douglas Aircraft's sprawling factory in Long Beach. Called "Lakewood," 17,000 homes sprouted, setting the mold for the building boom in nearby Orange County.

Simple, without character, the mundane three- and four-bedroom, single level homes were "just right" for Mr. Veteran and his family, with no down payment required and monthly costs of \$50. According to legend, a record 107 Lakewood homes were sold in one day in 1950. The swamped real estate sales staff earned \$25 per deal setting the compensation level for tract sales people for the next decade. Forget those Georgians, Victorians, or the newly-rediscovered Spanish revival styles or the enduring Bungalows, the day of the so-called "dingbats" had arrived. Built on inexpensive land, simple, straightforward and practical in design, the VA home style was here.

Young home builder Mark Bismark read the news story on the front page of the Los Angeles *Times* over his typical breakfast of two eggs, sausage patty, rye toast and black coffee. The Disney people, the story revealed, had paid \$5,300 to seven owners for each of the 145 orange grove acres. Bismark smiled as he

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calculated his own purchase only two months earlier of nearly 100 acres of similar West Anaheim land for just \$3,500 per acre.

Across the breakfast table his wife of nearly fifteen years, Ann, was engrossed in the paper's society page and commented without looking up from Jack Smith's column. "Don't be late tonight. We have dinner at the club at 7:30." Bismark said nothing, gulping the last swallow of coffee, and pecked his wife on the cheek as he left the bright, sunlit nook. He was wearing tan golf slacks, with a white golf sweater over a dark blue sport shirt open at the collar.

It was going to be another warm day, so typical for California that time of the year. Temperatures had reached eighty-five degrees the day before, and the clear sky assured a repeat performance. A few minutes later the thirty-five year old builder swung his small Thunderbird into the parking lot of the Bismark Enterprises offices on the Pacific Coast Highway. The two-story building, with parking underneath, was set against the high bluff above the highway and looked across the historic artery to the Sea Coast Country Club. Mark Bismark, Sr. and several investors had built and organized the club shortly after the company closed their Beverly Hills offices and moved "to the beach."

The offices were quiet. The staff of five had yet to arrive for the 8:30 a.m. gong. The door to the chief accountant's office, Willis Hipple, was open. Bismark shouted through the opening. "Hip, come on into my office and let's get those papers signed."

There was nothing pretentious about the Bismark offices. A wide staircase with metal rail led up from the parking lot into a reception area. There, on wooden parquet flooring, was a simple couch in the style the decorators called Swedish Modern. It was flanked by a magazine case on the right and an innocuous floor lamp on the left. A compact coffee table in the same Swedish Modern motif rested in front of the couch covered with the latest in shelter magazine – *House and Home*, *House Beautiful*, *Sunset* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. Behind the receptionist's desk were four other desks for the office staff. The desks were battleship gray. Metal. By Steel Craft.

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Bismark had inherited his staff from his father's successful Beverly Hills operation. The receptionist was an exception. Slightly built and blonde, in her early thirties, Betty Conway handled the phone, an occasional letter, additional copying and mailing chores from the financing department. Always a conservative dresser, her shapely figure, large blue eyes and cheerful almost shy smile made her a favorite with the visiting subcontractors and suppliers who frequented the office.

Betty lived with her brother, John, in Santa Ana. Recently divorced, John had been a used car salesman with the Big Kelly Kar Company in Los Angeles. From there he moved to Marshall and Clampett in Long Beach selling used Dodges and Plymouths. His gypsy-like employment was now camped at Barney King's Studebaker dealership on First Street and Oak in the booming county seat.

John had secured for Betty the office's most commented on mode of transportation, a pink and black 1950 Studebaker "bullet nose" coupe, which was proudly parked adjacent to the stairs. The Raymond Loewy design got not only comments, but also chuckles and some admiration from visitors.

"What happened to the propeller?"

"When is that thing going to take off?"

"How low does it fly?"

Betty just smiled at the remarks. Not everyone, she ascertained correctly, had a Studebaker, and few if any had the soon-to-be discontinued "bullet."

In the front office was long-timer, Natty Hall. Natty was a tall spinster in her early sixties and had been with Bismark Sr. for twenty years. She was, as the elder put it, "part of the scenery." Natty looked like an old-time schoolmarm but was as reliable as an old truck. She was always on time and ready to help. Working late was no problem. Natty was a Bismark person through and through.

The other member of the female staff was Willis Hipple's right arm, the warm and charming Dorothy Friend. Dorothy was always at Hip's side, looking ahead to tax reports, payments,

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extensions and closings. Just over forty, it was easy to see that she had been a real beauty in her youth. Big brown eyes, full mouth and round figure. Her husband of two years had been killed someplace in the South Pacific. She lived alone near the office in Costa Mesa.

The only office that portrayed the successful home building company's wealth was the front office of accountant, Hipple. It had been Bismark Sr.'s office and contained a large walnut desk, handsome leather side chairs, walnut paneling and a stunning view out across the Coast Highway, the Club and the Newport Bay. Hipple entered Bismark's plain office flourishing a sheaf of legal size construction loan documents. He had picked them up from the Great Pacific Bank offices in downtown Los Angeles the day before. The thin accountant laid them on Bismark's desk. Paper clips protruded from the stack marking the pages that needed the builder's signature.

Bismark's desk was as plain as the remainder of the office. It was a large solid oak door resting on four black metal legs, no drawers, just the big entry door with its natural oak finish. Behind the desk on an unpaneled white wall was a cluster of eight by ten black and white photos. They were all framed in basic black. The gallery included the destroyer *Howard Bedford* under steam and a photo of the Bedford's crew that looked like a high school football or basketball team. The young men had short-cropped hair and dress uniforms. Looking very innocent, but trying to appear combat ready.

There was also a photo of Bismark's boat, the *Markee*, and two golf photos from the Sea Coast Club. One showed Bismark and the other members of the country club's victorious golf team from the year before and the other of the builder and another young man, smiling broadly, with their arms about each other's shoulders. The plaque underneath read, "Member-Guest Winners, 1950. Bismark and Brown."

The builder flipped through the documents casually. "Any tricks?" he asked without looking up. "Everything just about what we agreed. No 'dutch interest' or anything like that?"

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The two men were studies in contrast. Bismark had just turned thirty-five years old. He had grown up in the development business during a period in which his father had prospered from the new home boom that hit with such an impact in the West those days after World War II. Mark was a rich man's son. He had simply inherited a well-financed and reputable home building organization following his father's forced retirement some fourteen months before.

Hipple was approaching the half-century mark. A slight touch of silver was sneaking into the sideburns of his lean, well-tanned face. Bright and serious, he was a product of a broken home. A maiden aunt in old Pasadena had raised him. After attending schools in that city, he had worked his way through the University of Southern California over on Hoover and Santa Barbara Streets. Only two years out of USC, he was hired by the aging Mark Bismark, Sr. as an accountant at the firm's Beverly Hills office. Hipple had moved with the company when the builder relocated to Newport Beach two years earlier.

Like his young employer, Hipple had married his college sweetheart, the attractive, bright and blonde Carole Workman. They had met at the Wooden Horse, a modest campus eating establishment along University Avenue. It started with a Coke, then lunch and perhaps a drink or two at Julie's and their romance grew. Her attraction to the serious Willis Hipple was a surprise to her sorority sisters. Carole had been seen during most of her junior year in the company of one of the Trojans' football elite, a very husky, curly-headed Tad Murphy. The *Times* called him "Touchdown Tad" and he captured the hearts of the Cardinal and Gold faithful with a last-minute pass to beat Loyola, a sixty yard touchdown romp to beat St. Mary's, and a long punt return to complete a winning season for the Trojans against the hated California Bears. Carole Workman was a young lady, as people liked to say, "who could have any man she chose" and she chose the quiet, studious accountant from Pasadena.

While Bismark enjoyed sailing and playing golf at Sea Coast on every opportunity that came his way, Hipple had no hobbies.

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If he had a passion, it was the Southern California football team. During those days when he ushered for his Boy Scout Troop at the annual Rose Bowl games and later as a student, he had become an avid Trojan football booster.

The young Bismark, confident and assured, had been schooled by listening to his father. The meetings at their home, the negotiations over the telephone with lenders or subcontractors, had been a course in home building and development.

The quiet accountant had learned the intricacies of new home financing and construction from two directions, the first was the “old man,” as he called Bismark Sr., and secondly from books. A hard-working student at USC, he continued to read every book he could find regarding financing, home building, construction and their histories.

Bismark finished the signatures on the half-inch stack of legal documents that made up the loan package for the company’s upcoming project in Anaheim. He looked at Hipple and recalled some advice from his now-retired father. Like most sons, he did not always agree with his stern father. They were too much alike. Both were stubborn, opinionated, aggressive and ambitious. Although, when the elder Bismark passed the reins to his son, one important point was made very clear. Mark could still remember that cool day just after Christmas in the Bismark’s new home overlooking Newport Bay.

“Whatever you do,” the aging man had told his son sternly, “keep Hip. He’s a good man, he’s loyal, honest and remember,” he stressed. “There will be lots of cash passing through your hands. There will be money from lenders, and escrows, from buyers and sellers, and most of it won’t be yours. An honest guy like Hip will keep things straight and moving on course. You’ll need him son, no matter how you plan to expand.” The old man was right. While the young builder had big plans for expansion and growth for the conservative home building company, Hip would be a trusted part of the team.

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“Well, Hip,” Bismark said grinning, “did you see the *Times* this morning?” “I brought it with me in case you missed it,” the older man answered. “We made some bucks on this one,” Bismark said happily as he recalled the purchase such a short time before the Disney purchase. “\$5,300 per acre – can you believe it?”

“I don’t think they will ever build it,” Hipple commented.

“I don’t know. Lots of people look at that show on television. Mickey Mouse has lots of fans,” Mark pointed out.

“Not that many. I just can’t see how Orange County can support anything like that. How many people live in Anaheim, 20,000? Maybe another 40,000 or so in Santa Ana. Those people in Los Angeles are going to have to take a lot of trips down Manchester to pay for that kind of thing. They are talking about a lake with a riverboat. In Anaheim?” Hipple continued.

“You might be right, Hip, but whether they go ahead with it or not, those Stanford research people have told the world that Anaheim is a great place to live. Great weather, easy to reach; all those things came out in their report. That can’t hurt us. That Santa Ana Freeway is almost completed through to Buena Park. In a few years, it will be a snap to drive from L.A. to Anaheim. Those research people know what they’re doing. Disney might just pull it off, even if he did pay too much for that land,” Bismark said confidently. “Either way, Hip, we’re going to sell lots of houses in Anaheim and we’re going to sell them fast.”

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