

Wendy Haskett Story #4, Written November 1998

It was the posters that drew Lola Roach's maternal grandparents, the Gayharts, to Leucadia. Distributed all over Los Angeles in 1928, they urged people to "Grow avocados in beautiful North County. Live the good life!"

"By the time they discovered what hard work it was, they owned a house and five acres on Union Street," said Lola, who lived with her grandparents all through grade school because Los Angeles, where her parents lived, aggravated her asthma.

"Central school was only a few blocks away. I used to walk there with Paul Ecke, Jr.," she remembers.

Lola, however, was doing something that the other 6-year-olds in her class were not. Her uncle, Hal Roach, was a famous producer-director; whose work ranged from serious movies such as "Of Mice and Men" and "The Little Foxes", to the Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin comedies. Several times a year Lola would be whisked off to Hollywood to the Hal Roach Studio, which was actually in Culver city, to act in one of "The Little Rascals" films.

"Not that there was much acting required in my first job," she said. It was in "Cradle Snatchers", a film in which The Little Rascals, a gang of mostly good-hearted kids who were always in trouble, were supposed to be taking care of a baby. "I was the baby, nine months old, and appeared careening down a hill in a runaway baby buggy."

Lola's paternal grandparents lived in a house on the studio lot. "My grandmother always hung her washing out on a line to dry," Lola said. "So, often the first thing people saw when they came in the studio gates was a line of flapping laundry."

Grandfather Roach managed the studio's finances. His elder son, Jack, Lola's father, was both a cameraman and a location scout. In the '30s, Lola remembers, action scenes required ingenuity.

"When my uncle was making "Captain Caution", with Ronald Coleman, it contained the difficult scene of a big sea battle," Lola said. "Dad went out and made friends with a group of strong, healthy life guards at Santa Monica Beach.

A huge tank, filled with models of battleships was set up in the studio, and the lifeguards swam underwater and moved the ships around."

Working on The Little Rascals was fun, she said. "There was no script. Nothing written down. 'Do what you feel like,' my uncle would say, so the kids made it up as they went along." (And, in case you're curious, Alfalfa's straight-

up-in-the-air cowlick was done by his mother.) Lola was in only about half a dozen of the “rascals” films, but was known as the one with the fair curly hair to whom the “bad boy”, played by Tommy Bond, sang love songs.” I was only about five, or six, but I can still remember him crooning ‘I’m in the mooood for loooove ..... ,’” she says.

“One day Shirley Temple’s mother brought her to the studio looking for work. ‘Sorry, we already have one of those types with curly hair,’ my uncle told her. And for the rest of his life--and he lived to be 104--he used to reminisce about how he’d lost out on Shirley Temple because of me!”

Life in Encinitas was interesting, too. Grandmother Gayhart was an avid boxing fan. Both grandparents took breaks from caring for the avocados to take Lola to the open-air boxing matches held downtown. “They were on a raised stage next door to where The Daley Double Saloon is now,” she said. “Sometimes they’d have a professional fighter challenging all-comers for \$10. That was a lot of money in the Depression.”

Lola’s asthma disappeared as she grew older, and her junior high and high school years were spent back in Los Angeles, living with her parents. By this time Grandmother Roach had taken to playing bridge on the deck of the Tuna Club on Catalina Island. “She used to take my sister and me along, then forget she had us with her,” Lola remembers.

It was on Catalina Island, when she was sixteen, that Lola noticed a tall, blond college student playing a pinball machine. “ I thought he was gorgeous!” she says of Eric Larson, a 21-year-old pilot who was the son of Swedish immigrants. “He asked me to a dance that night at the casino, which cost ninety-six cents and included a free fruit drink.”

When they’d been married for thirteen years and had three children, Eric and Lola Larson bought the house on Union street from her grandparents. “It’s named “Union” because it’s on the border between Encinitas and Leucadia,” Lola said. “We love the place. Our fourth child was born here, and we’ve now been here forty-two years. “

The Larsons are movie buffs, and go often, but the writhe-about-naked sex scenes shown now would, Lola says, have sent most audiences in the ‘30s into shock.

“When I was about 16 I went, with a boy-friend, to see “George Washington Slept Here,” she said. Part of the plot was that the two stars, Jack Benny and Ann Sheridan, accidentally sat on a bed together, before leaping apart. “My boy-friend and I were so embarrassed by an unmarried couple doing this, when we got outside we could hardly look each other in the eye.”

Last March the La Paloma Theatre in Encinitas celebrated seventy years of showing movies. A reporter from Channel 51 came down to interview Irene Rupe Swoboda, who was the La Paloma's first cashier, and also Lola. "I've got a couple of clips of you," the reporter told her.

"When we got home I turned on the 11 'O Clock News," she said "And there I was, in black and white, tap dancing energetically behind Spanky MacFarland.

" I always tell people it wasn't talent that got me into movies, but nepotism because of my famous uncle."

In 1992, when Hal Roach reached 100, the Smithsonian feted the man responsible for the comedies of Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. A lot of countries in Europe wanted to fete him, too There was, naturally, concern about the rigors of travel at his age. Did he feel like going? To France? To Germany? To Italy? "Uncle Hal not only went with enthusiasm," Lola said. "He took his girlfriend along too."