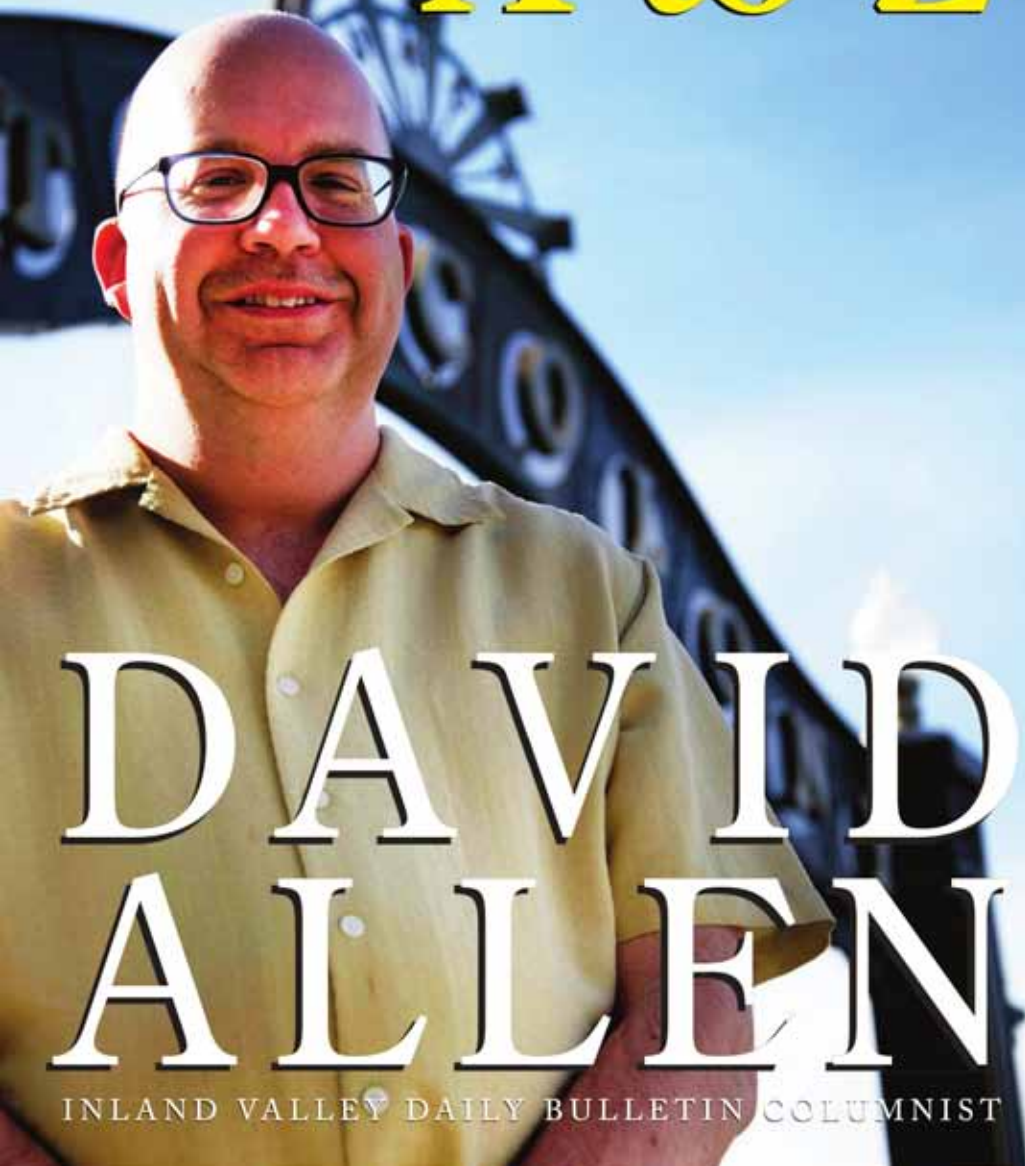


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Pomona A to Z



DAVID
ALLEN

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B

Onward to B. I considered writing about the Barbara Greenwood Kindergarten but decided highlighting an early 20th-century building was too similar to A and its adobes. I wanted to stake out more modern territory to keep readers guessing.

Midcentury architecture has become better appreciated in the decade since I wrote this. Like Pomona, I must be ahead of my time.

To update the B nominees, the Blockbuster Concert Series went bust. Too bad.

This column was published July 25, 2004.

B is for Becket

‘Pomona A to Z’ builds up famed architect

Week two of “Pomona A to Z,” my series highlighting the coolest parts of Pomona one letter at a time, brings us bouncing to B.

What will be B? Among the bounty:

* B could be for Barbara Greenwood Kindergarten, the nation’s first standalone kindergarten, a 1908 building on the National Register of Historic Places.

* The Blockbuster Concert Series in Ganesha Park, this year scheduled for Aug. 7, 14 and 21.

* Boxing, after championship boxer “Sugar” Shane Mosley of Pomona and the respected Fist of Gold pugilism program.

* Buffums’, the beloved department store downtown that’s now a medical school.

* Or, for that matter, the store on Garey whose name sums up its philosophy: Buy Two, Get One Free. (Alas, the store wasn’t there the last time I checked. Perhaps Buy Two gave away too many One Frees.)

But our B isn't any of those. Instead, B is for Becket's Bold Buildings.

I'm referring to Welton Becket (1902-1969), one of L.A.'s most celebrated architects.

His firm was responsible for such mid-century icons as – take a deep breath – the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theater, UCLA's Medical Center and Pauley Pavilion, Bullock's department stores, the Capitol Records tower, LAPD's Parker Center, the Cinerama Dome, the Sports Arena – still with me? – Century City Shopping Center and the Pan Pacific Auditorium.



Therese Tran

Pomona City Hall and the Council Chambers, left, are among Welton Becket's bold buildings.

And Pomona's Civic Center!

In the 1960s, Becket's firm designed seven buildings in downtown Pomona: six in the Civic Center, plus Buffum's.

It's the largest concentration of Becket's work anywhere, according to the L.A. Conservancy, which sponsored a retrospective and tour, "Built By Becket," in 2003.

Stroll around the Civic Center and you feel like you're in "The Jetsons," that other 1960s-era vision of the future.

There's the Council Chambers, a round building similar to the Taper Forum that seems to float. City Hall with its thin vertical windows and glass pavilion entrance. The Library's expansive interior without internal columns.

Other Becket buildings nearby are the Police Department, Superior Courts and Public Health Building.

With its parklike setting and broad walkways stamped with the Pomona logo, the Civic Center has a Utopian feel, like something out of the sci-fi film "Logan's Run."

"Those were buildings of the future, and that's what Pomona wanted," said Mike Schowalter, founder of the Pomona Modern Committee, which dotes on 1950s and '60s

architecture.

On Wednesday, Schowalter gave me a tour and the back-story.

You see, by the late 1950s Pomona was faced with a decaying downtown as shoppers fled to the glitzy Pomona Valley Center and its Sears on the outskirts of town.

In a bold stroke, the city decided to reinvent its core with a downtown pedestrian mall and a modern Civic Center.

Six of 12 buildings went up before the effort ground to a halt. But get a load of what else Pomona had on the boards: a monorail station, downtown heliport, civic auditorium, planetarium, art museum and residential high-rises.

Whoa!

The future would be so bright, Pomonans would be wearing shades.

“They were on the cutting edge,” Schowalter said fondly of the era’s leaders. “You’ve got to admire a city for doing something so out there.”

Speaking of out there, longtime residents may remember when – in a Mayberry-meets-“Blade Runner” moment – the reflecting pools were stocked with trout for fishing contests. The plaza was also the site of Easter sunrise services.

These days the Civic Center is the worse for wear, and the reflecting pools have been replaced with landscaping because the homeless population used the pools for bathing.

Still, most of the grandeur remains.

Hey, it's not Victorian architecture. But if you can appreciate 1960s style, heavy on exposed aggregate concrete, the Civic Center's got it in spades.

If restored, Schowalter asserted, Welton Becket's Civic Center would easily compare to Frank Lloyd Wright's modern buildings.

"This guy," Schowalter said, "was pretty hot stuff."

R

The letter R proved a good excuse to recount how Pomona got its name, which came from the Roman goddess.

As for the runnerups, Robbie's, Red Hill Pizza and Randy's Records have all closed. Sob! Oh, and the "Jane Eyre" quote referred to at the start is actually "Readers, I married him." I had recently read the book and couldn't resist mentioning it.

This column was published Jan. 9, 2005, as "A to Z," which began back in July 2004, entered its second calendar year with a roar.

R is for Roman goddess

who brings classic touch to Pomona

To paraphrase “Jane Eyre”: Readers, I’m at the letter R. OK, it’s a loose paraphrase.

“Pomona A to Z,” my recondite review of that city’s raptures, today rests between Q and S. Which R should we recommend?

Let’s reconnoiter in your ready room for a referendum:

* Rainbird Rainforest, a learning center at Cal Poly Pomona mimicking a rain forest and funded by the sprinkler company.

* Randy’s Records, a vinyl album store on East Second Street, visited by many an out-of-town band at the Glass House.

* Red Hill Pizza, the eatery that spent 30 years in an old red barn on Holt before moving downtown. Try the lasagna.

* Robbie’s, the downtown nightspot that in 1968 hosted a luncheon for Robert F. Kennedy, just days before his assassination.

* Reference department at the Library, always ready to respond to your research requests.

Well, I could go on and on – what about Repo Man Recovery? Rockwell Collins? the Donahoo’s rooster? – but that might get repetitive.

Instead, let’s stop roamin’ and start Roman. Because our R is for Roman goddess, the deity for whom Pomona is named.

Until Los Angeles County redesigned its official seal in fall 2004, few realized its dominant image was the goddess Pomona in her flowing robes – a design created in 1957 by a Pomona native, artist Millard Sheets.

Tragically, Pomona got the heave-ho along with the seal’s cross. County supervisors decided scrapping the cross but leaving the pagan goddess might send a weird message.

But who was Pomona, and how did a



Walter Richard Weis

Brought here from Italy in 1889, this statue of Pomona offers her marble bounty to library patrons.

Los Angeles suburb come to be named for a figure from Roman mythology?

“Not much is known about her,” says Richard McKirahan, a professor of classics at – where else? – Pomona College.

She was a goddess, “but a minor one, not in the league of Jupiter or Venus,” says McKirahan, noting that mentions of Pomona in myths are scant and sometimes contradictory.

Her sphere of influence was fruits, especially those that grow on trees. I forgot to ask whether that includes tomatoes.

“Her priest was the lowest ranking priest in the Roman hierarchy, which may mean that she was considered the humblest of the gods and goddesses,” McKirahan says.

So Pomona’s namesake is a goddess, but one with a public relations problem. Somehow that seems fitting.

The name came about like this. In 1875, real-estate investors from L.A. bought 2,500 acres out here for \$10,000, then subdivided the land into lots for public auction.

They sponsored a contest to name the town.

Citrus nurseryman Solomon Gates, a Pennsylvania native who loved Greek and

Roman mythology, decided his entry would play off hopes that the town would become a horticultural paradise.

He feared the name would be too fancy, his son, Superior Court Judge Walter S. Gates, told the Historical Society in 1963.

But at a community meeting, contest judges declared: "Henceforth, our new settlement will be known as Pomona."

That's certainly better than the derisive nickname by which the settlement had been known: Monkey Town.

When the city incorporated on Jan. 6, 1888, Pomona was official. And catchy: At least eight other U.S. cities adopted the name.

Local images of the goddess abound. She was depicted on fruit crate labels. She's on the city seal, affixed to city vehicles, buildings and letterhead.

There are even modern twists. A wall-sized mural downtown features a Latino-tinged goddess.

More traditional is the version on display in the Pomona Library: a 5-foot-3 statue of Pomona carved from marble and shipped here from Italy more than a century ago.

As the Pomona Progress described the figure upon its arrival:

“It represents the goddess in the act of returning from the fruit harvest, the folds of her gown being filled with fruits, while in the hair about the brow are tastefully arranged small clusters of grapes.”

An exact replica of a statue from antiquity, it was commissioned by the Rev. Charles F. Loop, a wealthy Episcopalian from Pomona. He saw the original while in Florence and thought a copy would make a dandy icon for his hometown.

It was presented on July 4, 1889, and has always been housed in the Library. Today, from inside her glass case, she keeps a watchful eye on the main floor.

“Most people just come by and look,” library staffer Camilla Berger says. “But (a former staffer) told me that years ago, some people came in who worship Pomona.”

Well, California is the land of fruits – and nuts.

S

Spadra was a natural choice for the letter S when I was writing this series. Not only is Spadra a crucial part of Pomona's origins, but people remain fascinated by the place, mostly because of its cemetery and the legends about frontier life and mysterious deaths. I've been in the library's special collections room more than once when some young person has come in to inquire politely about Spadra.

Mickey Gallivan of the Historical Society will be the first to tell you she plays up the drama because that's what people want to hear about Spadra. Too bad people persist in trespassing in the cemetery, which is private, and trashing the place. Not very respectful.

Among the runnerups, the world has stopped turning for Soap Opera Laundry, although the dryers still spin under the less dramatic name MXS Laundry.

This column was published Jan. 23, 2005.

S is for Spadra

Suddenly, 'Pomona A to Z' spotlights Spadra

Salaam, sahibs! "Pomona A to Z" today surveys the letter S for a symbol to sum up the city. There's such a surfeit, we won't have to scrounge.

So silence, please, as we sequester ourselves in our shacks and shanties, there to solemnly scan the scads of specimens:

* Sugar Shane Mosley, the boxer, and Suga Free, the rapper, who hail from Pomona. Sweet!

* The stylish stables built in 1909 for City Hall's horses in those pre-car days. They still stand at White and Monterey.

* Sacred Heart, St. Madeleine's and St. Joseph's, three churches serving the Catholic population.

* Special Collections, the room at the Public Library where you can research Pomona's past.

* Soap Opera Laundry, whose sign bears the image of a washing machine with TV-style rabbit ears.

Scintillating!

As you'd suspect, those only scratch the surface. We should also stop to salute Stan Selby, who led the Pomona Concert Band for an astounding 47 years until his death last November.

But our S is something different: Spadra.



Thomas R. Cordova

A pioneer family's passing is marked in Spadra Cemetery, a slightly spooky remnant of the early Pomona community.

Now absorbed into west Pomona, Spadra lay roughly between today's Valley and Mission boulevards on either side of the 57 Freeway.

The village sprung up in 1866 along a stagecoach line, then began crumbling a decade later as the railroad passed it by. All that's left is the stately Phillips Mansion,

which was built in 1875 and looks a lot like the house in “Psycho,” and a rather sad cemetery.

Residents never saw the end coming. When the upstart settlement of Pomona began in 1875, Spadra’s oldtimers derided it as “Monkey Town,” for reasons that remain obscure.

“They just thought Pomona would never be anything,” said Mickey Gallivan, president of the Historical Society of the Pomona Valley.

But it wasn’t just Spadra that had a short life. So did an alarming number of people who lived there.

As “The Village That Died,” a Historical Society booklet, puts it darkly: “The village of Spadra was characterized by murder, suicide and mysterious deaths.”

Maybe S should be for s-s-s-spooky.

Many Spadra stories start at Billy Rubottom’s inn, which is also where Spadra began. He’d bought 100 acres from Louis Phillips and set up shop along the Butterfield stage line.

To call Rubottom a colorful figure is like saying Shakespeare was a fair writer.

A rough frontiersman, he was wanted in his native Arkansas for killing two men with a knife. (I’m referring to Rubottom,

not Shakespeare.)

And in El Monte, Rubottom shot his own son-in-law to death. Even more destructively, he's been blamed for importing California's first opossums.

Rubottom may have been the meanest man in Spadra, but he had competition – even from a man of the cloth.

In 1872, the Rev. William Standifer, a farmer, angrily confronted the town constable, knocking him down twice. A bullet in the shoulder from the constable's gun only made Standifer madder. So the next bullet found the minister's heart.

Spadra also saw a murder-suicide between two lovers and an ex-con stabbed to death by his brother-in-law, among other untimely demises. As recently as this month, January 2005, a ghostly figure has been reported in the Phillips Mansion.

The cemetery in Spadra has 212 graves, officially.

If you were killed in a barfight at Rubottom's for, say, cheating at cards, "the rumor is they just dragged you off to the cemetery and buried you," Gallivan said. "So there are probably more than 212 people buried there."

The name Spadra, by the way, was stolen by Rubottom from his hometown

in Arkansas. According to Gloria Ricci Lathrop's "Pomona: A Centennial," though, it was his second choice.

The valley was already known as San Jose from its days under Spanish rule. But Rubottom's application for a post office by that name was rejected, because California already had a San Jose.

He succeeded with the name Spadra. We know it as Spah-dra, although the Arkansas pronunciation is said to be Spay-dra.

Opened in 1868, the Spadra post office was among the first half-dozen in California. The village was off to a good start.

Settled mostly by poor families fleeing the South, bustling Spadra soon had a school, a major road, warehouses for trade goods, three stores and two blacksmiths. All it lacked was a Starbucks.

Unfortunately, it soon lacked more than that. While Southern Pacific extended its line eastward to Spadra in 1874, by the next year the line went as far as Colton.

The train didn't stop in Spadra anymore, and almost no one else did, either.

So long, Spadra.



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