

Dorothy Lewis Kupcha's Memoirs of Life in Newhall, 1918-1931.

By **DOROTHY LEWIS KUPCHA.**

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Before I was born, my parents, Claude and Alma Lewis, homesteaded a ranch near Mint Canyon, above Newhall and Saugus. When my mother was expecting me, her third child, she worried about giving birth in such an isolated setting. As the time neared, my father drove her in his Model-T Ford to Los Angeles, where I was born on August 3, 1918. Then, we returned to the ranch.

My father was a contractor and builder. On the ranch, he built our house and a mile-long road to connect us to the main highway. He also dug a well and an outdoor toilet.

We lit our home with kerosene lamps, which we carried from room to room. There was no electricity, no phone. We had a wood stove. You had to chop the wood, carry it to the house, pump water, bring it up in a bucket. We bathed once a week in a big tin tub in the kitchen. There was no refrigerator. We had an icebox and occasionally went into town to buy a chunk of ice.

On the ranch, my brother and sister and I made our own entertainment. We clambered up the big boulders in the creek. We climbed trees. We collected wildflowers and knew all their names. We knew all about birds and stars.

My father was a volunteer deputy sheriff. Sometimes, he was called to help track down criminals. Sometimes, he caught them too, bringing them to jail in his Model T.

Once my mother went into our basement, where we stored canned food and sacks of sugar. She heard a soft sound she thought might be sugar leaking from a bag. It turned out to be the hiss of a rattler. She got my father's rifle and shot the snake dead.

My sister Elizabeth and my brother Raymond attended Honby School, a one-room school house that my father had built some years earlier. My mother's sister, Eve Smith, got her first teaching job there, at age 18. My mother had been a teacher, too. When I reached school age, she decided to teach me at home.

Ranch life was hard and lonely for my mother. When I was seven, we left the ranch and moved to a house my father had built for us in Newhall. I remember the first time I turned on an electric light. I kept pushing it up and down, up and down. It seemed like magic.

I still remember our phone number: Newhall 47. The telephone was a black box on the wall. You'd crank it by hand, and then tell the operator what number you wanted. If she was helping someone else, you had to wait.

I started second grade at Newhall Grammar School. William S. Hart, the famous cowboy star of the silent screen, lived nearby. Sometimes, he would show one of his movies at a school assembly. The students always loved it.

My father built the new Presbyterian church in Newhall. Church was the center of our lives. Not just for Sunday services, but for all kinds of activities. There was a piano in the basement, and we would have parties and sing. At Christmas, each child received a box of brightly colored candies.

The minister was Rev. W. H. Evans, who lived in the rectory in front of the church. Rev. Evans used to say "W. H." stood for "whip him." We liked Rev. Evans. Once my mother and I set a basket of cookies on the rectory porch, knocked on the door, and ran away. It was May Day.

In December 1926, our family went back to visit the ranch. Elizabeth, Raymond and I were overjoyed to see it again, and happily climbed the rocks in the creek. It was bitterly cold and windy. After we returned home, my father left to help hunt for a train robber. He returned late that night to find our wood stove blasting heat. My mother hovered over it, shivering uncontrollably. We children awoke the next morning to the sounds of an ambulance driving her away.

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Claude Lewis Family,
Mint Canyon ~1916



Lewis Kids 1919



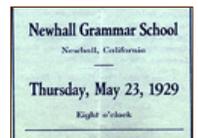
Newhall School 2nd
Grade 1925



Newhall School 4th
Grade 1925



Lewis Kids & Paul
Dietz ~1929



Newhall School
Commencement 1929

This was a very bleak time for us all. My father hired a housekeeper from Los Angeles to help with us children. I continued to attend Newhall Grammar School. One day, my teacher was sick and we had a substitute named Edna Tooker Dietz, a divorcee with a young son. It turns out my father had known Edna Tooker years earlier. Before long, he married her, and Edna and her son Paul came to live with us.

My father built us a new house, on a hill overlooking Newhall. There were many huge oak trees on the hill, including one in the middle of the road. People driving down the street had to go around the tree to get by.

In those days, many silent movies were made in the Newhall area. We had numerous opportunities to observe them being filmed. We'd see cowboys on horseback appearing to shoot at others, who fell over and appeared to be dead. And it was common to spot Hollywood stars walking around town.

There was a famous comedy duo, Mack and Moran, who performed a black-face act called "The Two Black Crows." This was a little before the days of Amos 'n Andy. Charles Mack owned a large beautiful house in Newhall, not far from us. His movie star friends would drop by to visit him. One of them, actress Clara Bow — known as the "It Girl of the 1920s" — once rode past me on a horse.

Charles Mack hired my father to build a second house for him, close to the first one. My father constructed what looked from the outside like a grand home. But the only thing inside it was a great big swimming pool. One day Charles Mack gave my father a battery-operated radio. We'd never had any kind of radio before. Now, we could listen to the comedy shows everyone talked about.

My father also built the Motor Stage Café in Newhall, the Saugus Garage, and a gas station at Castaic Junction. Whenever we drove by Castaic Junction, we'd stop at that gas station and visit the family who lived and worked there. I used to play with their daughter.

As a builder, my father was very interested in the construction of the Saint Francis Dam. He used to drive us out to watch it take shape. [The dam was completed in 1926.] I was nine years old when the dam broke on March 12, 1928. Among other things, it demolished Castaic Junction. We heard that my friend, her father, and their dog survived by floating on a mattress, but her mother and brother perished. She and her father both caught pneumonia that night, however, and her father soon died. I don't remember the girl's name, and I don't know what became of her.

When I was ten, I broke out in red spots. It turned out to be scarletina, a highly infectious strep infection. In those days, if someone had a contagious disease, health officials would quarantine the house. They'd post a huge placard on the door, forbidding anyone to enter or leave for 30 days. That would have been an extreme hardship for my family.

My parents reached a compromise with the health department. I was moved to a small room attached to the garage, where I lived by myself for a month. Of course, I couldn't go to school. My meals were handed through a window. People could talk to me from a distance, but no one could get close. It was lonely and I felt very sorry for myself. I would beg my parents to let me into the house, to no avail. I stayed in my prison cell, trimmed my fingernails and read books. Eventually, the quarantine ended.

Later that year, William S. Hart decided to give every little girl in Newhall a doll. My step-mother encouraged me to apply for one. After I received it, she had me write Mr. Hart a thank-you note. He sent me back a handwritten letter. I still have the doll, but unfortunately, not the letter.

We kept rabbits at our house on the hill, and for a while, a pet goat. But it wasn't a good place for a goat. My father took it to a man with a herd of goats outside of town. One day, the man informed us our pet had gotten lost. My father decided to look for it. He was climbing in a mountainous area when the ground gave way beneath his feet. He fell a great distance and was found unconscious.

It was April 15, 1931. I was twelve years old. It was Wednesday — art day — my favorite. When it was almost time for art class to begin, my step-mother appeared at school and said I must come with her immediately. We arrived at the hospital moments after my father had died.

It was a traumatic time. My step-mother moved the family to Glendale. Then, soon after we got there, she said she could no longer care for us. She and her son Paul would stay together. The Lewis children would have to fend for themselves.





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had come to an abrupt end.

I never lived in Newhall again, and have only been back a few times. But now, at age 85, I look back at the landscape of my youth with fondness. My experiences in Newhall, both happy and sad, helped shape me. They remain forever a part of who I am.

Dorothy Lewis Kupcha lives in Chula Vista.

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