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From Laguna with Love: Laguna appears to run in my family

By Miranda McPhee

When I called my mother in London eight years ago to tell her that my husband and I were moving from New Jersey to a small place in California, her reply flummoxed me.

"I've been to Laguna Beach," she said.

I frowned; not in my lifetime, I was sure. My London-based, quintessentially English family was well-traveled, but California had never been in anyone's travel plans but mine. I'd moved around the East Coast since emigrating to the U.S. many years ago but never west of the tri-state area.

"I know I have a cousin who lives there," I said. "But..."

"In 1941," she replied. "I was five." And out came the story.

In the late 1920s, my grandfather went from England to China where he was a partner in a prominent British accountancy firm at a time when the British had a lot of trading interests and investments in the Far East. So, my grandparents and some other close relatives lived there, and my mother was born in Tientsin, Northern China. When war came to the Pacific, she was evacuated on one of the last civilian boats out, along with her mother and brother. Digitized records of the handwritten ship's logs show their passage to the port of Los Angeles. On arrival, they stayed for a short time in Laguna Beach with friends before spending the rest of the war in Canada and eventually making their way to England.



Laguna in the 1940s

Courtesy of LB Historical Society

Recent months of lockdown and unhurried conversations have surfaced snippets of my mother's memories from 80 years ago: the ice-cream van's jingle

“Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”; steps down to a house by the sea; sitting on a high stool drinking fresh orange juice; curious seals approaching their barbecue on the beach; her brother telling her to hurry as there’s a rattlesnake. It makes me wonder what will fill my own memories in the years to come – the chatter and aromas along Forest Avenue at night; walking in Heisler Park on a blustery day; the Pageant of the Masters; idly watching beach volleyball by the lifeguard tower.

My other relatives who left China either settled in Vancouver or went to England, except for a cousin who wanted to paint the California coast and moved to Laguna Beach in the sixties, 20 years after my mother’s fleeting visit. Decades later, another cousin went from England to New York on business, met a girl, got married, moved to the West Coast, and eventually settled in Laguna Beach.

And then there is me. My husband always talked about retiring somewhere in Southern California, and sudden ill health accelerated the conversation. Given the uncertainty of our lives, we picked the Laguna area as stop gap for a year, but it didn’t take long to make it our permanent home.

So, four people from one small English family gravitated to the same place over the course of 80 years: at different times, from different directions, and for very different reasons. The family has no ancestral or obvious ties to California, nor indeed to the U.S.



Photo by Jennifer Griffiths

Main Beach

Without a doubt we have strolled along the same streets, walked on the same sand, and taken photographs from the same vistas. I have poured over historical photos with far more imagination than proof and find the idea that I could be sharing my mother’s towel space on Main Beach both delightful and intriguing, as though I am on her roundtrip ticket.

It is either the strangest of coincidences or Laguna runs in my family – you decide.

Miranda McPhee is a writer, traveler, lap swimmer, and bookworm who is curious at heart and happiest when she can see palm trees.