

Zoo Lady: Belle Jennings Benchley *by Debora Richey*



Belle Benchley at San Diego Zoo

Deserted by her husband, with a teenager to support, Belle Jennings Benchley (1882-1973) took an accounting class, then accepted a part-time position with the San Diego County Assessor's Office in 1925. Needing full-time employment, she then took a temporary bookkeeper position with the San Diego Zoo – a decision that would change her life. She sold her longtime home on North Pomona Avenue in Fullerton to widow Julia Nenno, moved permanently to San Diego, and started a new chapter in her life at the age of 43. Two years later, Belle was appointed director of the San Diego Zoo, and for most of her career, she was the only female zoo director in the world.

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Flight turns 50

In 1974, the Fullerton City Council established the Fullerton Bicentennial Committee to oversee city activities celebrating America's Bicentennial in 1976. Committee members commissioned renowned sculptor Aldo Casanova to create *Flight*, a 40-foot zinc-and-steel sculpture located on the lawn between Fullerton City Hall and the Main Library in the 300 block of West Commonwealth Avenue. A monument to creative vision and space, the 5,000-pound *Flight* was designed "to symbolize the continuous movement from Earth to Space", suggesting "in abstract terms man's indomitable delving into the unknown".

On July 10, 2026, Fullerton Heritage, Friends of the Fullerton Public Library, City staff and officials, plus some members of the public gathered to celebrate and commemorate Fullerton's Bicentennial Sculpture with new soon to be installed commemorative signs, walking path and fresh landscaping.

Save the date!

JULY 10

2026

10:00AM

COMMEMORATION CEREMONY WITH FULLERTON HERITAGE AND FULLERTON PUBLIC LIBRARY TRUSTEES

10:30AM

RECEPTION AND LIGHT REFRESHMENTS

"FLIGHT"

50TH ANNIVERSARY



SCULPTURIST ALDO CASANOVA (RIGHT) AND FABRICATOR JACK BROGAN (LEFT) IN 1976.

Come celebrate Fullerton's Bicentennial Sculpture! The 40-foot zinc and steel sculpture was created by well-known California artist Aldo Casanova. Fascinating Fullerton residents for decades, the piece was designed to "symbolize the continuous movement from Earth to Space."

FULLERTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
353 W. COMMONWEALTH AVE.
FULLERTON, CALIFORNIA 92832
(714) 738-6333

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Founded in the waning days of the 1915-16 Panama-California Exposition, the fledgling San Diego Zoo consisted of a small collection of animals, mostly domestic, housed on 150 acres with only ten employees. Under Belle's directorship from 1927 to 1953, she transformed it into an innovative, world-class zoo with over 200 employees, making the zoo and its San Diego Wild Animal Park (now Safari Park) the pride of the entire San Diego Region. Benchley had no zoological or animal management training, but under her direction the zoo pioneered new forms of animal exhibition. It was one of the first to put animals in open-air, cageless settings that recreated their natural habitats. She ensured that each animal had a separate private area which they could always access. She also established the first animal hospital at the zoo and developed a comprehensive nursery program. She ensured that the zoo was for the animals, not the public audience.

The Early Years

Belle Jennings was born in Larned, Kansas, one of eight children. She moved with her family to the Roseville area of Point Loma at the age of five in 1887. Her father, Fred M. Jennings (1858-1926), served as sheriff of San Diego from 1907 to 1914. Because the area

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Fullerton's historic districts are currently at risk

of excessive development and infill. California's push to address its housing shortage has led to sweeping legislative changes that directly affect preservation zones/historic districts throughout the state. California laws such as Senate Bill SB9, SB10, SB70 in reference to Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) mandates aim to increase housing density statewide. While these laws are designed to accelerate development, they also introduce new concerns in neighborhoods long protected for their architectural, cultural, and historical significance.

Historic Districts traditionally rely on local preservation ordinances to regulate alterations, demolitions, and new construction. These ordinances often require design review boards, strict architectural guidelines, and environmental assessments (Fullerton does not have a design review board). New state housing laws, however, increasingly limit local discretion, especially when projects qualify for ministerial approval. This shift reduces the ability of cities to deny or significantly modify proposals—even in areas with historic overlays.

The most significant concern for Fullerton Heritage (and preservation advocates statewide) is the potential erosion of neighborhood character. The core tension lies in reconciling statewide housing urgency with local preservation goals. California's laws do not exempt historic districts outright; they do allow cities to apply objective standards that protect significant resources.

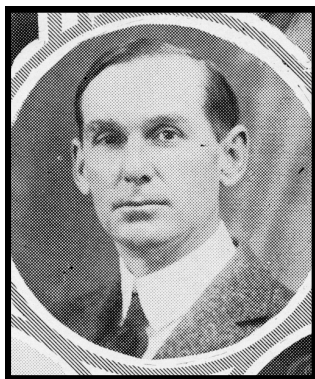
The challenge ahead is crafting standards that are both legally compliant and culturally meaningful, something that Fullerton Heritage has already written into code and submitted to city staff. At the moment, having updated zoning codes to address preservation zones is not the highest priority for the city. Fullerton Heritage is working with staff and have been assured that resources will assigned to this important project in the near future. Ultimately, we will have to work to get the state law updated. Another daunting task!

Historic zones will continue to evolve, and the success of this evolution depends on collaboration between city leadership, planners, developers, preservationists and residents.



was so isolated at the time, her parents offered a room in their wood-frame house to serve as Point Loma's first elementary school. Now the oldest home in Point Loma – San Diego Historic Landmark #728 – it has been converted into a restaurant, the Jennings House Eatery.

Belle graduated from Russ High School (now San Diego High) and then from San Diego Normal School (now San Diego State University). She taught for almost four years on the Pala Indian Reservation northeast of San Diego. In July 1904, she was offered a teaching position by the Fullerton Grammar School Board, joining her sister, Jane Orrell Jennings (1880-1917), who was teaching second grade. Jane later married into the prosperous Porter family. In June 1905, Belle replaced Miss Clara Nutting as vice-president of the grammar school. A third sister, Luella Jennings Miller, would also later teach at the Fullerton Grammar School.



William L. Benchley, 1918

On June 26, 1906, Belle married William Leonidas Benchley (1880-1966), the first son of wealthy Edward K. Benchley, Sr. (1854-1924), Fullerton's second mayor and the founder of the highly successful Benchley Fruit Company. The couple had one son, Edward Jennings Benchley (1907-1996), who later became a truck driver and mechanic. After her marriage at her family home, Belle moved to Fullerton where she and her husband constructed a home at 321 North Pomona Avenue on land gifted to Belle by her father-in-law. The home would later be razed and replaced by the Nenno House in 1928.

A terrific cook, the new Mrs. William L. Benchley often entertained and assumed the expected role of supportive housewife to her husband, who was working for the Benchley Fruit Company. She and William moved within upper class Fullerton society, joining the Fullerton Club and the Hacienda County Club north of La Habra. Very much a prominent club woman, she was an active member of the Fullerton P.E.O., the Fullerton Red Cross, the Placentia Round Table, the Fullerton Women's Club, the Fullerton Delphian Society, and the Women's Auxiliary of the Fullerton American Legion Malvern Post. She helped to coordinate the Armistice Day Parade held on November 11, 1922. That same year, Belle and other women club members formed the Community Shop Association, establishing Fullerton's first Community Shop on West Wilshire Avenue – a precursor to thrift shops – where the needy could buy surplus food, used clothing, and household items at greatly reduced prices. A top-class bridge player, she helped to organize the Fullerton Card Club. She also found time to volunteer as a precinct worker during elections.

Belle's friends and colleagues noticed her boundless energy and extraordinary organizational skills and encouraged her to run for the Fullerton Grammar School Board. In March 1920, in what was then the largest Fullerton school vote cast, she became the first woman elected to a board of school trustees in Fullerton, overwhelmingly defeating her two opponents. Belle won primarily because Fullerton women voters thought it was high time a female was elected to a public office. Men who voted for the male candidate, Samuel N. Fuller, did remark though: "Well, if we must have a woman, Mrs. Benchley is the best we know of".



The March 6, 1920 election was important because it included \$225,000 bond money to replace Fullerton's inadequate grammar school, and the construction of needed new elementary schools, especially in the west side of town. Belle oversaw the building of the Ford and Chapman grammar schools and became the driving force behind the construction of Maple School (1924), convincing her brother-in-law, Frank K. Benchley, to forgo his usual architectural fees. Although Belle later became a feminist icon, she rigidly enforced the school board's rule that forbade all married woman from teaching in any Fullerton school district. She required all employed female teachers to immediately resign if they married, believing that a woman's primary role was that of homemaker and mother.



Belle and William Benchley, 1916
Courtesy of Laura Costello

William L. Benchley and the Benchley Family

In August 1893, wealthy San Francisco industrialist Leonidas Brown Benchley (1822-1906) purchased 247 acres half a mile northeast of Fullerton for \$50,000 cash, naming it Helena Orchard in honor of his wife, Helen (1826-1917). Benchley intended to live on the ranch – which now encompasses Malvern Avenue, Jacaranda Place, and Brookdale Place – during the winter months, but he quickly grew so attached to Fullerton that he made it his permanent residence in 1894. Benchley's eyesight began to fail in 1901, so his son, Edward K. Benchley, Sr. (1854-1924), who had ranchland in Ventura County, moved to the Helena Orchard with his family, taking over many of the business dealings of his father. After his father's death, Edward continued to live on the ranch for a few years as his daughter and two sons – Helen, Frank Keith, and William Leonidas – married and moved away, then he moved to North Pomona Avenue.

Dedicated to furthering Fullerton's growth, Edward K. Benchley, Sr. established the Benchley Fruit Company in 1897, operating a prominent packing house along the Santa Fe railroad tracks (118 West Santa Fe Avenue). In 1904, he was elected to Fullerton's first Board of Trustees (now

the Fullerton City Council), serving as mayor in 1906-1907. He was director of the Fullerton Farmers and Merchants Bank and the Fullerton Improvement Company; served several terms as head of the Fullerton Chamber of Commerce; and was active in a number of fraternal organizations. When he passed away of pneumonia on July 31, 1924, at the age of 69, Fullerton businesses suspended activities for an hour while last rites were being observed.

When Belle married William L. Benchley in 1906, it was assumed that he would eventually take over the running of the Benchley Fruit Company from his father. He spent some early years learning the workings of the packing firm, then in 1911, he purchased controlling interest in the Benchley Fruit Company for a nominal fee from his father, who, in turn, purchased controlling interest in the Fullerton Farmers and Merchants Bank. Described as a womanizer and wastrel, William L. Benchley appeared to have neither the interest nor business acumen needed to run a large packing company that had connections throughout Southern California. Initially, the firm did well, opening new packing houses in Placentia, Pomona, and Anaheim, but weak economic conditions following World War I, and poor management practices, led to a slow decline in the company's fortunes. During the final years of the Benchley Fruit Company, Belle stepped in to work as cashier and office manager in an attempt to shore up the firm's financial and packing operations.

In 1923, William L. Benchley decided simultaneously that he no longer wanted to be in charge of the Benchley Fruit Company, as well as married to Belle Benchley. In May 1923, William left Belle and their son, taking up permanent residence in the California Hotel, the usual hideout for separated spouses. A few weeks later, William's desertion made the local newspapers, shocking the local community. William made it clear to his wife that he no longer wished to support her, and the couple waited the requisite year mandated by California law before divorcing in June 1924. Edward K. Benchley, Sr. and his wife Emma were fond of Belle and their grandson, and the divorce was detrimental for William, who was left nothing in his father's will.

In June 1924, William L. Benchley sold his interest in the Benchley Fruit Company back to his father, Edward, who announced his return to the packing business in the *Fullerton News Tribune*: "The Old Man Back in the Game after Fifteen Years Rest!"

Unfortunately, Edward K. Benchley passed away a month later before

THE OLD MAN

BACK IN THE GAME

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS REST!

"Once a fruit shipper, always one."

Benchley Fruit Co. has changed from son to father—son, W. L. Benchley no longer interested. E. K. Benchley, father, president of the Farmers and Merchants National Bank of Fullerton will manage the business, and with the assistance of the greatest selling agency on Earth, the California Fruit Growers Exchange, will strive in every way to assist the orange grower toward getting larger net returns for their fruit.

In this association the grower takes no responsibility, no stock to be purchased, can pick whenever he desires, can ship his fruit on individual account or in pool.

We believe if you will investigate you will be pleased to do business with the

Benchley Fruit Company

Phone 42 or 46

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he could revive the long-standing packing firm. On November 8, 1924, the Benchley Fruit Company was sold to James Eadington, Sr. (1866-1933), a former manager and secretary, who quickly changed the firm's name to the Eadington Fruit Company. The Eadingtons would greatly expand the company's packing and distribution operations, eventually making it the largest produce shipping company in California.

To support herself and her son, Belle worked as a clerk in the real estate office of her brother-in-law, Hugh Miller, the developer of Lansdowne No. 1 (later Fuller Park) and No. 2. Miller also appointed Belle to the board of the Lansdowne Water Company. She gradually resigned from various organizations and as a school trustee, leaving for San Diego in 1925.

San Diego Zoo Years

Because her knowledge of bookkeeping was so limited, Belle Benchley assumed her position at the San Diego Zoo would not last. She used her lunch and spare time to explore the grounds and familiarize herself with all the animals. Going cage by cage, she learned the behavioral and eating habits of each creature. She gradually assumed more and more of the daily running of the zoo, often reporting problems to zoo founder and president, Dr. Harry Wegeforth. When Wegeforth left in 1927, he promoted Belle to the top position, telling her: "Go ahead and run the place. You're doing it anyway".

She oversaw the growth of the struggling zoo through extensive animal collecting and innovative habitat design. She wanted the animals to have the feeling of being in the wild, and she tried to supply each species with as much open space as possible. Natural environments were provided, and for the most part, the animals were kept outside, but never forced to have human contact. Zoo visitors loved the changes and attendance increased fivefold and the zoo's budget sevenfold.

Despite her inexperience, Belle had one thing going for her: She loved animals. She toured the zoo once a day, inspecting each habitat and animal. She developed a legendary reputation for detecting an illness even before veterinarians or specialists, pointing out when an individual animal "just didn't look quite right". She insisted that each animal be treated with respect and would immediately fire any zoo worker caught mistreating one. Any visitor caught teasing, taunting or injuring an animal was instantly removed. As she would write in one of her books: "Every now and then I meet someone who says, 'I don't like animals.' I know that person has missed the proper chance to know animals and has thus been deprived of one of the richest experiences in life. I cannot help from pitying him, for to know animals is to love them".

To promote the zoo, she made hundreds of radio and television appearances and gave thousands of talks and lectures to clubs, schools, and visiting groups. She started a program that used the zoo's tour buses to bring school children to the zoo for an annual field trip. The children quickly dubbed her the "Zoo Lady". Visitors were often surprised by Belle's small stature and matronly appearance, but she charmed people who met her, earning the love and respect of her employees.

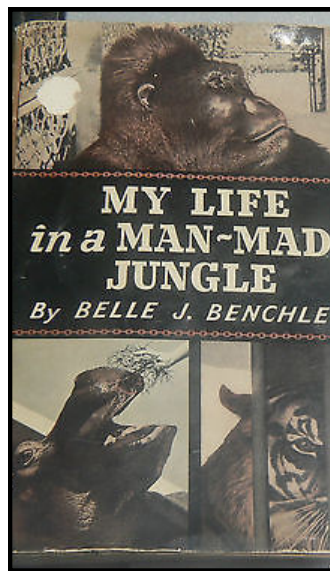


Coyotes in cages when Belle took over directorship of San Diego Zoo (San Diego Zoo).





Benchley behind her desk at San Diego Zoo



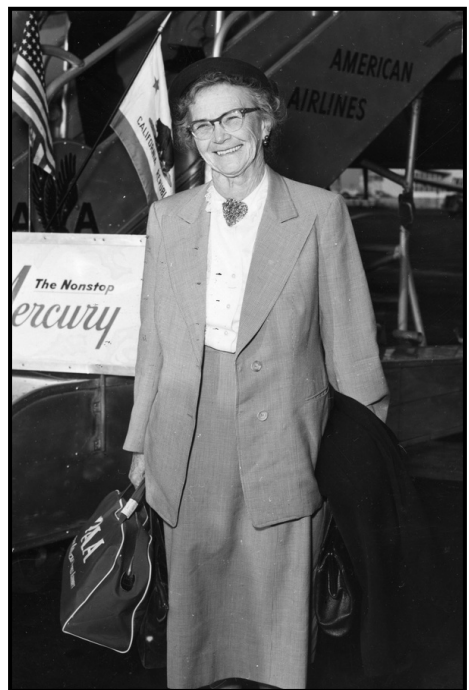
First Book by Belle



Belle at San Diego Zoo



Belle Benchley at Fullerton Public Library
book signing, 1956



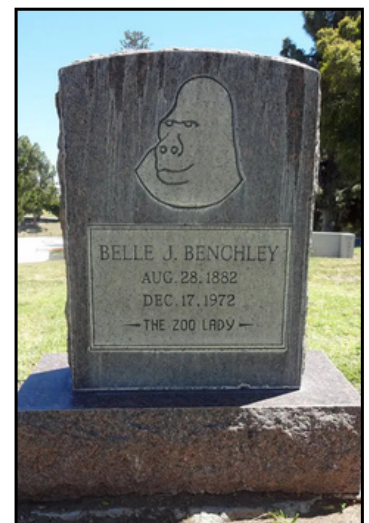
Belle Benchley, 1953, after retirement
from the San Diego Zoo.

She wrote three bestsellers – *My Life in a Man-Made Jungle* (1940), *My Friends the Apes* (1942), and *My Animal Babies* (1945) – and a children's book, *Shirley Visits the Zoo* (1947). She did not forget her friends in Fullerton and made repeated return visits for community lectures and talks, including one well-publicized talk before the Fullerton Business and Professional Women's Club in October 1937. She was also a popular guest at the Fullerton Public Library's annual Book Week, spending hours signing books and reconnecting with her friends.

Final Years

When Benchley retired at the age of 70 in 1953, the mayor of San Diego proclaimed "Belle Benchley Day". Over 800 guests attended a civic dinner held in her honor. Staff and friends at the zoo gifted her a three-month tour around the world. Earlier she had purchased a beachfront three-bedroom bungalow in Ocean Beach, where she lived with various relatives, including her widowed mother and sister, and divorced niece. She continued to give community talks and returned often to the zoo with her family and friends. She died in 1972 at the age of 91 and is buried in Greenwood Memorial Park in San Diego, where her gravestone features a carving of a smiling gorilla drawn by her granddaughter. In 2007, she was inducted into the San Diego County Women's Hall of Fame.

The Local History Room of the Fullerton Public Library has an extensive collection of materials on Belle Benchley, including her bestsellers. Over the decades, Benchley has appeared in historical fiction, most recently *West with Giraffes* (2019) by Lynn Rutledge, which details the finding and transporting of giraffes from Africa to the zoo in 1938. A biography of Belle Benchley – *The Zoo Lady: How Belle Jennings Benchley Built the San Diego Zoo* – will be published in October by the University of Nebraska Press. Cheri Pape, curator of the Local History Room, supplied author Sandra E. Bonura with local information about Belle Benchley.



ANNUAL Meeting

We kicked off our Annual Meeting a little earlier than usual this year—and for good reason! With Father's Day and Day of Music both falling on June 21, we decided not to compete with such a busy (and fun!) weekend.

Instead, we gathered on June 7, 2026, at Rutabegorz, where members enjoyed a fantastic turnout, great company, and a fun Sunday afternoon together.

President Ernie Kelsey took everyone on a "Year in Review," celebrating another successful year for Fullerton Heritage. Among the highlights were the approval of five new local landmarks by the Planning Commission and the installation of historic district markers in two of Fullerton's treasured historic neighborhoods—important milestones in preserving our community's rich history.

This year's guest speaker, Chris Epting, was a crowd favorite. A local historian, pop culture expert, and passionate Orange County storyteller, Chris has authored more than 40 books. He entertained attendees with fascinating stories, little-known historical gems, and plenty of humor. His newest book, *Hidden History of Orange County*, won't be released until later this year, but he brought advance copies to the meeting—and they sold out! It's safe to say he was a huge hit, leaving everyone eager to read more and looking forward to his next visit.



Fullerton Heritage Board Surprises
Ernie Kelsey with POTR Award



Chris Epting entertains FH members
with funny stories about OC.

Did you know the first boysenberries were grown in Fullerton?

**Save the
Date!**

Please join us for our Fall event.

WHEN: October 4, 2026 2pm - 4pm

WHERE: Hunt Library

201 S. Basque Ave

Fullerton, CA 92832

Speaker: Chris Jepsen, President of the Orange County Historical Society. Chris will entertain with stories of horticulturist Rudy Bosen, Walter Knott and how the original boysenberry was created. Snacks and refreshments will be served.

This event is open to the public, so spread the word!



Happy Summer Everyone, and Happy 250th Birthday America! 🇺🇸

I want to kick things off with a heartfelt thank you to all of our Fullerton Heritage members. Your support makes everything we do possible, and we truly couldn't do it without you.

I'd also like to recognize the amazing Fullerton Heritage Board of Directors. We are an all-volunteer organization, and these dedicated individuals generously give their time, talent, and passion to preserving Fullerton's history. Our city is better because of their efforts.

We also have exciting news! A huge thank you to the Fullerton Rotary for selecting Fullerton Heritage as a recipient of the 2026 Community Investment Award. Their generous \$750 grant will help us continue educating the community about Fullerton's historic buildings through markers. We truly appreciate Rotary's continued support and commitment to our community.

Another reason to celebrate—the restoration of the Commerce Building (Building 300) at Fullerton College is complete! If you haven't seen it yet, take a walk through the quad and admire this beautifully restored landmark. It's well worth the visit.

Our Mills Act program continues to gain momentum. This year we've seen more interest—and more applications—than ever before. Fullerton Heritage meets personally with each interested homeowner, to answer questions and help applicants navigate the process. It's exciting to see so many residents investing in preserving their historic homes.

July marks the close of our fiscal year, and in August we begin planning for the next twelve months. Looking back on everything we've accomplished together, I'd say we've had a pretty terrific year. We've celebrated milestones, supported preservation projects, helped homeowners, strengthened community partnerships, plus continued advocating for Fullerton's historic resources. While progress with the City can sometimes feel slower than we'd like—and yes, we're still navigating challenges like inappropriate development in historic neighborhoods—we continue moving forward with passion for our City's history. Every relationship we build and every project we complete helps preserve what makes Fullerton special.

Finally, if you find a membership renewal card in your envelope, it means your membership has lapsed. We hope you'll renew today—either online or by mailing in your renewal. Your membership truly makes a difference and helps ensure that Fullerton Heritage can continue this important work.

Thank you for being part of our preservation family. Have a safe, fun, and happy summer!

With warm regards,
Ernie

welcome

NEW MEMBERS:

Miguel Betancourt, Kyle & Shanna Beym, Mike Budinger, Steven & Tracy Cooper, Helen Cummings, Catie, DelleMonache, Jaymes & Pamela Dunsmore, Gavel Girl LLC, George Geary Culinary Media, Carol Gibson, Christopher Harte, Jonathon Hughes, Marjorie Kerr, Caryn Lerman, Emerson Little, Larry Little, German Perez, Carlos & Brittney Ramos, Lois Rubin, Mike San Ramon, Sowmya Srinivasan, Marisa Trautz, Janet Vandergrift



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President's Corner 2026