

Bringing History to Life and Life to History

Everyone is welcome to explore the richness of Carlsbad's past at Leo Carrillo Ranch Historic Park.

Written by Lois Swagerty



Deep in the southeast corner of Carlsbad lies the hidden treasure of Leo Carrillo Ranch Historic Park, a magical place where birds sing and nature thrives, history is alive and well, and the public is warmly welcomed.

THE HISTORY

Sara Kelly, the recreation supervisor responsible for day-to-day park operations at Leo Carrillo Ranch, gives a thumbnail sketch of the ranch's history. "The first inhabitants of this area were the Payómkawichum, or Luiseño people, who were forced to the San Luis Rey Mission by the Spanish in 1798. The next people who lived here were the Kellys, who homesteaded in 1869."

Kelly enjoys a special tie to the story as you may have guessed from her name. "My great-great grandparents, Matthew and Emily Kelly, homesteaded this land in 1869

cated within a day's drive from Hollywood, with enough water to support a cattle ranch, with an old adobe to restore and close enough to the ocean to get cool breezes." This location ticked all the boxes.

THE PROGRAMS

More than 1,000 fourth-graders visit the ranch each year to participate in the California History & Art Program, where they learn about ranch life first-hand. The half-day program allows them to experience the history of Carlsbad through interactive tours, hands-on activities such as cattle roping and tortilla making and creative art projects related to life on the ranch. "We design the program to dovetail with California state requirements for history and art. Not only is it fun and free for Carlsbad schools, but we hope we are helping out teachers," Kelly says.

The program is a partnership between the City of Carlsbad's Parks & Recreation and Library & Cultural Arts departments and the Friends of Carrillo Ranch, Inc. It is offered free of charge, thanks to the generous support of Friends of Carrillo Ranch, who fundraise to help make it possible.

"We also run a series of summer camps for kids ages 6-13 years old including everything from art camps to Radical Reptiles and Friends, yoga, nature and science camps," says Kelly. "We offer free public tours on weekends year round, and a botanical tour once a month. Weddings and private events

by staking a claim to the four corners of the property and farming and ranching here," she says, "My great-great grandfather's brother, Robert Kelly, owned the nearby Rancho Agua Hedionda and encouraged Matthew to abandon the California gold rush—where he wasn't striking it rich—and come down to claim the adjoining property."

Hollywood actor and rancher Leo Carrillo bought the property in 1937, building on the Kelly family's work and reconfiguring the Irish farmhouse into a traditional California rancho as a place to retreat from city life in Santa Monica. Kelly says, "He dreamed of a rancho lo-

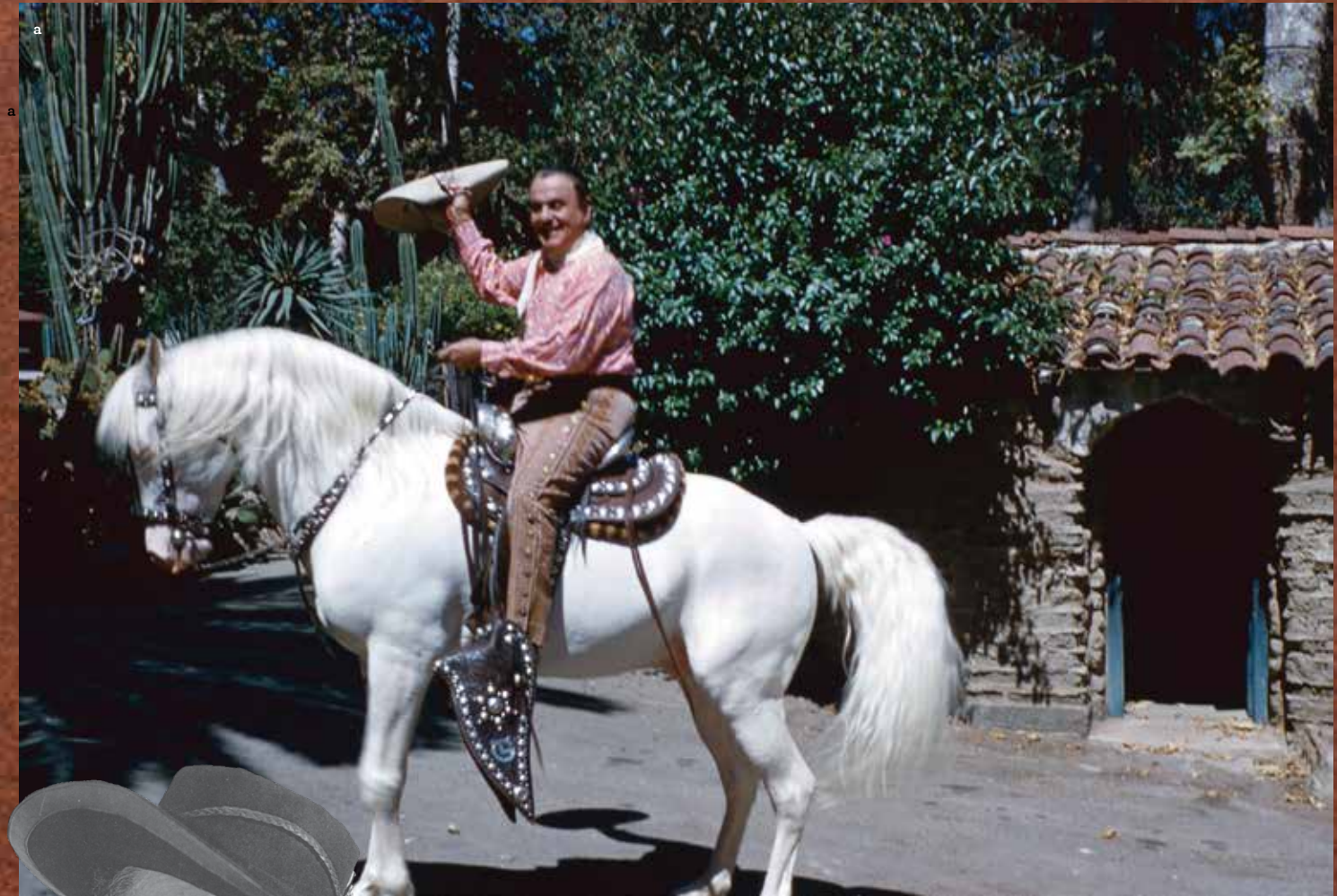
are hosted at the ranch from early spring through late fall and managed by our amazing catering vendor," she says. "My great-great grandfather's brother, Robert Kelly, owned the nearby Rancho Agua Hedionda and encouraged Matthew to abandon the California gold rush—where he wasn't striking it rich—and come down to claim the adjoining property."

Funding for the California History & Art school program comes primarily from the Fiesta at the Rancho fundraiser. Three additional events during the year are free or cost a small fee.

a) Leo Carrillo filming "Amigo Man" in 1960 (photo courtesy of Carrillo Ranch Historic Archive).
b) Carrillo in character for the 1942 film "American Empire" (photo copyright 1942 by Paramount Pictures Inc.).
c) Art instructors help local students create art (photo courtesy of Carrillo Ranch Historic Archive).



The ranch in its earlier days was surrounded by open space (photo courtesy of Carrillo Ranch Historic Archive).



THE EVENTS

FIESTA AT THE RANCHO

Coming up in May, Kelly says, “The fiesta is a beautifully catered dinner at the ranch featuring live music, photo ops, dinner by Personal Touch Dining with a bar and a silent auction of items donated by the local community. Not only are items on auction but also experiences such as a day with the SWAT team, a private movie night at the ranch, a catered dinner in Leo’s dining room and lots of fun local crafts, baskets and gift cards.” The lovely evening starts off in daylight and ends under the stars and twinkle lights. Tickets to this event make perfect gifts for birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day and are on sale at the City of Carlsbad’s website (carlsbadca.gov).

LEO CARRILLO RANCH FILM FESTIVAL

“The movie nights are one of my favorite things,” says Kelly. “I love the whole vibe of the night with people coming into the park and setting up their dinners for picnic or purchase, listening to music and watching movies under the stars.” The evening features custom-crafted playlists and entertaining trivia questions covering the history of the movie, Hollywood gossip of the times and colorful background to the films. First shown is an episode of “The Cisco Kid” TV show from the 1950s starring Leo Carrillo and Duncan Reynaldo as two of the first Latino characters portrayed as good guys on TV. Leo played the funny sidekick, Pancho. The feature film runs after dark.

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS AT LEO CARRILLO RANCH

Day of the Dead is a traditional Mexican holiday in November honoring friends and family who have passed. “We decorate the hacienda with customary items including photos, candles, marigolds and favorite foods and drinks of the Carrillo family. It’s meant to be a joyful memory of people you’ve loved and a reminder to appreciate the short sweetness of life,” Kelly explains. There is an interactive display and a free art project for kids on the patio during the two-day open house.

HOLIDAY AT THE RANCHO

The year culminates with a city-wide sponsored event held at the ranch. It’s a huge, family-friendly party featuring photos with Santa, a California snowball fight, cookie decorating, writing letters to Santa, tree lighting, a festive movie and arts and crafts. The ranch is decorated for the holiday season with a tree in every room of the hacienda and displays in the outbuildings.

“Our goal is to have a park where everyone feels welcome, but also is a beautiful, peaceful place,” Kelly says. “Whether you’re a bird watcher or a history buff, we hope you will want to come and visit. The park is here to serve the community because the community supports it, and we really appreciate that.”



Leo Carrillo Ranch Historic Park
6200 Flying Leo Carrillo Lane
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carlsbadca.gov/leocarrillo



SAVE THE DATES FOR 2025

FIESTA AT THE RANCHO
May 10, tickets on sale now

SUMMER CLASSES
June through August, registration opens March 12

LEO CARRILLO RANCH FILM FESTIVAL
Aug. 22, 29 and Sept. 5, free tickets, registration opens in July

DIA DEL LOS MUERTOS AT LEO CARRILLO RANCH
Nov. 1-2, free event

HOLIDAY AT THE RANCHO
Dec. 6, tickets available in August

a) The ranch hosts an annual Día de los Muertos event. b) Guests at the Fiesta at the Rancho fundraiser, which raises money for the California History & Arts Program. c) The site is a popular choice for weddings (photos courtesy of Carrillo Ranch Historic Archive).