Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.

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William "Bill" Louis Tozer,
Pitcher, Los Angeles Angels, Pacific Coast League
(Image Source: Internet)

Bullets and Baseball
By Jeffery G. Harmon

(Reprint from his book, Tales from Southwest Riverside County, 2019)

Gunfire rang out in the clear moonlit night. The group's celebratory laughter transformed to fear as another gunshot pierced through the trees. Taking refuge behind a palm tree, Bill Tozer's broad shoulders remained exposed. Suddenly a bullet pierced his right arm and then another struck his left shoulder. Someone yelled at the shooter to stop firing. As the gun fell silent, Tozer began to wonder if his professional baseball career was over.

Bill Tozer was a star pitcher for the Pacific Coast League's Los Angeles Angels. In 1905 he set the League's shutout record. Beginning October 28 and ending November 22, he pitched 46 consecutive scoreless innings in one season. In 1908 he played one season for the Cincinnati Reds before he was transferred back to Los Angeles. In 1909 he was voted the League's most valuable player.



The Los Angeles Angels at Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs Resort in 1911 for Spring Training.
Source: Images of America: Murrieta Hot Springs

In March 1911, the Los Angeles Angels traveled to the Murrieta Hot Springs Resort for spring training. While practicing at the resort, the Angels experienced multiple mishaps. At batting practice, catcher Fred Abbott threw a bat accidently hitting the first baseman, Howard Deal, on the side of head. The wound required six stitches. When pitcher Lee "Flame" Delhi dove into the pool, his face struck the bottom. Finally, Ed Klein fell into a cactus bed, causing multiple puncture wounds. However, the worst tragedy occurred during the midnight shooting of March 12. (Snelling p. 46)

Louis Guernsey reported, *"Pete Daley, (Bill) Tozer, (Flo) Israel and several guests of the hotel were returning to the new hotel from the dance hall, where a number of the guests had held an informal dance earlier in the evening. Israel retired to his room and some of the boys, including Tozer, decided to awaken him and invite him to take a stroll of a mile or two in the moonlight."* (March 14, 1911, Riverside Daily Press)

Thirty year old Florence "Flo" Israel was a well known horseman from Oakland, California. He and his wife had arrived at the Hot Springs hotel two weeks earlier for a restful vacation. Flo became acquainted with the ball players when they asked him to be an umpire during one of their practice games.

The ballplayers threw pebbles at Israel's hotel window on the second floor, goading him to join their group. He appeared in his bathrobe as he walked out onto the veranda. Upon request, he began to recite several lines from Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to his audience below. Then the ball players sang several songs and asked Israel to hurry up and join them.

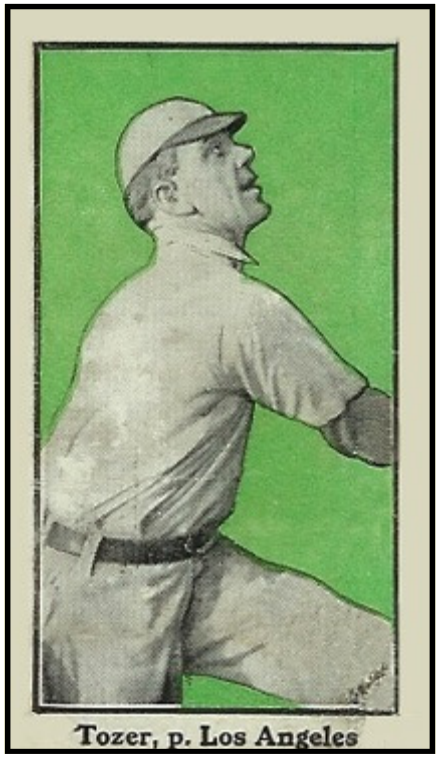
Conflicting witnesses' accounts tried to explain what happened next. According to Guernsey, another hotel guest approached Israel, offered him a

gun, and encouraged Israel to shoot it in the air for fun. Israel began shooting blindly through the palm and pepper trees. He didn't know he had shot anyone until he heard a warning. *"Suddenly somebody said, "Better point that gun up, you'll shoot somebody," whereupon he ceased firing."* (March 14, 1911 Riverside Independent Enterprise)

Bill Tozer, who was shot in both arms, angrily ran to his room, grabbed his revolver and returned to the scene. He fired fives times at Israel, but someone struck Tozer's arm, causing the bullets to go skyward.

Along with Tozer, Louis Guernsey, a special correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, had been shot in the foot. The two injured men were taken to the team's doctor.

"We helped him (Tozer) to Doc Finlay's bungalow and Doc washed his wounds." Guernsey reported. "He then took off my shoes and socks and discovered that the bullet had gone through part of my foot, coming out at the little toe." (March 14, 1911, Riverside Daily Press)



When Guernsey removed his shoe for the doctor, the bullet fell out of his shoe. However, the doctor was unable to remove the bullets from Tozer's arms without surgery. Tozer insisted on being taken to a Los Angeles hospital in order to receive the best care. Tozer was placed into an automobile and Angels' trainer Scott whisked him off to Los Angeles.

At 4 a.m. Tozer and Scott reached Corona. They stopped at the Corona Garage for gas and then they grabbed a bite to eat at a local café. Tozer met with City Marshal W. D. Lyman and demanded a warrant for Israel's arrest. Lyman, unauthorized to issue the warrant, instructed Tozer to go to Riverside and make the request with the county sheriff or the district attorney.

Tozer and Scott then drove to Riverside, arriving after 5 a.m. They met with Dr. C. Van Zwalenburg to have Tozer's wounds examined and redressed. Afterwards Tozer was placed on the 6:25 Salt Lake train to Los Angeles. He was then admitted to the California Hospital and cared for by Dr. W.W. Hitchcock.

Scott found Riverside



County Sheriff Frank P. Wilson and together they drove to Murrieta Hot Springs. Israel was arrested the next morning by Sheriff Wilson without resistance and was taken to Riverside on the Santa Fe afternoon train.

"He (Israel) declares that the shooting was part of a lot of horseplay indulged in by the players. Thinking to frighten them, he fired three shots into the air. He was much surprised to learn that they had taken effect." (March 13, 1911, Riverside Daily Press)

After a thorough investigation, the shooting was ruled an accident. Guernsey decided not to press charges. Earle Rogers, a Los Angeles criminal lawyer hired by Tozer stated, *"The wounds will in all probability deprive Tozer of the ability to earn a living at his occupation as a professional baseball*

player." (March 14, 1911, RIE)

Israel paid his bond money, was released and returned to Murrieta Hot Springs. Afterwards Israel traveled to Los Angeles to visit Bill Tozer. Israel apologized, made amends, and then he and his wife returned to their Oakland home. The incident was never taken to court.

When spring training came to a close, the Angels gathered their wounded and returned to Los Angeles on March 20.

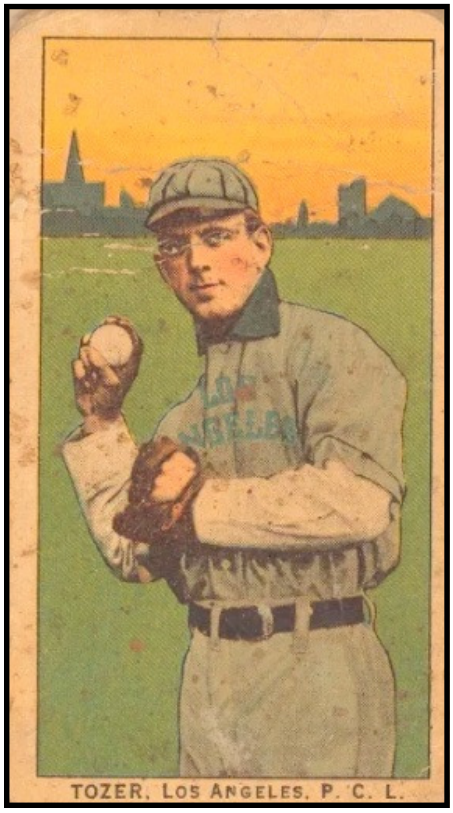
Following his surgery, Bill Tozer's pitching arm quickly healed. His left shoulder took longer to heal due to an infection caused by a cloth fragment from his coat that was lodged in his wound. Tozer donned his baseball uniform on March 30th and began working out with his team. On April 30th, Tozer joined the Angels during their afternoon game against the Vernon Tigers. The Angels defeated Vernon, 6 to 2.

The Los Angeles Angels finished dead last at the end of the Leagues' 1911 season. In 1912, their spring training camp was held on their home field, Washington Park. Years later when the Angels returned to the valley, they chose Elsinore as their spring training camp location.

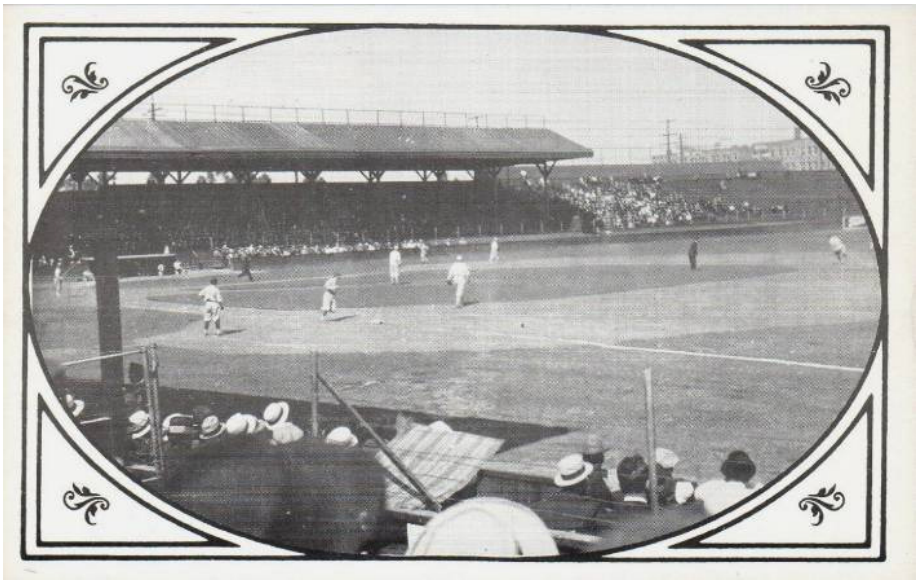
What led to the accidental shooting of Bill Tozer and Lou Guernsey may never be known for certain.

*"It is believed that it will ultimately be discovered that a too copious acquaintance with John Barleycorn (*alcoholic beverages*) was responsible for the near fatal rumpus."* (March 14, 1911, Riverside Independent Enterprise)

The bullet may not have ended Bill Tozer's baseball career, but it did end his chances of playing in the Major League. Prior to the shooting, the Boston Red Sox offered the Angels $3,500 for Tozer, but shortly after he was injured the offer was rescinded.



By the 1920s, Tozer's name disappeared from the sports pages. Then in 1942, Sam Gibson, a San Francisco Seals pitcher, pitched his 39th shutout inning. Most believed he had set a new league record until the archives revealed Bill Tozer's 1905 record. At the time, Tozer was retired from baseball and working at the San Francisco Mint. A forgotten legend, whose career took a hit from a bullet, was finally recognized as one of the Pacific Coast League's greatest pitcher.



Washington Park, Home of the Los Angeles Angels, Pacific Coast League (1911—1925) (Source: Postcard, eBay image)

Museum Update

This summer we have been working on several archiving projects.

We had a volunteer who spent several hours scanning photos and documents from the Bezanson Collection. We appreciate the hard work and time on this project.

We have also been photographing the museum items that are displayed in the exhibits. We will be adding the photos into our Past Perfect archiving software.

On Saturday, August 22nd at 10 am, President Jeffery Harmon will present the first of a four part series on the Mexican American War in Southern California. Come join us to learn about this war and its impact in Southern California.

As the summer break comes to a close, Murrieta students will return to school in August. We will be hosting our 3rd Grade tours beginning in September. We want to thank our returning volunteers for their continued support for this program. If you would like to volunteer, please contact us.

Please follow us on Facebook or Instagram @murrieta museum or on our website at
info@murrietahistoricalsociety.org

If you have any questions, please call us at: 951-677-7758

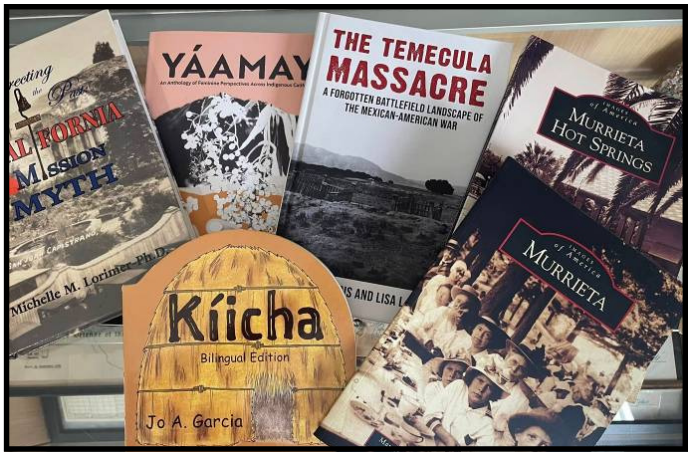
Thank you,

Annette Jennings,

Museum Director

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The General Monthly Board Meeting is held on the second Monday at 5:30 p.m. Please join us at the Murrieta Museum



The Murrieta Museum,
41810 Juniper Street
at Hunt Memorial Park.

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