

# The Chatsworth Pioneer Church

- Originally the Chatsworth Community Church, located at 10051 Topanga Canyon Blvd.
- The Church was built in 1903 with volunteer labor.
- In 1965, it was moved to Oakwood Memorial Park.
- Church services continue every Sunday at 10 am.



# The Chatsworth Pioneer Church

- In the beginning, church services were held in homes, and weather permitting outside under the oak trees.
- When the Santa Susana School was built in 1890, services were held there.
- In 1903 the Church was built by volunteer labor.
- This was the first Protestant Church in the San Fernando Valley, incorporated as the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chatsworth in November 1903.
- The Church was known as the Chatsworth Community Church, as all denominations were accepted.



- The Community Church was built on land donated by Nelson A. Gray located at 10051 Topanga, half way between Devonshire and Lassen on the west side of the street.
- The men who were building the Southern Pacific Tunnels above Chatsworth helped.
- The Ladies' Aid Society gave rummage sales, bake sales, church suppers, and sponsored many other activities to raise money for the church.



The Parsonage (home of the pastor) shown on the left was added in 1927.

- From 1904 to 1906, the Church was also used as a high school.
- There was no water on the grounds until N.A. Gray piped water from Hialeah Springs in the hills north of Chatsworth, about 1906.
- The church bell, cast in the East and shipped here for the local school in the 1890's, was given to the church when the Santa Susana Schoolhouse with its bell tower was replaced by the first Chatsworth Park Elementary School in 1916.
- Ringing the bell had to be done just right to keep the ropes from slipping off the pulley system, otherwise a tall ladder and several men were required to fix it.



- In the 1920's both White Oak Hall (1921) and the Parsonage (1927) were added. White Oak Hall was the community gathering place.
- During fires, floods, and disasters, the conveniently-located church doubled as headquarters for the Red Cross and other emergency services.





- The church served the West Valley area for 60 years. Social activities, youth events and town hall meetings as well as church services were held in the distinctive white frame building.
- Sunday School Classes were provided for children and adults with Dale Evans teaching the Adult class whenever she was available.
- A long list of the Clergy that served at the church is available.
- This Church was the center of Chatsworth community life until the 1950's when other churches were built as the population grew.

- In 1958, the name changed from Chatsworth Community Church to Chatsworth First Methodist Church.
- The Church was sold in 1962 and leased back by the Chatsworth Methodist Church until vacated in May of 1963.
- The Methodist Church moved to a new building further north on Topanga just south of Stoney Point, leaving the old church scheduled for demolition by the owner for future development.



# A Historical Monument

- On February 15, 1963 efforts were successful to have the church declared Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument #14 due to a letter written by Katharine Johnson.
- This action officially prevented the removal, destruction or alteration of the building for a period of six months to a year, allowing time for the communities concerned to take action to provide for relocation or preservation of the Historical Monument.



# The Historical Society is founded

- In April 17, 1963, the Chatsworth Historical Society officially organized to determine what to do with the Church. The founding members were Katherine and R.L. "Kelly" Johnson, Virginia Watson, Charles Janess, Arther Honey, Keith and Sheila Watts and Bill and Lila Schepler.
- Virginia has said that the founding meeting was at Katherine Johnson's home, sitting around the kitchen table trying to decide what to do to save the church.



1959 Commemorative Plate owned by  
Historical Society founding members  
Keith and Sheila Watts

## Monument

The Chatsworth Historical Society was officially notified by the Cultural Heritage Board that the present owner of the Chatsworth Community Church Building will donate the building to the society.

John Spinks, who bought the land and the buildings from the First Methodist Church of Chatsworth before it was declared an historical monument, was highly praised for his philanthropic action by Mrs. Henry Watson, spokesman for the society.

Plans to move the building from its present location at 10051 Topanga Canyon to a new location are underway as Spinks has other plans for developing the land.

Oakwood Memorial Park, 22601 Lassen St. has offered a \$20,000 parcel of land to place the building after the society has arranged for the move.

# Planning how to save the Church

- Lila Schepler stepped in as Historical Society President following the illness of Charles Janess.
- The property owner John Spinks offered to sell the building to the group for \$500. He was developing the land around the church and wanted to have it moved.
- In November 1963, Frank Enderly of the Oakwood Memorial Park Association offered a suitable site for the relocation.
- In April of 1964, John Spinks decided to donate the building to the Historical Society if they would move it off the property in 90 days.
- Fundraising to move the church had been started by a \$1,000 donation by Dale and Roy Rogers from a savings account their daughter Debbie had before she died.

# An Appreciation Reception at the Home of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers

- On June 7, 1964 An “Appreciation Reception” to honor those involved was held at the ranch home of Roy and Dale Rogers. Over 200 people attended.
- Boy Scout Troop 26 and Explorer Post 26 both assisted with traffic, parking and checking gate entry invitations. The Junior Women’s Club set up, decorated, and provided refreshments, serving as hostesses for the event.



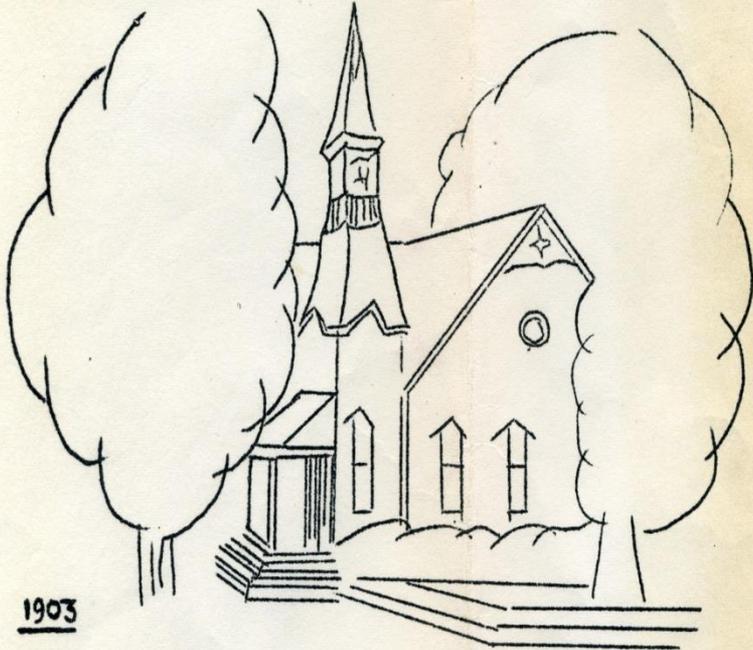
HOSTESS—Dale Evans and Chatsworth Honorary Mayor Roy Rogers will host an appreciation reception at their Chatsworth home Sunday, June 7, complimenting John Spinks and family and the board of directors of the Oakwood Memorial Park. Mr. Spinks donated the historic church to the local Historical Society which will sponsor the reception, and the cemetery board has donated a location for the building.

HELP YOUR COMMUNITY

◦◦ PLAN A BETTER FUTURE ◦◦

BY RETAINING THE

◦◦ BEST OF ITS PAST ◦◦



## Fundraising Continues

- The Historical Society continued to raise funds to relocate the Church and for future restoration of the Church.
- Boy Scout Troop 26 made 40 Miniature Church Banks that were placed at local businesses to help collect funds.

The emergency is due to the fact that John Spinks, owner of the property on which the church stands, has a prospective buyer for the property and would like to have the building moved as soon as possible.

If the Society does not have some tangible proof of its efforts to raise the necessary \$8000 to move the building, to present to the Cultural Heritage Board by their meeting date of Dec. 4, there is a strong possibility that the old church may be destroyed.

With this to pressure their action, the board has set the date for its fund raising campaign to begin on Dec. 1, and continue through Feb. 28. A probable 500 letters will be sent out on the new letterhead stationery, to prospective donors, individuals, organizations and businesses.

## Deadline Set for Monument Fund Drive

- Time had run out on the 90 days the Historical Society had to move the Church based on the agreement made with John Spinks, when he donated it.
- Proof was needed that \$8,000 had been raised to move the church, or the monument could be destroyed.
- The Historical Society requested a new deadline from the LA Cultural Board and was granted until **Feb. 1, 1965**. They succeeded in getting donated services and additional assistance to move the Church at the end of January with just a few days to spare, and accomplished the task for under \$2,500.

# Moving the Church

- Jan 25, 1965 - In preparation, the foundation was removed after the building was raised on jacks, then set on supports with wheels.



# Old Chatsworth Church Cornerstone Discovered

City Hall Bureau

A Bible and church records dating back almost two-thirds of a century were uncovered yesterday afternoon by workmen preparing to move the Chatsworth Community Church to a new location.

The church, oldest building in Chatsworth, was erected in 1903. Preparations are under way to move it from its original site at 10051 Topanga Canyon Blvd. to Oakwood Memorial Park, 22601 Lassen St.

In the cornerstone of the old building, house-movers Osborne Debert, Richard Newsome, Harry Voss and Jerry Duggan

discovered the Bible, a Sunday school attendance roster date Jan. 8, 1903, and a membership list of the church's ladies aid society.

Mrs. Henry M. Watson, historiographer of the Chatsworth Historical Society, said the presence of the papers was known, but that after the church was jacked off its foundation, they could not be found.

**LATER**, the house-movers discovered the Bible and papers in a hollowed space at the side of the stone. The hollow was covered with a sheet of tin and fitted against an adjoining stone.

Among the names found on the Sunday school list, according to Mrs. Watson, was that of Richard Williams, now 71, of 10416 Hillview Ave. A Chatsworth native, Williams attended the ceremonies at which the mementos were put in the locally-quarried cornerstone.

**MRS. WATSON** said the other paper and the Bible were badly insect-eaten and no attempt to read them would be made until steps could be taken to insure their safety.

The church was designated a historical monument of the City of Los Angeles on Feb. 15, 1963.

- During that process, the Church Cornerstone revealed several items including a bible, a Sunday School attendance roster dated January 8, 1903 and a membership list of the church's ladies aid society.

The items were saved, but exposure to the air after being stored in the stone with no protective container, caused them to crumble within the week.

# Moving Day Arrives

Wednesday, January 27, 1965

Hallie Abel, of Pacific Bell;

Lila Schepler, President of the  
Chatsworth Historical Society;

Councilman John C. Cassidy,

Carl Dentzell, Director of the LA  
Cultural Heritage Board;

Ray Moon and his boss, of Pacific  
Bell were on hand to help arrange  
for the wires to be cut or  
lowered...and reattached as  
needed.

The group posed for a photo just  
before the church was moved.



# Video Moving the Pioneer Church

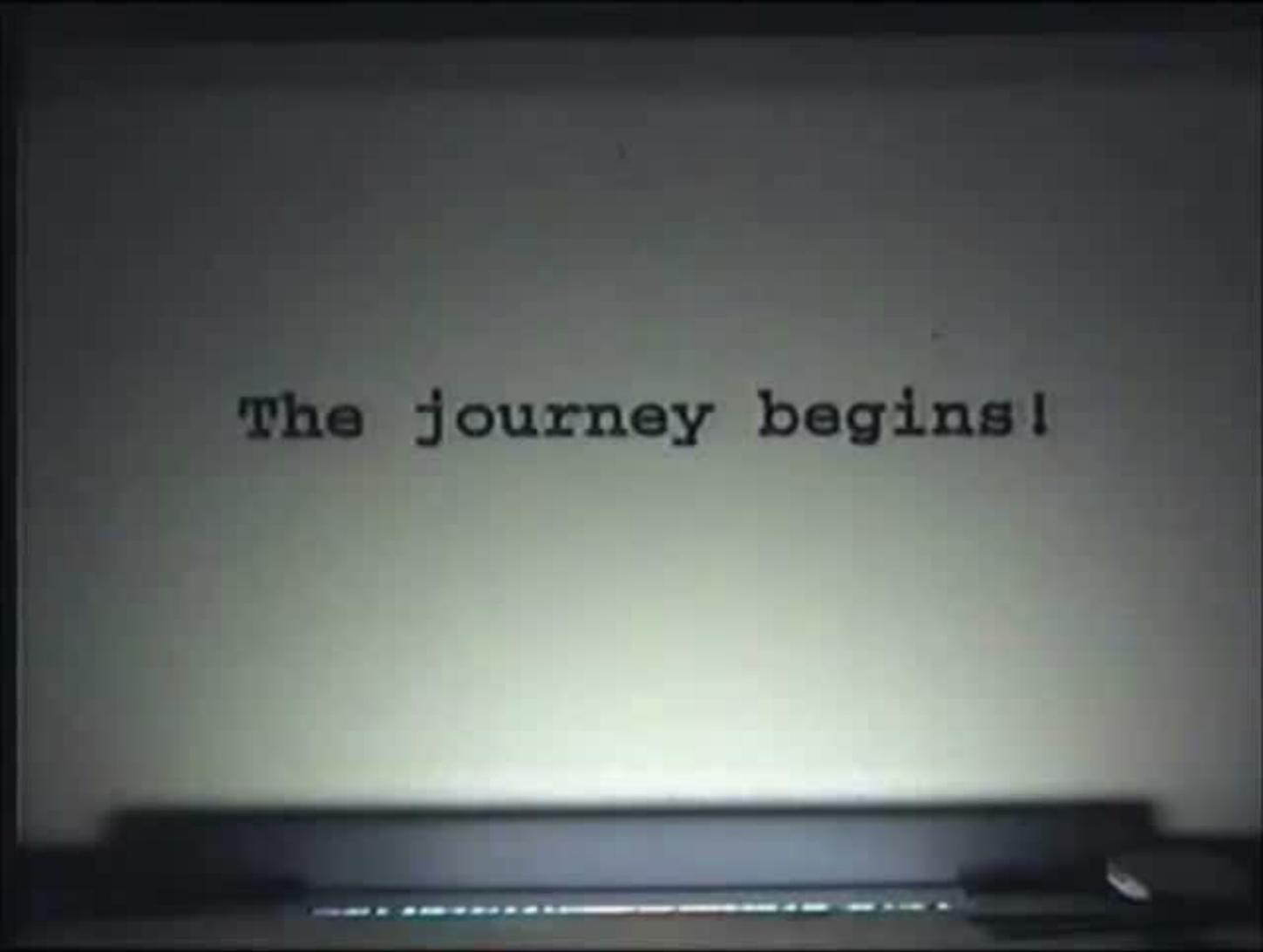
Wednesday,  
January 27, 1965

A 2 minute clip of a  
home movie made  
by Keith and Sheila  
Watts.

YouTube link at:

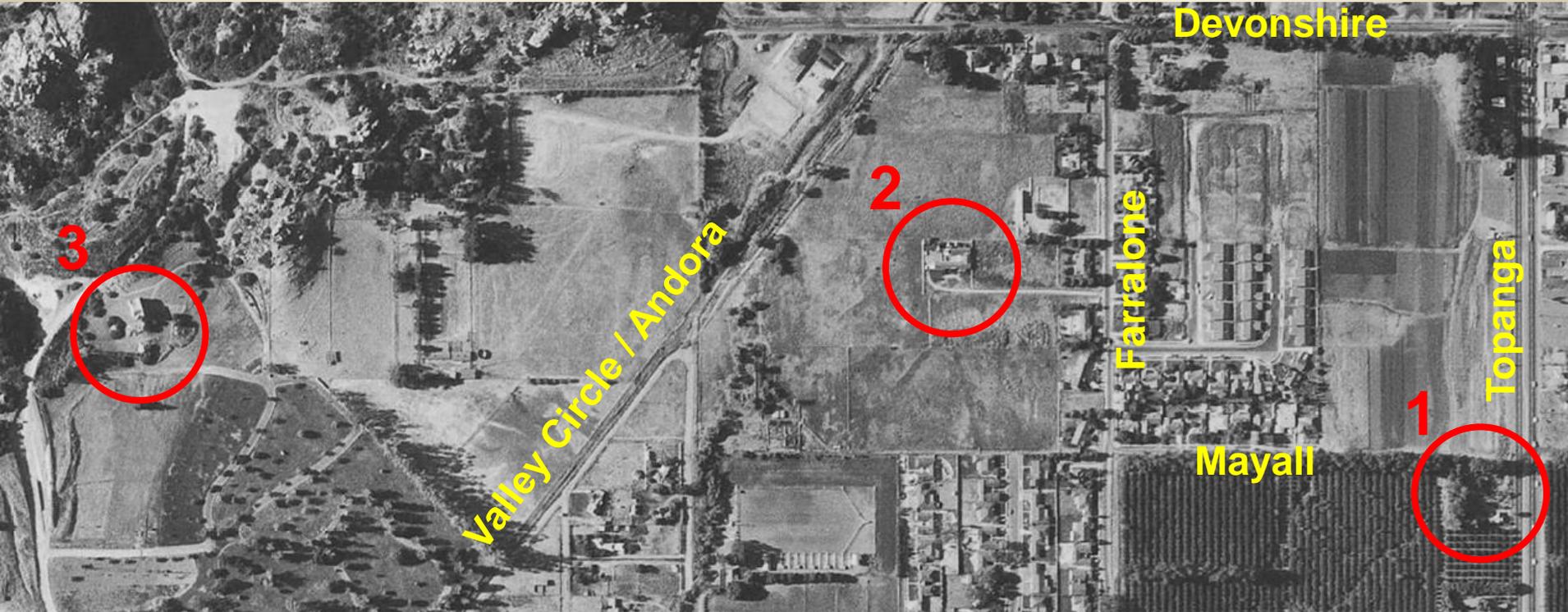
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3TYzaJF7Xs>

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The journey begins!

# 1967 Aerial Photo of Move Locations



- 1 Previous location of Church at Topanga; 2 Orrin Sage Ranch at 10151 Farralone  
3 Church at Oakwood in 1967 -- Street names are in yellow --

- Wednesday, January 27, 1965
- The Church rolls out on to Topanga to start the two day journey on back roads, across fields and creeks to Oakwood Cemetery.



Sheila Watts kept her children out of school “sick” for the day to watch this historic event, but had some explaining to do when they showed up in the newspaper the next day.





Along the way,  
Pacific Telephone Company  
and the Department of  
Water and Power  
cut lines and re-spliced  
them afterwards to allow the  
church to pass without  
having to remove the  
steeple.

Picture at right is Farralone  
and Romar.







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Four Photos  
taken on the  
Sage Ranch





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- Fences needed to be removed and replaced as the church moved along.
- And in this case the creek needed to be filled in before the Church could cross it.



All of this was done under the supervision of Bill and Frank Schepler who did most of the work.



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Having arrived, the church was later rotated by Oakwood Park Association to look out over the cemetery, which provided a much better view of the church.



- After accomplishing the church relocation, the restoration presented new challenges. The goal was to restore it to its original condition, however vandalism and the October 1967 fire scorching the building created additional problems. The Church sat on stilts boarded up as more funds were raised for work to be done.
- In his book Window Into the Past, Bill Schepler accounted for the funds required to accomplish this task in his article “Ignorance is Bliss”.

Moving and related expenses .....	\$ 2,475.00
Permits (not including the expediter's time) .....	650.00
Drawings and Engineering studies .....	825.00
Fire Insurance .....	700.00
Completion Bond (we hated this one) .....	1,200.00
Concrete foundation .....	1,400.00
Wood foundation (wood donated) .....	705.00
Concrete facing for foundation .....	340.00
Interior structural changes .....	595.00
New asphalt shingles .....	1,300.00
Plumbing .....	535.00
Recovering part of the exterior .....	770.00
Painting the exterior .....	600.00
Replacing an interior wall .....	160.00

Plastering and repairs .....	575.00
600 gallon holding tank .....	310.00
Porch and walks .....	790.00
Cleaning walls and interior .....	125.00
Painting and carpenter work (\$10 per hour) .....	945.00
Painting and labor (\$5 per hour) .....	930.00
Guard (checking building. twice a night for 5 months) .....	235.00
Paint .....	130.00
Lumber, doors, hardware, supplies, etc. ....	595.00
Transoms and glass including labor .....	345.00
Miscellaneous – plywood, nails, tractor work, patching materials, expediter at Building Dept., etc. ....	810.00
	<hr/>
	Total--\$19,725.00

All of these accomplishments were celebrated on April 25, 1976 with a Re-dedication of the Church, culminating 12 years of work moving and restoring the Chatsworth Community Church, now re-named the Pioneer Church.





Dr. Carl Dentzel, from the LA Cultural Heritage Board and Dale Evans Rogers spoke at the Dedication Services.





- In November of 1981, the congregation of St. Mary the Virgin, a Traditional Episcopal Church, led by The Reverend Dr. L. Noel Stipkovich, was permitted to lease the property.
- Since that time, the congregation of St. Mary the Virgin Anglican-Rite Catholic Church has occupied the building.

- The Reverend Russell Fry became the second rector of the small congregation, and he stayed until 1988.
- The Reverend Anthony Rasch became the rector in 1989 and is continuing in that capacity to the present time.

### **Improvements Made**

- Many improvements have been made in the building. A new roof was added by the Oakwood Memorial Park Association and the congregation of St. Mary's.
- The building was painted and new shutters were put in place by Tom Horton as an Eagle Scout project.
- The floors were refinished earlier by Brian Hayes, also an Eagle Scout project.
- The original light fixtures have been replaced, carpeting and ceiling fans added, the pews refinished and a few added, and many other beautification projects completed.

## Bell Replaced

- The original bell that hung in the steeple was ordered from Philadelphia by N. A. Gray, who donated the land upon which to build the church in 1903. The Methodist Church kept the bell when they moved out and built an arch on the grounds to house it. However, it was stolen and never recovered.
- A carillon replaced the sound of the bell until 1993, Robert R. Jones, a member of St. Mary's congregation, found a new bell, bought it, thoroughly researched how to hang it, and placed it in the tower in memory of his mother, Marcella Lyda Dixon, and his maternal grandparents.

## **Original Window Restored**

The vandalism of earlier years had destroyed all but one of the original stained glass windows of the church. The new stained glass windows were a testament to the perseverance of the congregation and the efforts of the Chatsworth Historical Society. The remnants of the remaining window were collected by Lori Mitchell and painstakingly restored. Her mother, Dianne Howard, contributed the replacement center piece.

## **A Proud Centennial**

The Pioneer Church celebrated its centennial on October 23, 2003. After a hundred years of service to the community, the church continues as a monument to the efforts and faith of its builders and to those generations who have followed.

Photo taken from the  
driveway of the  
Orrin Sage  
Chatsworth Ranch,  
10151 Farralone Ave.  
circa 1965



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# 1967 Aerial Photo of Move Locations



1 Previous location of Church at Topanga; 2 Orrin Sage Ranch at 10151 Farralone  
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# Interview with Virginia Watson

2003

A 6 minute clip of  
Huell Howser  
interviewing Virginia  
Watson, from the  
Huell Howser show  
“Chatsworth”

With Father Anthony  
Rasch and Linda and  
Andre van der Valk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM78ZVGDALs&t=9s>

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# Sources/Acknowledgements

Pioneer Church Artwork – by Richard Harsh (title page)

“A Story of the United Methodist Church, Chatsworth, Ca 1888-1988” by Lila Swartz Schepler

“The Pioneer Church” history written by Virginia Watson for the Saint Mary the Virgin

Anglican-Rite Catholic Church website [www.stmaryanglican.org/pioneerchurch](http://www.stmaryanglican.org/pioneerchurch)

Schepler Slide/Photo collection, property of the Chatsworth Historical Society

Movie: “The Pioneer Church, Chatsworth California...An Odyssey” prepared by Keith and Sheila Watts for the Chatsworth Historical Society

A 6 minute clip of Huell Howser interviewing Virginia Watson, from the 2003 Huell Howser show “Chatsworth”

Newspaper Articles

Prepared by Ann and Ray Vincent, Chatsworth Historical Society, May 2010, revised April 2016, Mar 2022