

John S. Todd

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Father *of the* City

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*of* Lakewood

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*A History*

# The John S. Todd Story

By Richard Howland

From a boyhood in Los Angeles, through service in World War II, raising a family, building a city, serving the residents of Lakewood for fifty years, and creating an enduring legacy of municipal jurisprudence, the story of John S. Todd is the stuff of legend.

In the time of the Pilgrims, John Todd's ancestors journeyed from Europe across the Atlantic. On his mother's side, an English ancestor married a Mayflower passenger whose first husband had been hanged at Plymouth.

The German side of his family joined the utopian New Harmony Movement in Pennsylvania in 1805. The founder required members to transfer their wealth to him, and he promised to take care of them for life. But the leader did not permit members to have children, and John Todd's ancestor came with a son and a daughter.

So the leader kicked out the father but kept the son as an indentured servant until the son was 18. That son was Todd's great-great-grandfather.

Many of these ancestors helped to establish cities in the New World and held official positions. Considering his pioneer stock, it is no surprise that John Todd generations later played an essential role in the founding of a city in California, Lakewood, whose existence depended on a new concept of local government devised by Todd. His brainchild was the contract city, or a municipal government that contracts with other public agencies and private businesses to provide services. In 1954, when Lakewood became a city, many critics believed its style of government was nearly as utopian as the New Harmony Movement had been.

## **Boyhood and education**

John Sanford Todd was born July 27, 1919, at Grand Forks, N.D., to John W. and Helen Todd. His sister Frances was ten years older, and his sister Mary was five years older. They called him "Buddy." His father had a doctorate in psychology and had studied with the early scholars in the new science.

Buddy's father established the psychology

department at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, and the University of Southern California later invited John W. Todd to create a psychology department. The family moved to California when Buddy was six months old, and settled in southwest Los Angeles. Spurning the trains and streetcars of the east, Los Angeles became famous for its fascination with automobiles, and Buddy was a car buff from his earliest days.

"I could identify every car on the road by make and year when I was 4. I loved the cars," Todd remembered in an interview. On sabbatical from USC in 1927, his father went to teach at the University of Chicago.

"All five of us set out in our 1925 Studebaker. I rode in the middle between my father and mother. It took a week or two. On steep hills, we would blow a rod, because the engine had a splash oil system, not pressure. Going down hill, there was not enough oil going to the cylinders. At the bottom of each big hill, we pulled into a garage and spent a night or two waiting for repairs. The mechanics were not very skilled in those days. Anyone with a wrench could call himself a mechanic."

The youngest Todd did not like Chicago.

"I always had lived in suburbs. In Chicago, I had to play with my (toy) cars on the windowsill because there was no place to play outside. Those also were the days of Al Capone. Some gangsters blew up a barbershop down the street, for not paying protection money."

At the end of his father's sabbatical, the Todd family returned to Los Angeles, where John attended Santa Barbara Avenue Grammar School, Audubon Junior High, and Manual Arts High School, where he was captain of the debate team.

Both of John's sisters graduated from USC. Mary was a beauty queen, selected to be Helen of Troy, and was the student body vice president. She married Larry Pritchard, the student body president. Frances also went to USC. She married Jim Harmon, a Canadian who attended USC.

After he received a driver's license in 1935, John bought his first car, a 1924 Chevrolet that did not run, for \$17. He spent the summer working on it. Later he overhauled engines for his father and neighbors. His next car was a 1930 Desoto Roadster.

Due to his mechanical aptitude, John wanted to become an engineer, but he was not good at math. He became a pre-med student at USC, but lost interest when he had to carve a pig fetus. He was drawn to government, so he became a political science major. By the time he graduated from USC, he had decided on a career in law.

### **The world at war**

But the United States had entered World War II. The Army Air Corps drafted Todd in 1942. He learned aircraft armament. The corps sent him to the Aleutian Islands, where the Japanese were threatening Alaska.

When the Japanese retreated, Todd's unit returned by boat to Seattle. Through family connections, he had met Frances McGuire on his way through Seattle to Alaska, and he visited her again on his way through Seattle to Los Angeles. They decided to marry.



John S. Todd (center right) with his family in the early 1920s

"I told my commanding officer on the train that I lived in Los Angeles and wanted to get off the train in L.A. to get married," Todd recalled. "He had been drinking, and he said OK. We honeymooned in Big Bear. I reported back to Pecos, Texas. The orderly didn't know I had left, because the commanding officer had never filed the paperwork. So I had been AWOL, but there was no record of it."

Then his squadron moved to Oklahoma, where Frances joined him. Next, the Army gave Todd a choice of going to England to be a gunner on a B-17 or going to Kansas to work on a B-29. At that time, the Germans were shooting down several B-17s every day. He picked Kansas. But soon his unit moved by boat to Guam in the Pacific.

"The Marines already had taken Guam. When we arrived, we went over the sides of the ship on nets, and cut trees ashore to make space for our aircraft to land. The B-29s came and started bombing Japan. I was loading bombs aboard the aircraft. I always had suffered back trouble, and it got so I couldn't walk. I went to a hospital for two months for bed rest."

His brother-in-law, Larry Pritchard, joined Todd in Guam. As an enlisted man, Todd could obtain beer, but no liquor. As a captain, Pritchard could get liquor from the officers club. He visited Todd and brought Scotch, which was John's favorite. His sister Frances also sent liquor. If sent through the regular mail, any liquor usually disappeared, stolen by servicemen in Hawaii.

So Frances filled a shampoo bottle with Scotch and mailed it to John. "I was on my way to a shower when it dawned on me that I should check the contents of the shampoo bottle, because I knew Frankie was clever. I discovered the Scotch just in time."

Pritchard was the chief intelligence officer on Guam, but Todd did not know his brother-in-law's assignment because it was secret. Japanese soldiers still were hiding on Guam, and Americans still feared an attack from Japan.

"Larry ordered us to carry a carbine, helmet and gas mask while working on the planes. He would visit me and would ask why no one was following those orders. I told him the orders were from some stupid jerk that didn't understand we couldn't do our work while wearing all of that equipment. After the war, he told me the orders had come from him."

U.S. planes from Tinian Island near Guam dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. "On the day we heard about the first A-bomb hitting Hiroshima, we went berserk. We got drunk. The next day, an old master sergeant shook me awake and said we had a mission. I told him not to bother me because the war was over. He stormed away. Of course, the war was not really over until the second A-bomb hit Nagasaki. I probably would have participated in an invasion of Japan, and I probably wouldn't be here today, if not for those bombs."



John S. Todd joined the Army Air Corps in 1942.

# A plan for Lakewood

After marriage and military service, home and family beckoned. The place would be Lakewood.

After the Japanese surrendered, Todd returned to Los Angeles. Frances was working as a secretary for a law firm. John went to law school on the G.I. Bill. When he finished law school, a friend said Lakewood Village might be a good place to practice. In 1949, Todd found an office on Los Cerritos Diagonal (now Norse Way), near Carson Street and Lakewood Boulevard.

“It was all farmland except Lakewood Village and the Douglas Aircraft plant. I spent just about my last \$200 on office furniture. Frances quit her Los Angeles job and hung out a shingle as a public stenographer. She also was my secretary.”

Later they found a house on Ocana Avenue at Harvey Way in a tract called Lakewood City, built in 1941. Todd used a Cal Vet loan to buy the house. He joined the Lakewood Taxpayers Association, whose first major accomplishment was to persuade the county to revoke permits for smelly hog farms near the San Gabriel River.

“Then we wanted streetlights,” Todd related.

There was an incredible demand for housing because so many servicemen had returned from the war, and many wanted to live in Southern California, after passing through the state’s military bases on their way to war. By 1953, there were more than 100,000 people living in the 25-square-mile greater Lakewood area, which had been mostly bean fields a few years earlier.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors had created the Lakewood Park, Recreation and Parkway District in 1948. The supervisors in 1953 relinquished control of the district to an independent governing panel, elected by residents, and Todd became the first president of the board. The district improved most of the street parkways with grass, sprinklers, and trees.

As the Lakewood Park District was gaining civic stature, the city of Long Beach pursued its own plans for Lakewood, annexing most of the area south of Carson Street. Many Lakewood residents did not want to join Long Beach. Lakewood was a new community in ascendance, and Long Beach was an old city in decline, they thought.

Todd argued that protesting annexation by petition was a valid tactic, even before Long Beach called for

the actual elections. His judgment was soon upheld in a landmark court case that ruled in favor of Todd's petition drives. The protest plan was so successful, in fact, that the only section annexed to Long Beach in 1953 was the Lakewood Village tract.

Critics said it was unfair to other county taxpayers living in the county's 45 cities for such a large community as Lakewood to remain dependent on county services. No one seemed to think that Lakewood could afford to incorporate as a city itself. It would be too expensive to build a city hall and establish a police force.

Todd thought: Why not incorporate Lakewood as a city, but continue to receive services from the county, while paying directly for these services? Boyle Engineering of Santa Ana, retained by a committee of Lakewood businesses, proposed that a new city could contract with Los Angeles County for road maintenance and building inspections, contract with the county Sheriff's Department for law enforcement, remain in the county's Consolidated Fire Protection District and the existing street lighting districts, and hire a private firm for trash collection. A "real city," with all the strengths of community identity and neighborhood values, could be made by contracting for services.

The county Board of Supervisors set an election on March 9, 1954, in which the people of Lakewood supported incorporation by a margin of 3 to 2, or 7,524 to 4,868. Most neighborhoods north of Carson Street had resisted annexation to Long Beach, and now they had

their own city.

"As the results came in, the incorporation office on Lakewood Boulevard became a bedlam," Todd wrote in a 1969 memoir. "People were screaming and yelling, and more and more people were crowding in to (join) the celebration." Lakewood's first city council hired Todd as city attorney at a monthly salary of \$500, Nita Birch as city clerk for \$400 a month and Guy Halferty as executive secretary for \$400 a month.

Lakewood's approach to local government has earned the city a special place in the history of American municipalities. Rather than taking on the expense of creating its own police, fire and street maintenance departments, Lakewood's founders came up with the idea of hiring county agencies to continue providing these services as they had before Lakewood incorporated.

Eventually, the new city also signed contracts with other public agencies and private companies to provide such services as animal control and trash collection.

The critics of the Lakewood Plan called Lakewood a "phantom city." Within a few months, the strengths of the Lakewood Plan proved any skeptics wrong. Lakewood prospered so spectacularly that the city became a model for the incorporation of 41 new communities in Los Angeles County, more than 130 throughout California, and several hundred more throughout the nation.

Contract services today represent about 40 percent of the city's operating budget. Lakewood contracts

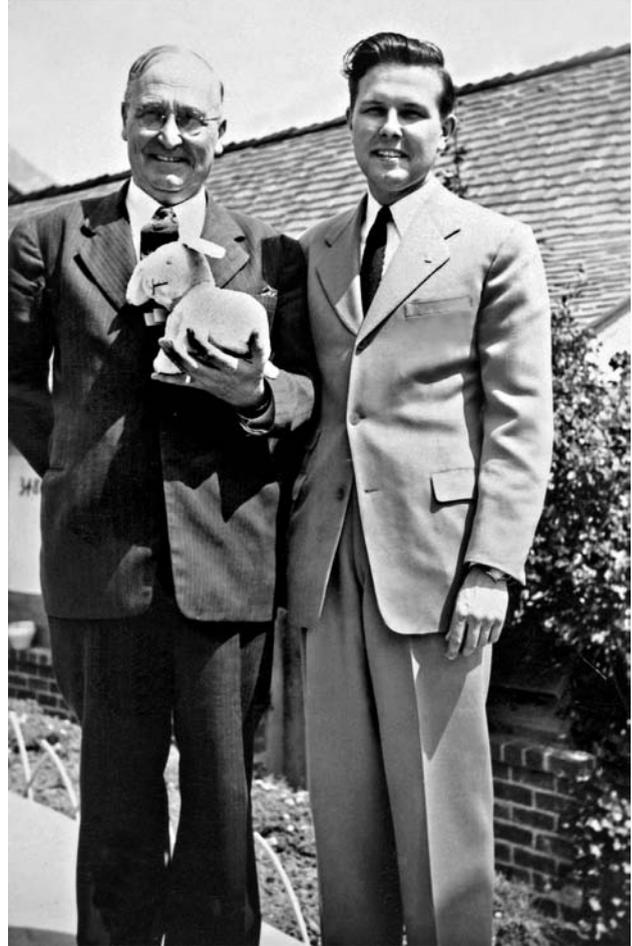
with private firms for trash collection, traffic signal maintenance, and street sweeping. By contract, Los Angeles County provides law enforcement, road repair, building inspection and civil engineering services, and street light maintenance. The city also contracted with the County Fire Department for a fire safety training program in city schools.

Parks, recreation and cultural activities, community development programs, parkways, medians and tree maintenance, the water utility and general administrative services are provided directly by the city through the services of approximately 170 full-time employees.

Today, Lakewood still offers the qualities of life that make life in Southern California enjoyable – a community-oriented city hall, outstanding park facilities, efficient public programs, as well as sound law enforcement and fire protection services, thanks to Todd's pioneering Lakewood Plan for city services.

### **1950s: Testing the plan**

Confident of the new city's future, voters approved bringing the self-governing Lakewood Park, Recreation and Parkway District under the city's jurisdiction. That led to a remarkable day in 1957 when the city council and the new recreation commission dedicated three new parks, each named for a patriot of South American liberation in recognition of the city's annual Pan American Festival.



John and John W. Todd in 1946.



Lakewood's remarkable story inspired national interest in 1954, and John S. Todd was in the news.

The city was administered from a modest storefront office at Lakewood Center until 1958 when a new, half-million-dollar city administration building was dedicated. Next door, a new library and a new Lakewood Sheriff's Station expanded the Lakewood Civic Center that soon grew to include the Lakewood Post Office.

By 1959, when Lakewood was five years old,

one-third of all the cities in Los Angeles County had incorporated as Lakewood Plan cities. With so much interest in municipal contracting, Lakewood released "The Lakewood Story" – a 30-minute documentary film describing the creation of the city and the formation of the Lakewood Plan for city government. Todd figures prominently in the film.

By the end of the 1950s, Todd had sat through hundreds of city council meetings, written hundreds of resolutions and ordinances, and had evolved a government structure that successfully met the needs of a growing population with increasing numbers of young people and new pressures for more city services.

### **1960s: Growing city**

And, Lakewood wanted more: more retail development, more schools, more parks, more sheriff's deputies, more fire stations, more opportunities for young people, and more bright promises for the future.

Todd's Lakewood Plan provided the means. Parkway panels along major streets were landscaped. Twenty-five miles of city streets were resurfaced under the city's local streets maintenance program. Monte Verde Park opened as a day-camp facility. Water main replacement had begun with a \$1.1-million, 5-year program. Pedestrian signals were added to major intersections.

Although the city had begun in the early 1950s by resisting annexation by Long Beach, Lakewood's growth

was completed in the 1960s when neighborhoods in the eastern part of what is now Lakewood were annexed, expanding the city to its current 9.5 square miles. The annexations boosted Lakewood's population and created a community of greater ethnic and housing diversity.

A larger Lakewood sought new ways to preserve the quality of life in the city's quiet neighborhoods. In the early 1960s, Congress passed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, which offered incentives and funding for innovative ideas and programs to help improve police agencies and neighborhood security. Lakewood and the Sheriff's Department, strong partners in contract law enforcement under the Lakewood Plan, looked for new ways to provide law enforcement for a larger Lakewood and the new cities served by the Lakewood Sheriff's Station.

The result was the hugely successful Sky Knight Helicopter patrol program, begun in Lakewood in 1966 and soon expanded to other Lakewood Plan cities under agreements developed by Todd.

Lakewood and the neighborhoods east of the San Gabriel River needed more parks, too. Bloomfield Park was acquired from the county and the site of Palms Park was purchased. The city also acquired use of the Edison right-of-way on the east bank of the San Gabriel River, the start of what is now Rynerson Park.

Lakewood's emphasis on community development and the preservation of its neighborhoods, earned the city recognition as a finalist in the All American



Sons John (left) and Michael (right) with Frances Todd

Cities competition.

While Todd and the other founders of Lakewood were creating a city, John and Frances Todd created a family. They had two sons, John Allan Todd, born Dec. 9, 1953, and Michael Arthur Todd, born June 16, 1955.

"My mother was a disciplinarian and my father was the go-to person for support and having fun," John Allan said recently. "We had a ritual of getting a haircut and going to the playground where they had ponies

and a merry-go-round. He also allowed us to turn our whole backyard into a go-cart track. My father put in a swimming pool and taught me how to swim and dive. We would swim and then chat, talking about life.”

Sheriff’s deputies visited the Todd house when John Allan and Mike got a little wild with firecrackers or with their garage band. It didn’t look good for deputies to come to the city attorney’s house, their father told them.

“When I was in Boy Scouts, my father tried to go with me as often as he could,” Mike Todd remembered. “But he hurt his back in World War II, so he could not go on a lot of campouts that required sleeping on the ground.

“He was tired when he came home from work, but he always had time to sit down with us and make Spanish flash cards or whatever. He always thinks of other people. He always wanted to make sure my brother and I were OK,” Mike added. John and Frances loved to entertain friends. They had a bridge club. They had cocktail parties. John barbecued turkeys for Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. He barbecued steaks, too. The family often rented a house in Oceanside, where John fished in the surf.

“Several families participated,” John Allan remembered. “The rule was that kids were in bed after sundown, and the adults would bring in the fish. When I was 4 or 5, my dad taught me how to surf fish. I became addicted. Wherever we vacationed, he was my buddy.”

Their father left the door open to his sons to go into



John and Millie Todd

law and join their father’s firm. “But he said to follow our hearts and follow our souls,” said John Allan.

With a doctorate in biochemistry from USC, John Allan now is a vice president of marketing for Nugen Technologies, a Northern California biotechnology firm that makes equipment for genomic analysis. He lives near Concord. Mike lives in Eugene, Oregon and works as a telecommuter for an executive search company in Scottsdale, Arizona.

# The city matures

Lakewood grew and prospered, but conflicts inside and outside the city challenged its optimism.

As John Sanford Todd's sons reached maturity in the 1970s, so did the city of Lakewood. Because so much of Lakewood had been built at roughly the same time in the early 1950s, civic leaders feared the city might deteriorate all at once.

The city council in the 1970s imposed city inspections on homes that were for sale, in order to catch violations of the building and zoning codes. Many voters believed their local government had become too intrusive. In 1976, they elected a new council majority led by Donald Plunkett, who had battled John Todd and the city for years over alterations to his properties.

During its first session, the new majority fired City Manager Milton Farrell and repealed the ordinance requiring home inspections. Among his duties as city attorney, Todd had filed several lawsuits against Plunkett for alleged violations of local zoning codes and state election laws.

Plunkett now argued that it was a conflict of interest

for Todd to pursue legal actions against Plunkett while Todd simultaneously advised Plunkett on the city's other legal matters.

Todd survived several votes of confidence, and his opponents never succeeded in ousting him. But Todd did lose his chair at the council dais. For years, Todd had sat alongside the elected council members, but the new mayor, Jo Bennett, ordered him to sit with other city staff members, below the council.

"It really hurt John's feelings when Jo Bennett removed him from the dais," said Larry Van Nostran, who was elected to the council in 1975 and still serves on the council. "I felt it was important to have our legal advisor sitting at our right hand. John knew the laws of the city. He wrote every one of them and knew them well. We later put him back on the dais."

Mike Todd remembers Plunkett's 13 months on the council as a "fiasco." "My dad couldn't figure out why some people were against him, because he loved Lakewood. He thought he would lose his job," Mike said. Instead, Plunkett lost his seat on the council. His critics said Plunkett disrupted council meetings, filed too many lawsuits against fellow city officials and continued to flout zoning ordinances.

By a ratio of nearly 3 to 1, the voters threw out Plunkett in April 1977 in the only recall election in the city's history. At the victory party, Todd offered a cigar to non-smoker Jacqueline Rynerson, a leader of the recall effort. She accepted it, but did not inhale.

### **1970s: Preserving neighborhoods**

In a softer approach to development issues, the city created a Development Review Board in the mid-1970s to assist developers and remodelers in meeting city building code standards. To help seniors and modest-income homeowners, the city used federal community development funding to finance home improvement loans. The DRB and home loan programs continue today.

Conflict in the Middle East forced Lakewood residents to wait in long lines for gasoline during the oil embargos of the 1970s. Lakewood city officials responded by naming a gasoline crisis ombudsman and adopting Todd's innovative ordinance that divided the city into service areas for gasoline stations. The measure was designed to ensure that some portion of Lakewood would always have gasoline on the days when drivers were permitted to fill their tanks.

Lakewood faced another challenge: the city's population was diversifying in age. Once a community of young families, Lakewood had become more representative of society. This realization led Lakewood officials to begin planning for a changing community.

In 1976, the William Burns Community Service Center on Clark Avenue was dedicated. The new facility included a child day-care center, programs for seniors and resources for more than a dozen county and non-profit social service and family assistance agencies. The Weingart Senior Center opened in 1981. In 2001, city officials enhanced the senior center adding a fitness center and remodeling restrooms to meet disability act requirements.

Lakewood's highly flexible contract system showed its capacity to meet changing conditions during the decade, when several city services previously provided under contract by the county were transferred to private sector contractors.

Lakewood's experience, and the success of other contract cities that incorporated in the 1970s spawned harsh critics, however.

In the 1970s, large cities, including Los Angeles, sought to transfer more costs for county services to contract cities. Los Angeles attorneys and lobbyists argued that contract cities should pay more, specifically for Sheriff's Department countywide services.

The fate of contracting under the Lakewood Plan hung in the balance. Would cities that realized significant cost savings by contracting with the county be hit with huge service cost increases? Under Todd's leadership, contract cities fought back. Todd eventually won a landmark case in favor of contract cities in state appellate court.



The Lakewood Plan - John S. Todd's great contribution to local government - gave the new city the benefits of county law enforcement and fire protection.

When the insurance industry abandoned liability insurance for cities in the 1970s, Todd joined in organizing a group of 33 cities, including Lakewood, to form the California Joint Powers Insurance Authority for the purpose of providing liability protection for its members. Todd served as the insurance authority's founding legal counsel. Today, the CJPIA is one of the largest municipal self-insurance pools in the state.

The city's concerns about a growing "drug culture" among California's youth led Todd to develop

a pioneering anti-drug paraphernalia ordinance after drug paraphernalia began appearing in some Lakewood stores. The ordinance required merchants who sold water pipes and other drug-related equipment to display such merchandise in a separate room and to keep children out. A year later, no stores were selling drug paraphernalia in Lakewood, according to the city's 1980 annual report. Many other cities followed Todd's model and passed anti-paraphernalia ordinances.

At the end of the decade, marked by the impact of Proposition 13 on local governments and widespread warnings that smaller cities faced hard times ahead, the Long Beach *Press Telegram*, looking at the city's 1979-1980 city budget, called it a "Howard Jarvis dream come true. Revenues are up, spending is down, and the level of service for residents remains the same."

### **1980s: Sustaining the community**

Drought racked Southern California in the 1980s, leading to the city's adoption of a comprehensive water conservation ordinance. The biggest challenge to Lakewood's water service didn't turn out to be supply, however. Keeping up with changing federal and state water quality requirements, renovating Lakewood's network of wells and water mains, and keeping water prices affordable to Lakewood families occupied city officials during the decade.

In 1984, The Centre at Sycamore Plaza opened as the new centerpiece of community life in the renovated Lakewood Civic Center. The new building also featured a television studio that brought the newest media technology to Lakewood – cable television.

The benefits of community cable television in Lakewood are a product of the cable franchise agreements developed by Todd that were much tougher than nearby cities had. The Lakewood cable ordinance also contains "parental control" requirements for adult programming on cable, including the innovative use of

lockout keys to prevent unsupervised use of cable boxes.

Other Lakewood ordinances adopted during the 1980s and 1990s continued the theme of a family-oriented community. Ordinances restricted operation of video game arcades and tightened codes for the construction of advertising signs. The city council voted a strongly worded ordinance to limit the granting of business licenses to adult entertainment businesses in Lakewood; none ever opened. And, the city began new anti-gang and graffiti control programs.

Lakewood also adopted a tough smoking regulation ordinance, one of the first in the county, which limited smoking in public places. Alcoholic beverages were banned from city parks.

Todd faced a personal challenge in 1980, when his loyal wife, Frances, died. Frances had worked as John's secretary, and then was a homemaker until their two boys went to USC. Then she worked again as his secretary.

"Frances wouldn't miss a council meeting. She really supported her husband," said Mickey Wagner, who was active with her husband Council Member Robert Wager in the effort to recall Don Plunkett.

In time, Todd began to court Millie Hammond. He had met Millie when he was the chairman of a cancer drive. She owned beauty shops in Lakewood, Long Beach, and Orange. Her husband died, and Millie had a car accident and became somewhat disabled. She sold her shops and left the area.

“After Frances died, I wondered what ever happened to Millie. I couldn’t find her in the phone book, but I got a Christmas card from her from Laguna. I sent her a note, asking to take her out. She later told me she paced the floor for two days trying to decide whether to respond. In two weeks, we decided to marry. I never horse around. Frances and I got married quickly, too.”

Millie died in 1990.

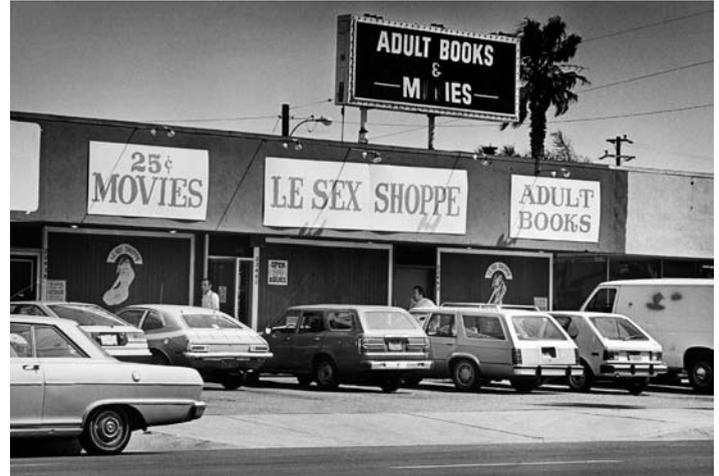
“He was a compassionate husband,” said Pat Piercy, who served on the Lakewood Recreation Commission. “When we were at Rotary conventions, he made sure one of the other wives was available to take Frances shopping. She was in a wheelchair, and she loved to shop for shoes.”

“He is a very giving man,” agreed Mike Todd. “He completely nursed my mother and his second wife when they were sick. If you think he was giving to the city, he was very giving to the family. He puts the needs of others above his own needs.”

### **1990s: Public safety**

The 1990 session of the California state legislature took aim at the heart of local government authority and much of the basis on which Todd had created the Lakewood Plan. The mounting threats to city revenues, local land use planning, and city council autonomy prompted municipal officials to mount a protest rally at the annual meeting of the League of California Cities.

Spectacular improvements were made at Mayfair



John S. Todd crafted many ordinances aimed at preserving the quality of life in Lakewood neighborhoods. His tough ordinances prevented adult businesses like these (in another city) from congregating in Lakewood.

Park in 1991, with the opening of the John S. Todd Community Center.

The adaptability of the Lakewood Plan was evident during the 1990s as law enforcement services experienced even more changes. The city greatly expanded law enforcement services in 1993, with the addition of two Specially Assigned Officers to create a second team of deputies working crime “hot spots” in Lakewood. In 1996, the city secured funds to set up a computerized crime analysis unit at the Lakewood Sheriff’s station to target career criminals preying on homes and businesses. In 1997, the city innovated the “Team Lakewood” concept for organizing community-based policing.



A grateful city council named the new community building at Mayfair Park in honor of John S. Todd in 1991. The John S. Todd Community Center houses park offices, two large community rooms, and the Mayfair Pool Swim Pavilion.

In 1999, Lakewood officials began another partnership with the Sheriff's Department. The Lakewood Nuisance Property Abatement Team was developed to attack the link between neighborhood crime and long-standing neighborhood eyesores. The team combines a city property maintenance code enforcement officer, a city prosecutor, and a sheriff's deputy.

Lakewood's General Plan received a "tune up" in 1996, which should keep the city running smoothly for the foreseeable future. The city's first General Plan was adopted in 1970.

After years of research and planning, the city approved an innovative public/private partnership with

City Light and Power that makes this private contractor responsible for maintenance of the city's street lighting systems.

At the end of the decade, The Los Angeles Times ranked Lakewood among the cities in Los Angeles County with "very low" business taxes and fees, a testament to the economies built into Todd's Lakewood Plan of local government.

# 21st century city

John S. Todd had guided city councils through fifty years of success. What will the future bring?

In 2001, Lakewood residents gathered on the plaza in front of city hall after the terrorist attacks on New York, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania to share their grief

and to remember the heroes and innocent victims of September 11. The city-sponsored “Lakewood Believes in America” rally brought more than 3,000 parents and young people to a candlelight service of remembrance and a proud show of patriotism. The city that Todd helped build and had spent so many long hours in guiding through the difficult years of development and challenge expressed its grief.

Lakewood in 2003 still needed the guiding hand of its “one-and-only” city attorney. The city council adopted a “get tough” plan for property maintenance. The ordinance amendments clarify and strengthen nine property maintenance standards, ranging from a prohibition on overgrown vegetation to repair of deteriorating asphalt driveways to the abatement of partially finished buildings.

The city council in 2002 adopted an innovative “jaywalking” ordinance to cite thoughtless parents who permit youngsters to make an unsafe crossing to and from their car to school. And a new city ordinance regulated Internet access studios (also called cyber cafés) that had become disorderly hangouts in other cities. Lakewood also acted to limit indoor swap meets (and forbid outdoor commercial swap meets altogether).



The Sky Knight helicopter patrol program shows the adaptability of the Lakewood Plan to new technologies and new circumstances.



John S. Todd was honored as a "Legend of Lakewood" during the city's 50th anniversary celebrations in April 2004. His sons Michael and John joined in remembering his fifty years as Lakewood City Attorney.

In 2004, celebration of the city's 50th anniversary of incorporation highlighted Todd's fundamental contributions to Lakewood and local government in California. The celebrations came with a note of regret, however. Todd announced his retirement at the end of the city's anniversary year.

As Todd neared his retirement at the end of 2004, his many admirers were eager to praise him.

City Manager Howard Chambers said Todd played a key role at City Hall for his full fifty years as city attorney. "He had his views on how Lakewood should evolve," Chambers said. "He went beyond legal opinions and exerted influence on policy. He was very passionate about Lakewood."

Councilman Larry Van Nostran said anyone who did not listen to Todd's advice was making a big mistake. "It's more than likely that he is right. Those who did not heed his advice, such as Plunkett, paid the price. Most people have made a lot of errors in their lives, but that's not the case with John," Van Nostran declared.

Vice Mayor Wayne Piercy said, "If we gave him an assignment, such as keeping drug paraphernalia out of the city, he researched everything carefully, worked on an ordinance and got us in good shape."

"He's a very impressive guy," said Mayor Todd Rogers, the newest member of the current city council. "He's been very helpful to me, in terms of mentoring me and teaching me the ropes of local government."

"John has done a lot more for the city than just the couple of issues he's noted for," said Councilman Robert Wagner. "There are many innovative things that he has done, producing ordinances that will withstand court scrutiny, where other cities will have ordinances overturned by the courts."

Todd once gave an old legal briefcase to Wagner, calling Wagner his "honorary deputy city attorney" because Wagner often took a different approach to legal interpretation.

Councilman Joe Esquivel went to Todd to learn about contract law. "I was president of the Contract Cities Association a few years ago," Esquivel said. "I relied on John and his knowledge. He never told me how to vote, but he guided me through the law. You can get advice

from him on any matter, not just legal issues. If you ask him, he will tell you what he thinks.”

### Still ahead

In a concession to age, Todd has given up at least one favorite pastime: working on antique cars. In the early 1980s, he saw a 1928 Chevy coupe for sale in Bellflower. That was the last year in which Chevrolet made a classic, four-cylinder engine. The simple engine was easy to work on. One man even could pull out the engine block. But he had to give up his car hobby in 2004.

“I moved to Huntington Beach,” he explained, “where I do not have a garage. So I sold my ‘28 coupe for \$9,000.”

Even without his car repair hobby, Todd plans to keep busy during his retirement.



Old friends and founders of Lakewood, former Mayor Jacqueline Rynerson (left) and John S. Todd share a nostalgic moment.

“I’ve always been interested in dinosaurs,” Todd continued, “so I wrote a book called *Another Time in Another Place*. I believe the universe is so vast that by logic there must be other worlds like ours. This book is set on a planet that is 50 years more advanced than Earth, and they land on Earth 180 million years ago during the age of dinosaurs. They arrive in a spaceship as big as an aircraft carrier, in which the passengers sleep for the whole trip.

“The books didn’t go anywhere. I had research material on dinosaurs left over, so I wrote a children’s book in which some boys travel in a neighboring professor’s time machine and pull out a thorn from a dinosaur’s hoof. The dinosaur hears the boys talking to each other, and he talks to them. They say they did not know dinosaurs could talk, and he says he did not know people could talk.”

Pentland Press Inc. of North Carolina printed the first Goodfellow book four years ago. “I did it because I enjoyed doing it,” Todd noted. “Since then, I’ve written other children’s books, unpublished, going back in time with the Goodfellow boys. They’ve been to the 1849 Gold Rush, the Gettysburg address and the Underground Railroad.”

Jeff and Joshua, the protagonists of the Goodfellow books, are based on two of Todd’s grandsons. The Goodfellow Boys and the Talking Dinosaur is dedicated: “To Bill and Zach who inspired Jeff and Joshua; to Kerstin, Carley and Jason, my grandchildren.”

# John S. Todd: Legend of Lakewood



What makes a legend? It is a special combination of strength, persistence, vision, and skill that led to the creation of a new city and a new form of local government.

The young community Todd joined in 1949 had gone from practically no population to nearly 100,000 residents in 1953. Hanging over them was a huge question mark: Should the unincorporated community be absorbed into Long Beach or should the families of Lakewood take on the risks of cityhood?

Todd joined the battle to keep Lakewood independent when the city of Long Beach began a series of annexation elections in 1953. With other community members, John mounted a spirited campaign to prevent “piecemeal annexation.” It was his strategy of appealing each annexation election as soon as it was announced that stalled Long Beach’s plans (although Lakewood Village and a few other neighborhoods accepted annexation).

Annexation was stopped, but Lakewood’s future was still in doubt. Todd took up the next challenge, working with other leaders to circulate incorporation petitions based on the radical idea that Lakewood had the resources to be a city.

The heart of the argument for cityhood was a plan – the Lakewood Plan. Todd conceived the idea that unincorporated communities didn’t have to choose between annexation by a big city or building costly civic

infrastructure from scratch. Instead, he believed that city councils could turn to the county to deliver municipal services through a system of contracts.

Convinced that the plan would work, Lakewood voters made their community a city in 1954 and the first in the nation to supply all of its services by contract. Today, the contracting plan that Todd created shapes the future of one-quarter of California cities.

The plan's "father" became its chief interpreter when the first Lakewood City Council met on April 16, 1954. The new council members appointed John as Lakewood's City Attorney. He held that office for fifty years – as one of the longest serving city attorneys in California history – ending his service to the city council in 2004.

As the city's legal counsel, John drafted hundreds of ordinances, policies, regulations, and resolutions over the past fifty years. The quality of everyday life in Lakewood can be directly attributed to the body of law of which Todd is the principal author.

As large as it is, this was not Todd's greatest achievement.

Almost as soon as Lakewood was formed, some cities sought to undermine the basis of the contract plan with the county. The new contract cities were threatened by a series of political and legal maneuvers that would have made the Lakewood Plan impossible.

With Todd's guidance, contract cities fought back. In 1957, they formed what would become the California



**John S. Todd's contributions to Lakewood go far beyond the achievements of 1954 and include a half-century of pioneering legal work that has had a permanent impact on municipal law in California. A fighter for local government and a persuasive defender of Lakewood's values, John S. Todd is truly a Lakewood legend.**

Contract Cities Association. And with John as lead counsel, they took their cause to the Los Angeles County Grand Jury, the California Legislature, and the courts. John's plan was finally vindicated in a landmark ruling by the State Court of Appeals in 1977.

John served in other ways – as an officer in the contract city association and the statewide League of California Cities. He was, for a time, the City Attorney of Pico Rivera as well as Lakewood. And he was the first

legal counsel of the California Joint Powers Insurance Authority, an agency that provides member cities with insurance protection.

Preservation – that might be one of the major themes of Todd’s career as city attorney, legal counsel, and defender of the Lakewood Plan. Innovation – that is another theme, too. Todd saw more clearly than others that new forms of local government were needed for the new cities of California.

Future Lakewood City Council members will miss Todd’s wise advice. They will remember his contributions with pride. Lakewood residents will honor him always as a true “Lakewood legend.”

His successors in the decades ahead will never be his replacement. There will always be only one John S. Todd, Lakewood’s first City Attorney.

## **John S. Todd, Father of the City of Lakewood: A History**

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If you would like to know more about John S. Todd, the Lakewood Plan and Lakewood's history, click to [www.lakewoodcity.org/50th](http://www.lakewoodcity.org/50th).