

She preferred rags over her riches

Costa Mesa woman's wealth revealed only after her death

By Judith I. Brennan
The Register

The old white house no longer breaks the strong gusts of winter winds that used to blow across Marianna Whelan's farm. The windmill and chicken coops are gone, and red dog Roger's barks have faded to silence.

Only the rusted cyclone fence is left, still wrapped around the 14 acres that Whelan clung to until her death on Valentine's Day. Worth millions, the farm was a piece of prime commercial real estate, just one-half mile south of South Coast Plaza. Developers all over the county were itching to get their hands on it, her relatives say.

But it never would happen while Whelan was alive.

The feisty pioneer would scare them away with a big stick as they approached her door again and again in hopes of buying the land.

Although she lived the life of a pauper, Whelan was not interested in their monetary offers. Only the land mattered, and Whelan refused to give in to the inevitability of development rolling across Orange County.

With her death, the land at last will change, to be transformed from farm land to a sprawling apartment complex.

And with her death, the secret of Marianna Whelan's existence was told: far from the poverty she dis-



Marianna Whelan
'A Howard Hughes kind of person'

played to the world, she was worth millions.

Her cobweb-covered closets were filled with velvets and lace

and satin gowns. Her dust-covered, extravagant jewelry boxes were filled with the rarest of gems.

But she wore only hand-me-downs and dark, often threadbare clothes. She had the money to buy 50 Jaguars, but she walked or took a bus to all destinations.

Her home was filled with precious antiques, but the rooms were sealed off from the tiny kitchen, where she lived out most of her life.

Her wealth was scattered all over Orange County, in property she bought during estate auctions at the county courthouse in the 1930s. She paid for it with egg money, cash she had accumulated from selling the eggs of 5,000 chickens she raised on her farm.

She never raised the rent on her properties. She never evicted tenants. She never made improvements.

She spent her days walking to the

store to buy apples for her horses or strolling to the banks to wheedle free doughnuts and coffee. Her money was scattered in numerous banks throughout Costa Mesa. She felt it was safer that way.

Occasionally she would say hello to her neighbor Rose Morales during her morning walks. But she was always alone.

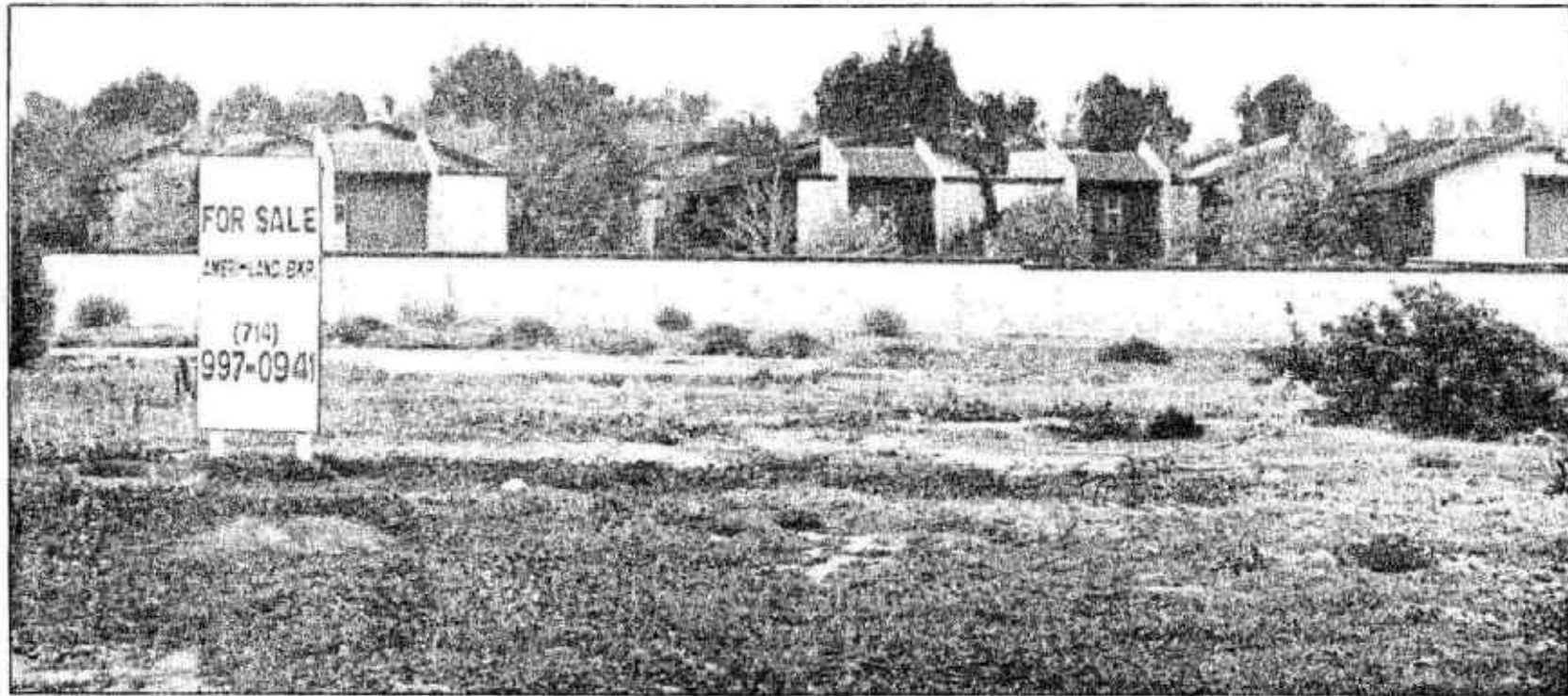
"A very eccentric, kind woman, Mrs. Whelan," Morales said. "But she was a recluse. You couldn't really describe her any other way. I've never really met or have ever seen anyone like her."

"She was like a Howard Hughes kind of person, you know? But this time Mr. Hughes was in an old woman's body."

Antonia Napolitano's memories of her distant, second cousin are sordid and rough. They are scat-

Please see WOMAN/B4

WOMAN Though a millionaire, eccentric Costa Mesa pioneer adopted a miserly lifestyle



Pat Tehan/The Register

A vacant lot on the southeast corner of Bristol and Baker streets in Costa Mesa once was land owned by Marianna Whelan.

“ I went into the bedroom and opened her closets and I couldn’t believe the beautiful gowns. Some things were old and elegant. Some things still had the price tags on it. I sat down on the floor and laughed. Here I thought she was some poor old bag lady. I used to give her my old hand-me-downs. I guess she wanted people to think she was poor so they wouldn’t bother her. I just couldn’t believe my eyes. ”

Rose Morales
Marianna Whelan’s neighbor

tered over the years when Napolitano, her sister and mother would visit Whelan and her husband, Alfred, during the early days on the farm. It was the late 1920s, and the surrounding land on which commercial developments now sit also was farm land.

Baker and Bristol streets, which crossed at the corner of the Whelan farm, were dirt roads lined with horse-drawn-buggy tracks.

Napolitano, now 64, lived for the summer weekend trips to her cousin's house. She was 7 then. The Whelans had 15 head of cattle, goats, the chickens and two pigs "that served as a garbage disposal," she said.

Marianna Whelan would greet her cousins at the gate. She always wore jodhpurs, tennis shoes, white cotton socks and a bonnet. "Always," Napolitano said. "Always the same clothes. They were spotlessly clean, but she must have rinsed them out every day. It wasn't until near her death did we realize she had some of the most gorgeous clothes I had ever seen."

Whelan and the children would play with the animals. "She would cook for us and everything we ate always had eggs in it," Napolitano said. "I can remember watching her candle the eggs for hours. The ones she couldn't sell, she would feed us in cakes; everything you could think of had eggs in it.

"We'd cook and then she would tell us stories about her youth."

Fascinating stories.

Whelan was born in Germany; Napolitano never knew what city. "She used to tell us her parents were so strict and rigid that she vowed when she was a child she would get as far away from them as she could when she was old enough," Napolitano said. Old enough was 16.

The family had moved to Zurich, Switzerland, and Whelan decided to run away to Spain in her mid-teens. "No one really knows how she ended up there, but when she got to Spain she became a tutor to the infante to the throne," the crown prince, Napolitano said.

"She was a lady-in-waiting and she had wonderful stories. While Whelan lived in the Spanish court, she met a doctor," Napolitano said. "We never really knew if she fell in love, but we assume she did.

"He wanted to go Argentina to practice medicine and he took her with him. She became his nurse."

But Whelan never was schooled in nursing. "The first time he did an appendectomy, she passed out," Napolitano said.

"Somehow she ended up in New York City and that's where she met Alfred." He was a refrigerator repairman. She had a job as a clerical worker.

The young couple moved to California and Whelan remembered

that she had a cousin living near Los Angeles. She knew the cousin had married an Italian with the last name of Napolitano.

"To show you what kind of determination Marianna had, she called every Napolitano she could find in the state," Napolitano said. Finally she found Napolitano's mother.

"Orange County was considered the wilderness back then, so we were pretty surprised when we heard from her," Napolitano said.

"It was such a thrill for me because she loved animals as much as I did," she said. "I remember she told me she bought the chickens because she had made a promise to herself when she was a teenager that she would own them someday. Her father took her on a business trip once and they met a man who raised chickens.

"She had never seen them before and she said she fell in love with those chickens. I guess she must have. Why else would anyone raise 5,000 chickens?"

The money raised from the eggs of those 5,000 chickens bought six properties in Santa Ana, one piece of property in Anaheim and six properties in Costa Mesa.

"When she died, the rent on those properties was the same as the first day she rented them," Napolitano said. "Apartments that would rent for \$500 or \$600 a month today, well, she was renting them for \$89 a month.

"She never improved them. Once she even spent a night in jail in Santa Ana because the city condemned one of the properties for being in such disrepair. She used to tell the tenants she would never raise the rent, but don't expect any improvements in return.

"If anything went wrong, she'd fix it with bubble gum and wire or whatever she could find," Napolitano said. "She'd get on the bus with her little tool kit and go collect her rents and she'd always make them pay her in cash, because she didn't believe in checks. A couple of times, she was even beaten up and robbed by some of her tenants, but she never reported them.

"She took care of those properties and the farm herself. I can't remember Alfred helping."

What she does remember of Alfred is that he was "a tall, bony-shaped man. A very cold, distant man." He died at age 71.

"He was put in a state hospital; he used to have these horrible headaches," Napolitano said. "He went insane and became very violent in the end.

"I remember Marianna wasn't allowed to visit him anymore because he would attack her and that's when she changed."

It was also the time the Napolitano family visits ended.

Over the ensuing years, the only neighbor, or anyone for that mat-

ter, to pay much mind to Whelan was Rose Morales.

It was Morales and her husband, Joe, who ran the nursery down the street, who used to wave to Whelan on her morning walks to the store for apples.

"She loved her horses and her dog Rover," Rose Morales said.

Actually, she had four dogs. "They all looked alike and they were all named Rover," Morales said.

"She'd never say much when she'd pass. She'd just wave and go on by."

Chic Clark, Whelan's insurance agent, said she used to drop by his office occasionally for morning doughnuts.

"She used to tell me how almost daily, real-estate types and developers would come knocking on her door and drive her crazy. They offered her millions of dollars for that land because it is so valuable but she'd shoo them away with a shotgun," Clark said. Napolitano said it was a big stick.

"Really," Clark added, "she had the last, best piece of commercial real estate that size available in

this area."

Peggy Brooks, with Bristol Development Co., said the land in the area sells for \$15 to \$20 a square foot.

According to county records, George Argyros with Arnel Development Co. bought the property Nov. 7 for \$9.2 million. The company, which has built other apartments and office projects in the area, plans to build a 370- to 400-unit apartment complex on the site. Jim Deal, Arnel's project manager, said the company plans to break ground by mid-1987 on the new complex.

"When this property came up for bid, there were so many companies interested in it," Deal said. "It is a wonderful piece of property and one of the last best buys in that area."

Napolitano said she could not discuss the sale or the company's plans for the land since other properties Whelan owned are being liquidated.

"But I can tell you with that property, plus her rental properties, she was worth more than \$10 million," Napolitano said. "Why, she had about six accounts with different banks and there were hundreds of thousands of dollars in those accounts."

On June 30, 1979, Marianna Whelan stepped off a curb on Bristol Street and was struck by a car. Joe Morales rushed to her aid.

She suffered seven broken bones in her left leg, four breaks in her left shoulder, bruised ribs and a crushed pelvis, Napolitano said. "Everything healed except her pelvis. She was the toughest old lady," she said. "Except, the doc-

tor said she was the worst case of malnutrition he had ever seen. Her diet was totally doughnuts and coffee that she had sponged off the banks during her morning visits.

"Plus the candy."

Ah, the candy. It was one of the big surprises Rose Morales found after Whelan's accident.

"It was unreal," Morales said. "She told me after the accident to look for a little black book. I had only been in the kitchen area of her house, since the rest had been sealed off with the back of a bookcase.

"I never really understood how she ate since the only thing that used electricity in the kitchen was a 25-watt light bulb that hung from the ceiling. Well, I pulled back that bookcase and you wouldn't believe what I found."

The first thing she saw was a huge dining table, covered with large jars filled with decaying candy. In the bathroom, there was a five-gallon jar of Hershey bars that had turned white with age.

She walked farther and saw rooms filled with incredible Chinese and European antiques. "But they were covered with cobwebs and dust," Morales said. "There was a little trail where I could tell that she would walk through the house. I guess she would check on things.

"I opened some of the drawers and they were packed with knickknacks and every kind of pasta you could think of.

"I went into the bedroom and opened her closets and I couldn't believe the beautiful gowns," she said. "Some things were old and elegant. Some things still had the price tags on it. I sat down on the floor and laughed.

"Here I thought she was some poor old bag lady. I used to give her my old hand-me-downs. I guess she wanted people to think she was poor so they wouldn't bother her.

"I just couldn't believe my eyes."

Morales continued her search. She found the black book. And she tracked down Antonia Napolitano.

Napolitano put Whelan into a nursing home. On Valentine's Day, Whelan died. She was 86.

Napolitano has spent the past eight months trying to track down Whelan's brother and sister in Germany. They are also in their eighties, she said. They told her to liquidate the property, auction off the antiques and send them the money.

She is doing that now.

"But somehow I look back over all this and I feel this great sense of sadness for not having known her well in the last years of her life," Napolitano said. "She was one of the originals around here. A settler.

"But more than that she was, how would you say ... an enigma?"