

Take Wilshire

A Walk Down the Back Streets of the Man Who Named L.A.'s Big Boulevard

SOMETIMES WHEN my wife and I are returning home late at night from the Westside, I use Wilshire Boulevard rather than the Hollywood or Santa Monica freeways. Traffic is light at that hour. And glowing in their night lights, the great stone and marble corporate palaces of the boulevard are magnificent. Wilshire Boulevard at night, in its deceptive slumber, is Los Angeles at its finest.

Many Angelenos probably never heard of its namesake, Gaylord Wilshire. They may suppose that the street was given an English name for class. Wilshire was indeed a real and extraordinary person.

He was born in Cincinnati in 1861, the son of a millionaire banker. Will Taft, later to become President, lived across the street. Wilshire attended Harvard for one year, where he starred in economics and studied philosophy under William James.

He worked for a year as a clerk in his father's bank, but he was soon manager of a small steel mill. While looking at some mining properties, he fell from his horse and was hurt. Like so many others, he came to Southern California for a cure.

He arrived during a land boom; he bought some land in Long Beach that he developed into Grand Pacific Boulevard—today's Ocean Boulevard. For sport he rode horseback through the breakers, and being a handsome Har-



Gaylord Wilshire

vard man with Van Dyke beard and athletic figure, he soon became much sought after by young women at the great Victorian Long Beach Hotel. Wilshire and his brother, William, planned to enlarge the hotel, but it burned, and the boom fell in its ashes.

Wilshire moved to Fullerton, where he bought land and laid out what today is Commonwealth Avenue. When the Fullerton boom ended, Wilshire and his brother sold out; if they had stayed, they would have made millions.

Oddly, it was during the Fullerton boom that Wilshire became that rare breed: a millionaire socialist. He believed that the trusts would overproduce, unemployment would follow, and the government would have to take over the trusts.

In 1890 Wilshire met and married Hannah Owen, a lovely anarchist and member of an illustrious Welsh family. They moved to London, where they befriended every notable socialist, including G. B. Shaw.

On the death of his father, Wilshire returned to America and in 1896 he bought a barley field for \$40,000; that was the beginning of Wilshire Boule-

vard. He dredged Westlake Park (now MacArthur), widened the boulevard to 120 feet and named it for himself.

Sales were slow; Wilshire became restless. He got into the billboard business, monopolized it and turned a fine profit. Next, he did something astounding. He started a socialist newspaper with the masthead: "Let the Nation Own the Trusts." It was big, splashy, expensive. It was filled mostly with editorials by Wilshire and articles by such socialists as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Shaw and Edward Bellamy.

Wilshire had the showmanship of Barnum. When the City Council passed an ordinance requiring a permit to speak in Pershing Square (then Central Park), Wilshire wrote an open letter to the chief of police saying that he would speak in the park at a certain time and that if he was arrested, he would "pulverize" the ordinance.

At the appointed hour, Wilshire mounted the dais, a handsome figure in English tweeds, with wavy walnut hair curling under a Panama hat. He spoke, he was arrested, and he "pulverized" the ordinance in court.

Eventually divorced, Wilshire moved to New York and married Mary MacReynolds, who was not only a beauty but who also knew calculus and Greek. In 1906 Wilshire found a gold mine in Northern California and induced numerous socialist friends to invest in it on the notion that only gold was safe from overproduction. There was gold in the mine, but not enough.

Almost broke again, Wilshire settled in Pasadena, gave up socialism and embarked on his last folly. He developed the Ionoco, a heating belt that was promoted as a cure-all. In 1925 he launched a big ad campaign and opened numerous offices. The Ionoco was big business.

But in 1927 Wilshire was stricken with illness; alas, his belt failed to save him. He left \$17,000.