



The Piru Circles

Interest for a public art component as part of the sidewalk improvement project began with the Piru Neighborhood Council. Funding for the public art came from donations from Warner Bros., Heritage Valley Inn, and the Piru Neighborhood Council.

A Request for Proposal was sent out in early 2005 and Helle Scharling-Todd was the artist selected for this public art component. Born in Denmark, Helle received training in glass and tile mosaic at art academies in Italy and Germany. She has done several public art projects in the United States and abroad. Locally her works hang in the E.P. Wright Library in Ventura, the Santa Clara Senior Center in Ventura and the Ray D. Prueter Library in Port Hueneme.

Helle worked with a group of Piru residents and teachers at Piru School on creating a public piece that would integrate the art into a sizable portion of the sidewalk area and make it educational for students walking to school. What evolved was the production of seventeen 2-foot diameter mosaic circles that were placed in the sidewalk at each corner of an intersection.

The "Piru Circles" depict different aspects of the history, ecology and economy of the upper Santa Clara Valley. Two circles represent the Native Americans of the region – the Tataviam. One symbolizes the Vacqueros, the Spanish cowboys and another Rancho Camulos, the Spanish land grant rancho that covered the upper end of Santa Clara Valley. Five represent different historical aspects of the region's economy – gold, oil, oranges, the railroad, and filming. Four depict local animals or plants – the Piru reed, condor, rattlesnake and olive tree. Three characterize historic buildings in town – the Mansion, Piru School and the Heritage Valley Inn. And one mosaic is a representational aerial of where the town is located. A brochure explaining the significance of each mosaic is included.

The seventeen "Piru Circles" represent different aspects of the history, ecology and economy of the upper Santa Clara Valley. Mosaic artist Helle Scharling-Todd created these circles in 2006 as part of the County of Ventura Redevelopment Agency's "Safe Routes to School" Sidewalk Project. Funding for the circles was provided by Warner Bros., Heritage Valley Inn, and the Piru Neighborhood Council.



THE PIRU CIRCLES

PIRU CALIFORNIA

**Ventura County
Redevelopment
Agency**



1. CAVE PAINTINGS - The Piru Indians were part of a Shoshone-speaking people known as the Tataviam. They left information about themselves chiseled into and painted on rocky overhangs and secreted caves throughout the local mountains. Their drawings of humans often resembled lizards with rake-like hands. Other drawings show abstract designs resembling zig-zags, hourglasses, grids and circles.

2. INDIAN BASKETS - On August 11, 1769, the Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolá wrote that he had found a populous village of Indians in this location. "Carrying their bowstrings loose, the Indians offered necklaces of stones, in exchange for which we presented them with beads." By all accounts a peaceful tribe, the Tataviam were christianized under the San Fernando Mission. Later they worked on large Spanish rancheros such as Rancho Camulos. Juan José Fustero, who billed himself as "the last full-blooded Piru Indian" died on June 30, 1921.

3. THE VAQUEROS - Along with bringing the horse to the new world, the Spanish developed the cowboy style of riding and herding. These original cowboys called themselves Vaqueros, from the Spanish word *vaca*, meaning cow. During the 1800's, this region was used to raise great herds of cattle, first for the San Fernando Mission, and later for the Spanish land grant ranchos. Vaqueros in this valley were of both Native American and Hispanic descent.

4. GOLD MINING - In 1848 James Marshall's discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill touched off the California gold rush. Gold was actually discovered first in Ventura County in San Feliciano Canyon off Piru Creek in 1841. Dedicated prospectors still pan the Upper Piru Creek in search of golden flakes.

5. OIL EXPLORATION - Entrepreneurs in this region began extracting oil from the ground as early as the mid 1800's. This unrefined oil was a thick, sticky substance called asphaltum that was used to surface roads and seal roofs. The first commercial oil refinery in Ventura County was built in 1861. By the 1880's almost all of the State's oil production came from this region. California's first oil "Gusher" occurred in Adams Canyon in 1888.

6. RANCHO CAMULOS - In 1839 Antonio del Valle, Majordomo of Mission San Fernando, was given a 48,612-acre land grant. He named his rancho after the Tataviam Indian village, Kamulus, which was located within its boundary near the river. In 1884, Helen Hunt Jackson visited Camulos and used its setting as the background for "Ramona", her romanticized novel on the plight of the Mission Indian.

7. ORANGES - Commercial citrus plantings occurred in the Santa Clara Valley as early as 1874. However, the citrus industry did not really begin to develop until the early 1900's when reliable water sources and transportation were introduced. During the period 1920-45, the citrus industry went through an unprecedented era of expansion. This region is known as the home of "Valencia" oranges.

8. THE FILM INDUSTRY - Because of its small town charm and proximity to Hollywood, Piru is a favorite location spot for shooting commercials, television shows and feature films. Recent productions include "The X Files", "Jag", "Ghost Whisperer", "Bubble Boy", "Torque", and "War of the Worlds".

9. CALIFORNIA CONDOR - California Condors are the largest North American land birds and among the largest flying birds in the world. An adult condor can weigh up to 22 pounds and have a wingspan over 9 feet. Condors mate for life. As part of the vulture family, they are scavengers. Lead poisoning has contributed to their rapid decline. They are now listed as an Endangered Species with a current population of fewer than 200. The local Sespe Mountains are a Condor sanctuary.

10. OLIVES - David C. Cook, founder of Piru, was a deeply religious man. He called Piru a "Second Garden of Eden" and planted over 900 acres of oranges, apricots, walnuts, and olives. He was particularly fond of olive trees because of their biblical connection. The olive trees in Town Square were planted by Cook and are over one hundred years old.

11. PIRU CITY - Piru is situated near the base of the Piru Mountains, where Piru Creek empties into the Santa Clara River, at the upper end of the Santa Clara Valley in the eastern section of Ventura County. David C. Cook laid out the town of Piru in 1888. It was initially further up Piru Canyon, but the Southern Pacific Railroad refused to bring the train to that location, so Cook moved the town to the rail line. Originally Highway 126 (Telegraph Road) ran through the center of town.

12. THE RAILROAD - From the 1850's until the 1930's, railroads were America's lifeline. Communities depended on them for their connection to the outside world. The Southern Pacific Railroad began building a line through this valley in the mid 1880's on the north side of the Santa Clara River. The growth of the citrus industry and the towns of Piru, Fillmore and Santa Paula, could not have taken place without this important transportation system.

13. PIRU REEDS - The name Piru was derived from the tule reeds that grew along the creek. They were used by the Indians to weave baskets. Originally pronounced 'Pee-roo', legend has it the accent was changed by train conductors who would shout out 'Pie-roo' when coming into town.

14. RATTLESNAKE - The Southern Pacific Rattlesnake can grow to over 5 feet in length. Its triangular shaped head and rattled tail identifies it as poisonous. The rattlesnake's diet consists mainly of small rodents. Since snakes cannot regulate their own body heat, they need warm temperatures in order to move about. The rattlesnake rarely bites humans unless it has been disturbed or teased.

15. HERITAGE VALLEY INN - Built in 1887 by David Cook as his original residence, this Colonial Revival building has had a long and colorful history as the town's main hotel under various names including the Piru Hotel, Mountain View Hotel, and the Round Rock. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks stayed here while filming "Ramona" at Rancho Camulos.

16. COOK MANSION - David C. Cook built this lavish Queen Anne Victorian in 1890. It was later owned by Scott & Ruth Newhall who are fondly remembered for their contributions to the community. The mansion was burned to the ground in 1981 but rebuilt in exact detail from historic blueprints. A bronze phoenix atop its tower symbolizes its "rebirth from the ashes".

17. PIRU SCHOOL - Since Piru was first founded, there has always been a school for its children. This, the third school built for the town, has sections dating back to 1922. Currently the school holds classes in Grades K-5. It is part of the Fillmore Unified School District.

About the Artist

Helle Sharling-Todd was born in Denmark and studied mosaics and art in Copenhagen, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. She is a resident of the city of Ventura and has completed numerous public art projects throughout Ventura County.

