

## BILLY'S MIGRATION

Of course he came from somewhere else, and headed west as a young man. Billy Garland was born in Maine on March 31, 1866, to the Reverend Jonathan May Garland and his wife, Becca, who had been deaf since a bout of scarlet fever at age three. Billy, a middle child, had an older brother, Rastie, and a younger sister, Rose. The family lived in Westport, an island then reachable only by ferry, where Becca's farming family had dwelt for one hundred years. Reverend Garland, a heavily bearded circuit-riding Methodist minister, often lodged with his parishioners.

When the children came of school age, the family relocated to Waterville, Maine, where they lived in first one, then another, rented home. Life was austere in their household, but Becca encouraged her children to attend college. She prevailed with Rastie, who graduated from Colby College and Albany Law School, and with Rose, who graduated from Smith College and New York Law College. Billy followed a different path.

After three years at Waterville High School, and a short period laboring on his uncle's farm, Billy, without graduating, moved to Boston, finding work there as a clerk in a crockery firm. Restless after one year, and troubled by a bad cough, he joined his parents in Daytona Beach, Florida, where they'd moved in 1884 to launch a stagecoach line and tend a five-acre orange grove. Billy lasted only a few months driving stagecoaches for his father's company.

Still restless, still bothered by a bad cough, he next tried his luck in Chicago under the sponsorship of his mother's relatives, who held



**FIGURE 1.** Looking west on Sixth Street from Main Street, downtown Los Angeles, in 1903. Tracks cross at this intersection, where streetcars mingled with horse-drawn carriages. Security Pacific National Bank Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.

leading positions in the city's banking community. Over a span of six years, he moved up from bank messenger to clearinghouse clerk to receiving teller at the Illinois Trust and Savings Bank. His restlessness continued, though, as did his lung problems. One night in his boardinghouse room, a hemorrhage almost choked him. Find a milder, dryer climate, a doctor ordered. Billy's eyes turned to the West. Boosters in Southern California had been extolling the great life out there: the fertile land, the burgeoning commerce, the waves of tourists, and—most important—the healthy Mediterranean-type climate. Billy boarded a Southern Pacific train and arrived in Los Angeles in the winter of 1890, with twenty-three dollars in his pocket. He moved into a boardinghouse on Olive Street, where he paid nine dollars a month for a room and breakfast. He was all of twenty-four and more than ready for his future.

He had an inexorability about him, an air of fate. When he entered a room, often with a British "Fortunate Hits" cigarette in hand, people would gravitate toward him. What lured them was something impalpable, a certain flair. He had an infectious personality, abundant enthusiasm, unflagging energy, and a powerful handshake. On top of that, he projected composed, eye-on-the ball certitude. Those around him could see that he believed in himself and believed also in the future. Sensing he

would always prevail, people wanted to follow him, wanted to climb on his bandwagon.

Billy first found work in LA as an auditor for the Pacific Cable Railway Company, earning seventy-four dollars a month. But he couldn't stop looking out his window at this new world he inhabited. Citrus, wine grapes, and other fruits were growing everywhere. Bean fields covered what would become Beverly Hills; fig orchards covered the future Hollywood. In downtown LA, Billy could still see unpaved roads, with horses and buggies hitched in front of stores. Open water ditches—the *zanjas*—ran down Figueroa Street to Jefferson and along West Adams, delivering irrigation water to homes. Yet Los Angeles was evolving. The population had reached 50,000, after a sharp growth spurt in the 1880s fueled by promoters, the arrival of the transcontinental railroads, and a furious rate war between the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe lines, culminating in fares of one dollar for a journey from Chicago to LA. (It didn't hurt that California's oranges and lemons had taken first prize at the New Orleans International Exposition in 1884–85, suggesting Southern California as a Garden of Eden.) In just one year, 1887, the Southern Pacific brought 120,000 people to Los Angeles.

All this fueled a spectacular real estate boom between 1885 and 1887, lifting the price of an acre in Los Angeles County from one hundred dollars in 1886 to fifteen hundred dollars in 1887. It was sheer madness, a stampede, shot through with frenzied speculation. People were buying lots one day, then selling them the next day at a profit. Soon the developers stepped in, building whole new towns—more than sixty in 1887, each launched with auctions, barbecue parties, and brass bands. In that year alone, Southern California realized a dizzying one hundred million dollars in land sales, well beyond what was understood to be the region's net value.

The boom collapsed suddenly (and inevitably) in the summer of 1888, as banks grew nervous, promoters went bust, and everyone tried to sell property simultaneously. By the time Billy arrived in 1890, real estate prices had plummeted, wiping out \$14 million (nearly \$355 million in 2018 dollars) of assessed valuation in one year. Millionaires had become indigents, and most of the sixty new towns had turned to grain fields. The bust shocked many residents of Los Angeles, with some fleeing, some questioning the future, and some jumping off bridges. But where others saw a debacle, Billy, as he looked around, saw only opportunity and possibility.

The boom, he reasoned, had lasting positive effects: The influx of population and capital had energized the city and generated the development of hotels, churches, schools, and new industries. The city had expanded half a mile in every direction from the central plaza, developing water service, rapid transit railroads and fifty-seven irrigation companies. Where there'd been only dirt roads, there now were eighty-seven miles of paved streets and seventy-eight miles of cement sidewalks. A number of educational institutions had also sprung up, among them the University of Southern California, Occidental College, and Pomona College. In the fall of 1888, urged on by General Harrison Gray Otis, the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, the business community had formed the city's first chamber of commerce and launched a spectacularly effective propaganda campaign, luring not fly-by-night investors but farmers and other well-off migrants from the Midwest. Given all this, Billy believed the situation to be far less discouraging than it seemed. No banks had failed. The climate and the fecund soil hadn't gone away. Nor had the transcontinental railroads. Realty would surely rebound, he believed, . . . as it always does.

The descendent of farmers, Billy considered real estate the basis of all wealth. This represented a kind of religion to him. Since the beginning of time, he would later preach, "land has been the source of that which man calls wealth." Real estate—the soil with its fixed improvements—"is very clearly fundamental in the makeup of the universe. It is the granite base upon which we build everything material in life." Banks weren't the only storehouses of wealth: "Before the time of banks, man loved the soil."

With some of the earnings from his job, Billy bought a city lot. As his health improved he considered returning to Chicago. Then he found that his lot had increased \$500 in value (the equivalent of \$13,058 in 2018 dollars). He decided to stay in Los Angeles. What's more, he decided on a new career. In 1894, after three years as an auditor at Pacific Cable, Billy at age twenty-eight quit to form his own real estate business, W. M. Garland & Co. His first important deal was the subdivision of the Wilshire Boulevard Tract, which he marketed in 1896. It was then a district of the city wholly unimproved and remote, but Billy kept urging its merits. Because he truly believed in what he was selling, so did buyers: the Wilshire tract would eventually become, for its time, the finest residential section of Los Angeles. Billy, regrettably, didn't himself buy in the Wilshire tract (he expected LA to grow to the south). But he was on his way.

So were others, all newly arrived just as the boom went bust. Billy came to know them well. There was Harry Chandler, twenty-five in 1890, already five years into a job he'd landed in the *LA Times* circulation department. There was E. L. Doheny, thirty-four, a struggling frontier prospector just two years away from striking oil near the corner of Second and Glendale Boulevard—with pick and shovel, digging the first producing well in LA after finding this site by retracing the path of a wagon dripping tar. There was Henry Huntington, forty, already convinced Los Angeles would become “the most important city in this country, if not in the world,” and already planning the sprawling Pacific Electric Railway, the celebrated “Red Cars” mass transit system that, from 1901 on, connected cities throughout Southern California.

Billy soon became Chandler's investment partner, Doheny's neighbor and Huntington's real estate broker, as W. M. Garland & Co. grew to dominate the field of commercial property. The future—whatever it might involve—animated Billy. Growth would shape the future, of that he was certain. Real estate values would rise along with population—the right kind of population. They just needed to promote their region, or rather, their notion of the region. Billy began to imagine a city that did not yet exist.