

CATHERINE MULHOLLAND

The OWENSMOUTH

BABY



The Making of a San Fernando

Valley Town



NORTHRIDGE

Santa Susana Press

1987

Today almost a forgotten man, Whitley largely oversaw the development of the southern half of the San Fernando Valley in its initial stages. Banker, jewel merchant, land and townsite developer, this stout handsome land-boomer was for years to arrive almost daily from his home in Hollywood to oversee the transformation of grain fields and arid lands into market towns and agricultural suburbs and ranches. Fifty years old when he began the Valley project, he would later claim that it had ruined his health; but at the outset this flamboyant salesman was fired with enthusiasm, and his activities and opinions were to provide much of the internal drama on the Board of Control for years to come.

Hobart Johnstone Whitley was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1860, the seventh and youngest child of Joseph and Eleanor (Johnstone) Whitley. His father had once been a Member of Parliament for Liverpool. From Canada the family moved to Flint, Michigan, where Whitley received his schooling, although he also returned to Canada for some study at the Toronto Business College. His parents' deaths when he was eighteen forced him to seek employment, which led to his job with the Great Northern Railroad.

Described by a business associate as one of the "old-time champions of Bismarck and the Missouri Slope," Whitley built towns. He once claimed he'd built a hundred of them in Dakota and Oklahoma territories: towns named Ellendale, Steele, El Reno, Chickasha, Enid. . . . For Whitley towns happened all the time in America. They sprang up like weeds along the railroad tracks, for it didn't take much to make a town in those days. A heap of bricks and a pile of lumber on the bare land, some stakes driven in geometric patterns. It was called Progress, and Americans believed in it, wanted it. Towns were a manifestation of the country's advance and its upbuilding—visible evidence that God blessed America. The Empire Builder himself, James J. Hill, of the Great Northern Railway, proclaimed as an article of faith that "Land without population is a wilderness. Population without land is a mob."

Whitley believed that with a passion. Indeed, as a youth he had worked in the land department of Hill's Great Northern line and doubtless at that time became imbued with the expansionist spirit of the rail builders. At his death, the *New York Times* would call

him the Father of Hollywood, but long before he developed the truck gardens of Hollywood into choice residential districts Whitley had platted townsites on the Great Plains from the Dakotas down to Texas. As a townsite-spotter with the Rock Island Railroad, he had joined the Sooners when they opened up Oklahoma Territory, and was one of a group to go to Washington, D.C. to powwow with President Theodore Roosevelt and other great white fathers to boom the town of Guthrie for the new state capitol. TR knew Whitley, and had once even given his wife, Margaret Virginia, whom he had addressed as "Little Lady," shooting lessons on his ranch in the Badlands, Chimney Butte. That was in 1887, when he'd been west to discuss the opening up of Indian Territory; years later, during a political parade in Los Angeles, Whitley's heart had swelled with pride when the President had spied him from the parade line and called out, "Hello there, Whitley!" Mrs. Whitley saw parallels between Teddy, the Rough Rider, and her "Bert," who had left his Canadian home and inheritance to seek his way in the American West and whose terrible error had been that "he sacrificed his life in the name of Progress."

In later life she tried to sort it all out in a 40-page handwritten manuscript, *The Gift of Prophecy*, which she began by announcing her mind-reading powers: "When I was born the seventh child with a veil over my face the family all predicted that I would have the gift of prophecy, and when very young I began to fulfill their predictions." The power did not leave her, either. Hadn't she always recognized the villains who would betray her big man? Poor H.J.! thought Mrs. Whitley. Although he too was a seventh child, he was born without a caul and therefore lacked her spirituality and trusted where he should not have. Hadn't she been the one to warn him about the employee in the pipe organ factory in Van Nuys who could not look her in the eye and thus signalled to her that he was not to be trusted? And she was right. And the manager of the cannery that H.J. organized in the Valley—hadn't she suspected from the first that he was up to no good? And what would have happened to her husband and his four powerful associates had she not foreseen the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times*?

With a faint whiff of the apocryphal wafting over some of the