

# Cultural Daily

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## Val Verde: The Black Palm Springs

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2018

Even though the city of Los Angeles was founded by 44 Black and Brown Spanish citizens in 1781, it remained one of the most segregated cities in North America for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Restrictive housing covenants and redlining policies enforced by banks and insurance companies propagated these policies across Los Angeles County well into the 1970s, even after the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional between 1948 and 1954. Such policies were even enforced in cemeteries.

For many years, the Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights was one of the only places people of color could be buried in Los Angeles County. Not surprisingly these policies also extended to places of recreation like parks and beaches. There were only a few parks and beaches that allowed the presence of people of color. One of the few early communities that did not restrict African-American Angelenos was Val Verde and Val Verde Park in Northwest Los Angeles County, just a few miles shy of the Ventura County line.

Located just beyond Magic Mountain between hills in a lush pocket of the Santa Clarita Valley, Val Verde was considered the Black Palm Springs in the 1930s. Founded in 1924, it was designated as a resort area for African-Americans right from the beginning. In 1939, they built an Olympic swimming pool. The first African-American actress to win an Oscar, Hattie McDaniel, was known to frequent Val Verde during the 1930s.

See this short video: [Val Verde with Ralph Story](#).

The story of [Val Verde](#) was first brought to my attention by native Angeleno and veteran music industry denizen Greg Lupu. There's been an annual picnic on Memorial Day weekend over the last 45 years and Lupu found about Val Verde almost 20 years ago. Nonetheless, he did not learn about the historical significance until he saw a segment on KCET's "Things That Aren't Here Anymore with Ralph Story."



Greg Lupu

Lupu was asked 6 years ago to help organize the picnic and to bring in some bands to liven up the annual affair. This is when the wheels started to turn. "I started to realize that we could create a festival which would actually be something significant due to Val Verde's history," he says. "I feel honored to help carry on a tradition which also helps preserves history." He's been doing his part booking bands and bringing in poets over the last 6 years.

Lupu's primary collaborator in organizing the picnic over the last few years is Zoe Blaq. Blaq is a community organizer, poet, activist and devoted student of history. Like Lupu, the Val Verde story inspired her. She feels empowered by the history and wants to share the story. "Learning about Val Verde Park, California is part of black history," she exclaims. "Black history is the history of all Americans. It helps end racism."



Rashonda "Zoe Blaq" Bartney

Moreover, Blaq declares, "Val Verde Park is one of those forgotten historical places that was thriving and supportive of art, culture and wellness by Black leaders and celebrities since the 1930's due to segregation. We must continue to archive our stories, so children of the African diaspora will understand the past and move forward without fear of creating an inclusive and accepting world." Blaq has done her part to share the history and archive the stories through inviting several artists, activists, musicians and poets to share the stage with her annually at the picnic.

I was there at Val Verde Park's annual picnic on Memorial Day 2017. Musicians like Leisei Chen, Mahi Gato, Greg Hernandez, Dez Hope, Malik Moore, Piel and Emile Poree and poets like Jeffrey Martin, Gia Scott-Heron and Allan Aquino among others were on hand sharing their work. A few local teenagers from Val Verde sang some songs and the whole day was a spirited event. I also met [Shelby Jacobs](#). Shelby grew up in Val Verde in the late 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. He attended high school in nearby Newhall and even though there were very few Blacks at his school in the early 1950s, he was the Student Body President.



Shelby began attending UCLA in 1953 and by the time he graduated he started working as an engineer. He worked for 40 plus years as an engineer and ended up becoming one of the leading contributors to the Apollo Space Program at Rockwell. Jacobs told the *San Diego Union Tribune* in 2015 that, "The way I characterize my career is that I went from the back of the bus to the front of the bus." Jacobs was driving the bus as one of the leading engineers of the Space Program.

Jacobs was the keynote speaker at the 2017 Val Verde annual picnic and he reflected on his many happy memories growing up in Val Verde. He noted that his formative years in Val Verde equipped him with the confidence and vitality to make his dreams come true. Though he has not lived in Val Verde for over 60 years now, it will always hold a special place in his heart and his enthusiasm radiated when he spoke.

On the Val Verde main stage in May 2017 near the conclusion of his speech, Jacobs smiled mischievously at the crowd and then said something like "Though I was never up in space, I do know how to moonwalk." He then moonwalked backwards across the stage to the laughing audience. Now over 83 years old, Jacobs remembers his youth in Val Verde like it was yesterday.

The 2018 annual picnic is coming up and will begin on Saturday May 26<sup>th</sup>. Greg Lupu and Zoe Blaq are doing all they can to create a dynamic annual event to celebrate historical Val Verde by offering free camping, hiking, yoga, swimming and unique vendors to honor the legacy of the community once known as the Black Palm Springs.





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