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The Southern California Storytelling Scene... seen by Katy Rydell

The Southern Californians enjoy the luxury of a thriving storytelling community. Thirteen groups are scattered between Bakersfield and San Diego. While the groups operate independently of each other, to a certain extent many are the children and grandchildren of Peggy Prentice, who created the first group back in 1981.

At the time, Peggy was a secretary in the aerospace industry, looking for an outlet for her creative energy. She did two things that were to have a lasting impact on her life and on the lives of countless others. First, through UCLA extension she took a class in storytelling taught by Nancy Schimmel; second, she attended a conference in Northern California run by the American Storytelling Resource Center. At both the class and the conference, Peggy met other Southern Californians who were interested in storytelling. Already Peggy was busy organizing; she had the foresight to keep track of names and addresses. In October 1981, she invited everyone on her list to an evening of storytelling in her home. Six people showed up.

For the first few months, the group continued to meet at Peggy's house. As the group expanded it moved to the Story Room of the Santa Monica Public Library, a warm, intimate space whose walls are lined with hundreds upon hundreds of books of stories. The library was a good place to meet, but it had two limitations: a 9 pm curfew, and a ban on collecting donations. Peggy thought it was important, particularly for a fledgling group, to have guest storytellers perform from time to time. She wanted to pay guests an honorarium but was unable to collect money in the library. So the group moved again. This time to a small, private elementary school where Kathleen Zundell, who by then had joined Peggy as a co-sponsor of the group, was a teacher.

At that time, in 1984, Community Storytellers numbered about 15 people. The group was big enough for a meeting but too small to be assured of its long-term survival. Enter the press.

In May, 1984, the Los Angeles Times ran an article about the group on the front page of the View Section, with photos. At the next meeting, 80 people showed up. Not all of them returned for a second visit, but for the next two years, newcomers continued to trickle in, attracted by that article. The influx of energy did wonders for the continued health and liveliness of the group.

The group has moved twice more. We now meet once a month on a Thursday evening in West Los Angeles. Each teller has a time limit of eight minutes. From time to time we produce a

Tellabration (sometimes we call it a bash). Last fall we gave ourselves a smashing 15th birthday party with dinner, a cake, and, of course, stories galore.

Some years ago Peggy Prentice moved to Palm Springs where, of course she created another storytelling group, the Desert Storytellers. In 1992 I was hired by the Long Beach Public Library to encourage and produce storytelling events in Long Beach. Having been raised on Community Storytellers, the job did not seem complete until I had founded the Long Beach Storytellers. Others who have come to Community Storytellers to see "how we do it" have gone home to produce groups in their own communities. Paul Higgins is starting the Santa Clarita Valley Storytellers in Valencia. Michael McCarty is leading the Griot Workshop in Los Angeles.

The Storyswapping Festival held each May (see Storyline Spring 1997) has been a wonderful inspiration for a number of groups. This once-a-year gathering of tellers from all over the area sends people home determined to launch groups in their own communities. Groups have popped up in Riverside, Claremont, Costa Mesa, Bakersfield. Orange County has produced an extremely active South Coast Storytellers Guild.

Festivals have cropped up: the Flying Leap Storytelling Festival in Solvang in February. The Pacific Storytelling Festival near Los Osos in September; the Once Upon a Story Festival in San Juan Capistrano in October. San Diego offers Vicky Reed's storytelling class at the University of San Diego which attracts superb performers from all over the country, virtually all year long.

To keep track of all these doings, back in 1987 I created a regional newsletter called *Stories*. It tries to cover what's happening, not only in Southern California, but throughout the Western and Pacific region. There's a lot going on. Newsgroups. New Festivals. New Classes. Happily storytelling is thriving.



Katy Rydell, besides editing, writing, publishing *Stories*, is currently teaching storytelling at Cal State, Los Angeles, and performing professionally both locally and afield. She was a featured teller at the Bay Area Storytelling Festival last year. She will be featured at the **Forest Festival** in the Olympic Peninsula this fall. A *Stories* subscription is \$15 to Katy Rydell, 12600 Woodbine St., Los Angeles CA