

FULLERTON HERITAGE

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The mission of Fullerton Heritage is to foster an appreciation of our city's cultural history and to ensure the preservation of our historic architectural resources and environments.

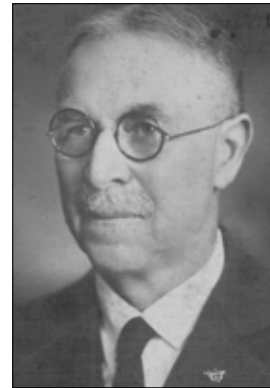
Hugh Edgar Johnson: Fullerton's Fiery Newspaper Owner and Editor

by Deb Richey

A colorful character in a colorful period of journalism, Hugh Edgar Johnson was the personification of an early American country newspaper editor and proprietor. After starting three Orange County newspapers, Johnson was enticed to move his *Tribune* to Fullerton in 1893, by the promise of 300 paid-in-advance subscribers. Johnson established the *Fullerton Tribune* when the town was little more than a hard-packed plot of bare earth, and under his hand for nearly 40 years the newspaper flourished in parallel with the growth and prosperity of the city. In the early days of the newspaper, Johnson was the *Tribune*—gathering, writing, editing, and placing the news in various positions in the pages of the newspaper, and writing all the editorial opinions. In an era known for fiery journalism, his hard-hitting reporting, vitriolic editorials, and caustic wit were legendary throughout Southern California. One of the few Democratic editors in Orange County, Johnson and his newspaper would provide the still-fledgling townsite with a cohesive identity while playing a major role

in shaping the attitudes of his readers and the town. The *Tribune* remains the only day-to-day chronicle of early Fullerton, and Johnson remains the most significant and longest-serving editor and newspaper owner in the city's history.

Born on February 28, 1868, in Ashville, North Carolina, Hugh Edgar Johnson was the oldest of nine children born to Merriman Haskew Johnson (1836-1906) and Laura Ann Sitton (1846-1925). A farmer and carpenter, Merriman Johnson served as a Second Lieutenant of the North Carolina 16th Infantry Regiment during the Civil War, and was one of about 800 Union and Confederate veterans who migrated to Orange County after the war. The family settled in Santa Ana in 1886, when Hugh Edgar Johnson was eighteen years old.



*Hugh Edgar Johnson, 1931.
Courtesy of Fullerton
Public Library.*

Johnson's first job was as a typesetter for the *Santa Ana Standard*, working under cantankerous proprietor and editor Daniel M. Baker (1842-1902). He worked as a reporter for morning newspapers in Santa Ana and Los Angeles for about two years. He opened a small print shop in Santa Ana, with his first enterprise the publication of a theater program for the Spurgeon Theatre, later extending the same service to include a program for a theater in Anaheim. He printed the Santa Ana program in a small office in downtown Santa Ana, then bicycled to the *Anaheim Gazette* newspaper office, where he printed the Anaheim theater program.

On August 21, 1889, Johnson, then 21, married Mildred (Millie) R. Ward, age
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Fullerton College Buildings Rehabilitation Project

The rehabilitation of the 300 and 500 buildings is considered essential work under the current COVID-19 rules, so the bidding stage is proceeding. The College District Chancellor will release project funds July 1st.

A tentative schedule has been established for the next phases. Between July and October 2020, contractors will be prequalified regarding their experience with restoration and preservation projects. Those possessing the necessary qualifications will receive invitations to bid on the project in October. Bids will be due in December 2020. The project could be awarded to the successful bidder in April 2021, and the notice to proceed with the project could be issued by August 2021.

The schedule is still tentative, because it must be coordinated with the construction schedule of the new classroom building that broke ground last February on the campus. This new building must be ready for occupancy before the 300 and 500 Buildings can be vacated for their rehabilitation. Summer 2021 is the expected completion date for the new building, so an August 2021 start for the rehabilitation of the 300 and 500 Buildings may be a reach. The rehabilitation of the 300 and 500 buildings could be completed by early 2023.

—Terry Galvin

Fullerton College Houses Moved

On two sunny days in April, two houses previously owned by Fullerton College took their journeys from Chapman Avenue to the lots in the 400 blocks of East Amerige and East Wilshire (ref. Newsletter 2020 Winter). Although unpublicized, because of the lack of any other activity in the town, word quickly spread about the pending moves. The project, originally proposed and supported by Fullerton Heritage, was witnessed by an impressive group of social distancing onlookers, and was possibly the most photographed event in Fullerton's history. Everyone had cameras and cell phones, and they were in constant use.

Developer Tony Bushala purchased the lots from Fullerton College, which then gave him the houses to move and restore. Brandt House & Building Movers used sets of hydraulic wheels to support and guide the buildings while they were towed along Chapman, Raymond, Commonwealth, Lemon, and Amerige, and then placed precisely over their future foundation locations. The first house was pulled through the Amerige lot to the adjacent Wilshire lot; the second house was placed directly on the Amerige lot.

To add drama to the event, the first house was so wide that most



of the street trees in the 300 block of Amerige needed trimming, which added about two hours to the otherwise uneventful move. Making the left turn from the narrow street onto the narrow lot was a tight maneuver.

The second house was much easier, except for having to cut about 4 feet off of the roof to get under some wires. A fitting conclu-

sion for the day was the crane lifting the roof section back into place as though it had never been cut. Once restored, the houses will be compatible additions to the neighborhood and good uses for the last vacant lots on the old Pacific Electric line.

The successful move of these two houses was the culmination of a four-year-long effort by Fullerton Heritage starting in late 2015, when Fullerton College announced its intention to raze the houses it owned on East Chapman Avenue. Ultimately, with the support of Fullerton College President Greg Schulz, the two houses with the most historical significance were saved and moved to the two vacant former Pacific Electric Railroad lots that had been owned by the College for many years.

—Terry Galvin

Fullerton YMCA Sign

The process to have the Fullerton YMCA sign designated a Local Landmark is underway. Dedicated on October 29, 1962, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) building and neon sign are located at 2000 Youth Way. Prior to the construction of the new permanent facility, the Fullerton YMCA had been renting buildings since its founding in January 1906.

The Mid-Century Modern facility and exterior neon sign were designed by notable local architect Charles Wickett, who had also served as treasurer for the Fullerton YMCA. The red, white, and blue neon sign, positioned west of the building entrance and overlooking North Harbor Boulevard, was produced and installed by the Nu-Art Neon Sign Company. A Fullerton company established in 1946. The YMCA building was constructed by Leonard V. Bouas (1924-1993), a former Fullerton College football star. The grounds were designed by notable local landscape architect Clark B. Lutschg. The naming of Youth Way, which was built to support the facility, was the result of a contest won by Dorothy Brewer (Mrs. Hubert D. Brewer).

The application for Local Landmark status was approved by the Landmarks Commission on April 15, 2020. When presented to and approved by the City Council, the YMCA Sign will be designated Local Landmark #104.

—Ernie Kelsey



2020 Election of Officers

Fullerton Heritage Board of Directors has made the difficult decision to cancel the 2020 Annual Meeting. The following serves as the ballot. Please email your vote to info@fullertonheritage.org or call the Hot Line at (714) 740-3051 by June 30, 2020. Votes not received will be assumed to be votes in favor of the Board's recommendation, and will be voted by the Board by proxy.

The following candidates are recommended to serve as directors of the Corporation for two years:

- Jordan Byers
- Jennifer Harris
- Bob Linnell
- Deb Richey
- Ray Sly

I vote for the candidates listed above

Write-in candidate: _____

The following continue to serve on the board: *Maureen Burton, Terry Galvin, Ann Gread, and Ernie Kelsey*

Johnson

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20, one of ten children born to John and Roxana Ward of Tustin. A 39-year resident of Fullerton, Mildred Johnson (1869-1931) worked alongside her husband for decades as he established early Orange County newspapers, often setting type and reporting on women's issues. The couple had no children.

After working for other local newspapers, Johnson decided to launch his own daily, the *Santa Ana Tribune* (August 1, 1889-October 1989), first published on the same day Orange County was officially born. He could not, however, find a niche in a crowded field, and the paper quickly ceased publication. A few months later, he relaunched the newspaper as the *Westminster Tribune* (January 25, 1890-October 8, 1892), a tabloid-size sheet, originally printed in Santa Ana where Johnson continued to live for some time. The Johnsons settled in Westminster in 1891, becoming early pioneers of the town, but when the *Westminster Tribune* ceased publication, they returned to Santa Ana to start the *Orange County Tribune* (January 30, 1893-March 1893), working out of a small print shop over an undertaking parlor.

By 1893, there had been three brief and unsuccessful attempts to establish a newspaper in Fullerton. Almost from the time the city was established, early pioneers realized what was needed for the growth of the city was a good newspaper. Town founder Edward Russell Amerige (1857-1915) and rancher/businessman Alexander McDermont (1844-1921) approached Johnson about starting a newspaper in Fullerton. At first Johnson "could not see much in it" but agreed to visit Fullerton. After making the trip, Johnson accepted the proposition, but requested a guarantee of 300 paid-in-advance subscribers (at \$1.50 per annum) to begin with, and "twenty enterprising citizens" stepped forward with the requested amount in cash. Johnson began publishing the *Fullerton Tribune*, a Saturday weekly, in April 1893, from his print shop in Santa Ana. He moved with his wife to Fullerton on July 12, 1893, renting rooms in the McDermont Block on South Spadra Road (now Harbor Boulevard)



Hugh Edgar and Mildred Johnson with Flora Starbuck (left to right) in front of the Chadbourne Building, April 1893. Courtesy of Fullerton Public Library.

before starting construction of a "little cottage" at 218 West Commonwealth Avenue (razed, 1940s) in November. The couple would live in the Victorian-styled West Commonwealth Avenue home until 1928, when they constructed their dream home, a lavish Spanish Colonial Revival home in Brookdale Heights.

When Johnson started the *Fullerton Tribune* in April 1893, the town had no paved roads, no gas or electricity, no bank, and one streetlight – an oil light, at the northeast corner of Harbor Boulevard and Commonwealth Avenue – where the city's business building, the Chadbourne, was located. He rented a corner room in the Chadbourne Building, sharing the building with a dentist, a physician, a grocery store, and the town post office. The ambitious 25-year-old would don his trademark bowler hat and travel by horse and buggy, bicycle, and horseback over the roads of North Orange County to gather news and advertising. He then helped his compositors set stories, one letter at a time, running a hand-operated press. In 1893/94, he constructed a two-story, six-room building on Harbor Boulevard, becoming the first weekly newspaper proprietor in Orange County to own his own newspaper building. The *Tribune* office was expanded in 1898, providing a private editorial office for Johnson where he could meet with readers, advertisers, and reporters. In 1911, Johnson constructed his last *Tribune* building at 107 South Harbor Boulevard. The small brick building, which would later be used by the legendary Leo Fender to manufacture his first guitars, provided Johnson with the electricity needed for his

new all-electric printing equipment.

To supplement his income, Johnson used the newspaper's printing equipment to run off wanted posters, broadsides, business cards, stationery, and other items for residents, businesses, and government officials. He served as the town's telegraph operator and as Fullerton Justice of the Peace from August 3, 1897 to January 1, 1903, losing the November 1902 election by one vote to Charles K. Ford. He was also the Fullerton/Orange County correspondent for the *Los Angeles Herald* and the *Los Angeles Times*, which frequently reprinted or reported articles and information from the *Fullerton Tribune*. These sideline jobs were ideal for Johnson as they provided him with information that he could share with subscribers of the *Tribune* and other newspapers. One good example of his use of different job hats occurred in October 1898, when Mrs. Winifred Gross confessed to Justice of the Peace Johnson that while traveling with John Hancock, her paramour, she witnessed Hancock's killing of two other travelers. Telegraph operator Johnson sent out a detailed description of the accused killer to neighboring towns. Hancock was soon apprehended, thanks to the description, and Johnson had a series of lengthy stories of the affair for his front page, which he then shared with the *Los Angeles Herald* and other newspapers.

A forceful, salty, and witty writer, Johnson remained the *Tribune's* major reporter. He investigated and reported on local developments, and would often travel by train to report on major events, such as world fairs, exhibitions, and disasters, which he would photograph and describe in vivid detail, making his readers feel as if they were there themselves. He interviewed a wide variety of people, everyone from President Grover Cleveland to "saloon smasher" Carrie Nation. When a notable person showed up in Fullerton – William Jennings Bryan, Helen Keller, Governor Hiram Johnson – he made sure he was there to describe the event in great detail.

Even in an era of sharp-tongued journalism, Johnson stood out for his editorial rants. He cared little for what people thought about what he published, and his feuds with

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Johnson

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fellow newspapermen and Fullerton's leading citizens are well documented. He cultivated the art of name-calling, developing nicknames for his competitors – the *Fullerton News* was the Snooze and the *Anaheim Plain Dealer* was the Plain Blackmailer – that were instantly recognizable to his readers. He relished lawsuits from other newspapermen, including a \$10,000 libel suit from Horace McPhee, editor and owner of the *Santa Ana Blade*. Johnson would push the insults too far, however, with Charles C. Chapman, wealthy citrus rancher and Fullerton's first mayor, by referring to him as "Czar Chapman" and "The Great I Am" in front page headlines. Deeply offended by the character attacks, Chapman started a rival newspaper, the *Fullerton News*, in February 1902. Johnson despised the *Fullerton News'* inexperienced editor, Vivian Tresslar, nicknaming him the effeminate Vivvyanne, and insulting him at every opportunity. Johnson would eventually buy out the *News*, which had never been a serious competitor, in 1926.

Although Johnson initially supported the anti-saloon movement endorsed by Fullerton conservatives – a decision he later regretted – he was an ardent progressive Democrat who was often at odds with Fullerton's fiscally conservative townspeople and officials. From the start, Johnson raised a strong editorial voice on issues he supported, often with great success. One of the first projects to command his attention was the establishment of Fullerton's first bank. Through the efforts of the editor and other local businessmen, they put up all the money they could spare themselves to start the Fruit Growers' Bank of Fullerton. He then turned his attention to the cause of a public high school for the city. In opposition to the statement that the high school was "a ruse to make the poor man educate the rich man's children," Johnson wrote: "A second thought will show anyone that the poor man pays little or no tax, and almost always has more children to educate." He later used what he called his "heavy weight" editorials to push for Fullerton's and Orange County's first rural mail delivery in 1900, and for city incorporation in 1904. His editorials exerted wide local influence and many now recognizable institutions and sites in Fullerton were all championed by Johnson, including Fullerton College (1913), Commonwealth (now Amerige) Park (1913), Loma Vista Memorial Park and Cemetery (1914), the Pacific Electric Depot (1917), the California Hotel (now Villa del Sol, 1923), and the Fullerton Municipal Airport (1927).

Around 1929, Johnson began to wind down his 45-year career of newspapering, divesting himself of papers that he had acquired. This included the *Fullerton Tribune*, which he sold for \$160,000 to a veteran newspaperman from Bloomington, Illinois, W. Kee Maxwell (1879-1952), who had 34 years of experience as a reporter, correspondent, editor, and publisher. A fellow Democrat, Maxwell

guided the *Tribune* through the Depression years, retaining most of the features and civic-minded editorial policies established by Johnson. The *Fullerton Tribune* is remarkable for having only three owners in its first 80 years. It survived for another 55 years under various owners until the daily was finally shut down at the end of 1984 – the last of Orange County's 19th century newspapers to go.

Mildred Johnson died in the couple's new Brookdale Heights home of a stroke on October 22, 1931. In April 1935, Johnson began to experience severe heart problems and moved into the nearby California Hotel, where he passed away on May 16, 1935, at the age of 67. Out of respect for the memory of Johnson, the *Tribune* went to press shortly after noon the day of his funeral so employees could attend the ceremony. The May 17, 1935 issue of the *Tribune* also carried a lengthy tribute to Johnson. By the time of his passing, most of his squabbles with the town's leading citizens had been patched up and his contributions to Fullerton's growth recognized.



Johnson House on Brookdale Place. Courtesy of Bob Linnell

Shortly after Johnson's death, it was discovered that on November 12, 1932, he had married his former mistress, Jessie Elvira Smith Engstrom, in Ventura County. Prior to the marriage, Johnson purchased a \$25,000 Beverly Hills mansion (722 North Roxbury Drive) for her, and signed an affidavit noting that he was the father of her daughter, known as Beverly Smith or Beverly Engstrom, born in 1920. Johnson, however, left a will that denied the legality of his marriage to Mrs. Engstrom (she obtained a mail order Mexican divorce from her previous husband) and the parentage of her daughter, claiming that the affidavit was signed under threat and duress. The revelations were met with disbelief by Fullerton residents, many of whom believed the purported second Mrs. Johnson was a fake out to get Johnson's considerable fortune. Despite scurrilous attacks, the "illegal" or "reputed" Mrs. Johnson persisted and hired Isidore B. Dockweiler (1867-1947), one of the shrewdest and most powerful lawyers in Los Angeles (Dockweiler State Beach is named for him), to break the will. The well-publicized case would go through the courts from May 1935 to June 1937. The second Mrs. Johnson was eventually declared the legal wife of Hugh Edgar Johnson, and Beverly his daughter. Mrs. Johnson gained ownership of the home on Brookdale Place, valued at \$10,000, along with the *Fullerton Tribune* building, and the Johnsons' first home on West Commonwealth Avenue. Beverly Smith filed a correction to her birth records naming Johnson as her father. Mrs. Johnson had signed a contract with Dockweiler agreeing to pay him forty percent of what she obtained from the Johnson estate. When she did not pay the agreed amount, Dockweiler sued her, and obtained the Brookdale Place dwelling, along with the other two Fullerton properties, in 1939, which he quickly sold. The Johnson House on Brookdale Place is a designated Fullerton Local Landmark and has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

President's Corner

Summer 2020–Annual Meeting Edition

by Ernie Kelsey

Hello Fullerton Heritage members. I really don't even know what to say about the start of 2020, other than thank you for your continued support. Although Fullerton Heritage will not be having an Annual Meeting this year, and the Board of Directors haven't met in person since February, we've still managed to get a lot accomplished over the last twelve months. Fullerton Heritage's "year" is from July to June each year as June is when we would normally hold our annual meeting.

Even with so much going on, Fullerton Heritage accomplished the following:

- Worked with the City to further secure the Amerige Brothers' Realty Office after several instances of vandalism
- Welcomed a new Board Member – Jordan Byers (welcome Jordan!)
- Advocated successfully for historic buildings included in the CSUF and FCC master plan documents
- Successfully saw Local Landmark - 103 (Naylor/Dalton House) added to the City's list of Significant Properties
- Submitted application for the YMCA neon sign to be established as Local Landmark - 104 (Awaiting City Council approval)
- Collaborated with the City to create "Fullerton Residential Preservation Zones" information brochure to help educate about Historic Districts and Preservation Zones.
- Donated several books to the Local History Room at the Fullerton Public Library
- Met with several city leaders to discuss the Fullerton Heritage mission
- Supported Senate Bill 451 with letters of support to the City and State
- Placed various Local Landmark and National Registry plaques with the gracious support of the Fullerton Rotary
- Conducted several downtown walking tours and a Hillcrest Park tour
- Celebrated as the Fullerton City Council enacted the Mills Act after decades of advocating by Fullerton Heritage
- Continued celebrating as a 5 year effort was completed as we watched two boarded up Craftsman houses on Chapman get moved to their new addresses on Wilshire/Amerige
- Watched as our Social Network presence continues to grow with more content and thousands of page views on a monthly basis
- Laughed, cried and relished incredible memories as we bid a fond farewell to Tom and Kate Dalton who retired from the Fullerton Heritage Board of Directors after over 25 years of hard core dedication to local historic preservation and the City of Fullerton. We love you two!

Thanks to the efforts of the Board, our members, and the City, we were able to accomplish a lot over the last twelve months. As we come out of the national health crisis, we look forward to working with the City to implement the Mills Act and to start advocating to preserve part of the Kimberly Clark building on Orangethorpe.

Without your membership and monetary support, we would not be able to do everything we do. This why I'm asking you to renew your membership or donate to Fullerton Heritage today. We've made it easier – you can renew or donate on our website (fullerton-heritage.org/Join).

Don't forget to visit our Facebook and Instagram pages and share our content.

Thank you,

–Ernie

New Member

Welcome new member: Jensen Hallstrom

Farewell, Kate and Tom

I find it hard to believe that Kate and Tom Dalton are leaving the Fullerton Heritage Board. My wife, Michele, and I served on the board with them for about fifteen years and, during that time, watched Fullerton Heritage grow in stature and influence in the city.

Kate and Tom were deeply committed to the goals of Fullerton Heritage; and were perhaps the best-known faces of the organization in City Hall. Friendly, persuasive and always collegial, the Daltons helped pave the way for the Fullerton Heritage's ideas– influencing City policy to preserve Fullerton's architectural and cultural history.



Kate and Tom Dalton

For much of the time we were on the Board, Tom served as FH president. His leadership was key. Yearly summer planning meetings set the goals for the coming year. Monthly Board meetings were efficient and effective; checking progress on our goals and setting priorities. There was always an agenda and we stuck to it.

It seemed that Kate attended every Design Review Committee meeting, advocating for appropriate architectural treatment even before there were written guidelines. She kept the Board up to date at our monthly meetings and summarized building activity for FH members in the twice-a-year newsletter.

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Plummer Auditorium Update

The Plummer Auditorium seismic retrofit and subsequent ADA improvements project is considered an essential activity, so work has been able to proceed. Unfortunately, the work is still administrative at this point. The High School District must complete the CEQA process (environmental review) prior to making a formal application for State funding for the project. That process is nearing completion. Once the funding application is submitted, there is an undetermined amount of time before a response can be expected. The District is hopeful that funding will be approved for the next fiscal year.

In the meantime, Fullerton Heritage has submitted an application to have the Plummer Auditorium murals listed separately as a Local Landmark and then placed on the National Register. While the building was placed on the National Register in 1993, the murals were still painted over at the time, so they were not included in the application. The High School District Board has approved our efforts. Local Landmark designation should occur this year, but with the current COVID-19 situation, the exact timing is now uncertain.

—Terry Galvin

Mills Act Adopted!

On April 21, 2020, the Fullerton City Council voted unanimously to adopt and immediately implement a Mills Act Program. This was another huge success for preservation in Fullerton.

The Mills Act was created in 1972 by California Government Code, Article 12, Sections 50280-50290. Named for Senator John Mills, the initiative allows a city to enter into contracts with owners of historic properties who agree to preserve, maintain, and rehabilitate their properties. The owner receives of reduction in property tax as determined by the Orange County Assessor's Office. The owner agrees to reinvest the savings to implement the agreed upon

rehabilitation/maintenance projects. The result being neighborhood preservation and overall property value increases.

More than 100 cities in California have Mills Act Programs. Fullerton is the 10th city in Orange County to adopt a Program. The County has a program as well. Programs are administered at the local level. The Fullerton Program will be administered by the Community and Economic Development Department-Planning Division. Properties that will be eligible for a Mills Act contract are those that are residential in kind with assessed value less than \$800,000, and are either a designated Local Landmark or Significant Property or are a residence

located within a neighborhood with a residential preservation zone. For further information, contact Andrew Kusch, Associate Planner, (714) 735-6599 or AndrewK@cityoffullerton.com

Fullerton Heritage is proud to have been a strong proponent for bringing the Mills Act to Fullerton and for our positive relationship with the city to finally have the program launched. Please visit fullertonheritage.org to access the City of Fullerton Mills Act Program Description, Guidelines, and Application.

—Ann Gread

Daltons

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Everyone on the Fullerton Heritage Board was dedicated to the mission of the organization. We all worked hard, following the example of Kate and Tom.

I looked back over more than ten years of Fullerton Heritage newsletters and made a list of our accomplishments, from the establishment of several Preservation Zones, the adoption of preservation guidelines (written by Kate), the development of walking and driving tours, getting historic properties placed on the National Register of Historic Places, initiating efforts to save the Fox Theater . . . well, the list goes on—too much to list here. But I would invite everyone to review those archives. There is much to be proud of, and much is owed to Kate and Tom.

As they move on to a much-deserved rest, we must recognize their efforts, for they are leaving Fullerton Heritage as a now invaluable civic organization, and the City of Fullerton is much better off for their contributions.

—Jim Powell



Board of Directors 2020-2021

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Jennifer Harris / Ernie Kelsey / Bob Linnell
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