



Remembering Elysium

By Gary Mussell

Like the mythical kingdom of Camelot, there was once another perfect spot located outside Los Angeles where nudists and naturists could go to practice their clothes-free philosophy free of the workday troubles of the nearby city. That place was called Elysium Fields and it existed for over 30 years, thriving under the loving eye of a man named Ed Lange. At least that is how people now remember it.

In reality, Elysium lived on the edge of extinction for its first 25 years, under the constant threat of closure by the County of Los Angeles. It was the longest and most expensive zoning battle in County history, and the court case went all the way to the United State Supreme Court. Ironically, after finally the fight for a conditional use permit, Ed Lange died, leading to a final six years of acrimony, a member's revolt, and the park's final closure in 2000 by Ed's two daughters.

But let's start at the beginning.

Elysium Fields opened on Memorial Day, May 1968, on land purchased by Ed Lange. The 8-acre property lay in the heart of a winding canyon near the mountain village of Topanga, about 20 miles to the west of Los Angeles. Lange was a successful fashion photographer and magazine publisher. For many years he also had been active in the social nudist movement and, as a young man, was a member of the Fraternity Elysia nudist park when a local newspaper sensationalized the suicide of an Elysia member and blamed it on the nudist park's lifestyle. As a result, Los Angeles County closed Elysia and passed one of the harshest anti-nudity ordinances in the country. Ed vowed the same fate would not befall him.

Also, the taboos at traditional nudist clubs were enormous. At the time, most clubs had "no touching" rules, and you were not allowed to look at another person lower than their neck, nor could you dance unless both partners got dressed. "They [the other clubs] squeezed the humanity out of people in order to prove that nudism was innocent," Lange wrote at the time. His Elysium Institute was going to be something different, so he described his new venture as a Human Awareness Growth Center." His policy was "clothing optional" not "nudity required," which, in the nudist community, was a very controversial concept at the time. People could hug and touch, and while overt sexuality and genital touching was forbidden, there was not the paranoia about simple touching found at so many nudist places. It was a relaxed, loving, and sensual environment.

Up the steps on a little hill above the lawn was a very large hydropool that could hold about 50 people when full (often it was.) Members and guests spent many hours there visiting with other people, the air scented by the eucalyptus trees that provided afternoon shade. There were often rumors of late-night sex in the hydropool, which could get one kicked out if the couple got caught, but nobody ever did.

Lange started making contacts with many of the top authors, psychologists, and philosophers living in the Los Angeles area encouraging them to host workshops and seminars on the grounds for their customers and peers. It was a place where nudity was allowed, but it was not required except in the swimming pool. This made Elysium quite different than the conventional nudist venues of its day. People brought their spouses and partners, their kids, and their friends who otherwise might never have gone to a "nudist camp." It was an instant success.

Over the next few years, Elysium began offering an amazing variety of workshops and seminars that attracted best-selling authors, Indian gurus, renowned psychologists and psychiatrists. For example, Dr. Albert Ellis, a famous specialist on rational emotive therapy, ran the world's first group nudity therapy session there during that first summer.

Elysium also attracted its share of local self-help practitioners eager to share their New Age insights on the healing powers of touch, positive thoughts, and tarot cards. Among these seminars were such titles as: Non-Verbal Communication, Tantalize Your Senses, Ego Therapy, All About Wine, Tactile Celebration, Biogenic Gestalt Massage, and the ever popular Thursday Night Tribal Feast (where one could not use their hands and had to grunt at the person next to them to be fed.) These seminars often sold out with up to two dozen attending at a time.

Within a few years, a local Native American shaman began hosting quarterly Sweat Lodge events. Tennis lessons and yoga classes were also added to the schedule. Ed was happy to give them space and a promotional ad in the monthly Elysium magazine, the *Journal of the Senses* (JOTS), for half the fees they collected.

On most summer weekends, as many as 300 people might be on the grounds, but most Elysium visitors did not participate in the workshops. “We came to recharge our batteries”, was the phrase most often used by those spending a lazy afternoon sitting on blankets on the lawn, chatting with friends, and appreciating the many nude forms that dotted the lawn. It was a very social place.

One member billed as “The Naked Magician” performed a show there, which was filmed (with an animated top hat covering his privates) for a television entertainment segment. It was also mentioned on radio stations across the country, including Paul Harvey who was outraged at the very thought of it.

Sharing food was a wonderful and sensual experience that brought the members closer together. One tradition that sprang up early was the weekly potluck dinner, held on Sunday night. There could be as many as a hundred different dishes laid out on a long table near the BBQ, where Cliff and Glenn cooked their chicken and tri-tip to perfection. On Wednesday nights, different members would rotate preparing a full meal for guests in attendance. Two cooks in particular were always in demand: Orin always brought belly dancers to accessorize his Middle Eastern cuisine, while Jeff and Kris were known for their amazing Italian food.

In 1970, clinical psychologist Jean Paul Moran joined the Elysium staff. Moran’s hobby as a sculptor was encouraged by Lange and soon flat-metal images of people in joyous poses soon dotted the lawn boundaries. A few years later, Noel Pugh moved in and became Elysium’s resident artist and caricaturist. He and his easel were a common sight near the pool as members and guests enjoyed having their nakedness captured on paper as a keepsake of their day at the Fields.

Elysium also promoted two other things that appalled the nudist establishment:

First, was the infamous “Meditation Room.” Located in the back of the main building, it was 8x 6 without much light and only a mattress on the floor and a drawn curtain for the door. How one “meditated” was up to them, but the rhythmic sounds often coming from within could hardly be described as chants. Ed’s rationale was this: since open sex or lewd conduct was not permitted on the open grounds, there needed to be a place where individuals for couples could find relief from their occasional personal tension over a long weekend. The rule was each couple only got 30 minutes, they had to always bring their own sheet or towels, and they had to clean up when you were done. On busy weekends, the line of couples waiting to use it often stretched down the hall and even outside the building. Ed eventually shut the room down as the naïve belief of “victimless crimes” gave way to the harsh reality of herpes and AIDS. The room only operated from 1970 to about 1984 but its reputation followed Elysium for decades and among some old timers, it is what Elysium is best remembered for instead of the other pioneering innovations Lange brought to the naturist movement.

The second innovation was Lange allowing his massage therapists to set up their tables out in the open, under a tree on the lawn, right in front of the members and guests. Even to this day, massage is seen in many nudist parks as having a sexual connotation, and best done in private. Ed, ever the master at marketing, understood that seeing someone get a massage and feeling so relaxed and refreshed afterwards would convince onlookers they would like one also. Ed and the massage therapist split the \$50/hour fee 50-50, so both he and the therapist were happy with the extra business it brought in. Often there would be three or four different tables set up around the grounds, all of them busy for hours at a time.

Within a few years, Ed’s success attracted media attention. In 1973, Allistair Cooke included Elysium in his award-winning BBC documentary series “America.” The following year, television personality Tom Snyder videotaped a full hour at Elysium for his Tomorrow show. A few years later, Geraldo Rivera actually stripped off his clothing for one of his shows and joined club members in the hydropool.

The Mother of All Legal Battles

It looked to everyone like Lange's dream was going to be a triumph. But parallel to this success, another story unfolded, one that would cost the dreamer nearly a million dollars in legal fees before it was over.

Unknown to Lange, only a few weeks after the 1968 opening day, local sheriff deputies were hiding in the bushes on the edge of the property taking photographs of the naked people and documenting all that went on. On June 23, 1968, three helicopters suddenly appeared overhead flying very low. Police cars filled with officers suddenly drove in from all sides and arrested or cited 24 people for violation of the County's anti-nudity ordinance law.

The ordinance stated that it was illegal for "two people of the same sex could not be nude in the presence of another person or persons of the opposite sex." The law not only forbade the establishment of nudist parks, but also applied to people in their own homes. Ed was happy to challenge the law, indeed he had been anticipating this moment for many years.

Lange's attorney presented a vigorous defense, claiming the law "invaded the constitutional rights of privacy." The judge agreed, and ruled the law unconstitutional. On December 4, 1968 an Appellate Court agreed, and the *Los Angeles Times* headline: "Nudists Win!" brought a lot of publicity to Lange and to Elysium. Membership started to rise dramatically.

However, a Topanga neighbor, Harvey Anderson, did not take the court decision well as he was convinced there were "immoral acts" going on behind that gate. He complained to the County Board of Supervisors, who, in turn re-defined retroactively the zoning category that applied to Elysium as not permitting nudist assemblies or "human growth centers." Elysium filed a lawsuit claiming the restriction was unconstitutional and was an ex post facto violation of the law. The County Appealed, and in 1972, the State Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Elysium. By this time, the media had gotten interested in the case. Nobody had ever defied the Board of Supervisors so vigorously before – and won. Ed relished the moment and Elysium became a cause celeb, and remained so for the next 20+ years.

In November 5, 1971, the County Board of Supervisors counter-attacked by passing another zoning ordinance, and again Lange filed suit and won. Five years later, the County ordered Elysium to terminate its business, but Elysium again the Court of Appeals ruled in Lange's favor. In 1984, the Regional Planning Commission granted Elysium a 5-year permit subject to 27 conditions. Among those conditions was that Elysium widen Robinson Road, the only access to Elysium and the adjoining neighborhood.

Unfortunately for Elysium, Mr. Anderson had sunk steel posts into his property line along the road, which made widening impossible for those hundred feet. Lange and several of Anderson's neighbors then sued Anderson for not allowing the road to be widened.

The local community soon tuned against Harvey for his obstinacy. He said old friends would no longer speak to him and he was constantly being harassed in the local market. In late 1985, Harvey decided to move to Malibu but, even from a distance he never stopped fighting Lange and Elysium for "driving him out of the Topanga."

Meanwhile, a new conservative Supervisor, Michael D. Antonovich, was elected in the County Supervisor district that included Topanga and Elysium, and he did not like Elysium at all. In January 1986, Antonovich convinced the others Board members to overturn the 5-year permit that Elysium because the Institute sat on "a geologically unstable hill." Lange was outraged at being blindsided, and filed another lawsuit. "We haven't been closed a day in 25 years and we aren't about to start!" he told the *Los Angeles Times*, defiantly.

Community groups--from the Topanga Women's Club to the Chamber of Commerce--rallied to defend Elysium. However, this time Elysium lost its suit in LA Superior Court, and again in the CA Court of Appeals the following July. When the California Supreme Court refused to hear the case in late 1987, Lange appealed the case to the US Supreme Court. While legend says Lange won his Supreme Court case, in reality he did not. The high court actually refused to hear the Writ and remanded to case back to the County. But by doing so, Lange got what he wanted, forcing the County to go back to the beginning and open a totally new zoning hearing.

As luck would have it, the County reapportioned its political districts in 1991, and Supervisor Ed Edelman now represents Topanga instead of the arc nemesis, Mike Antonovich. Edelman seemed much more open to finding a way to resolve this never ending battle which was costing both parties hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees.

Lange and his supporters realized with the change in the county's political climate, might finally be a better position than in previous rounds. Also, public support for Elysium has mounted over the years as Topanga now saw Elysium

as a good neighbor and supporter of community projects. Also in 1991 the lawsuit with Harvey Anderson was finally settled so that Elysium could finally widen Robinson Road.

At the September 1991 hearing were 74 local residents in support of Elysium, and only 6 stood against. One of them was Harvey Anderson, who drove in from Malibu for the hearing. After public testimony was completed, the Regional Planning Commission unanimously voted to give Elysium its long-sought Conditional Use Permit. The road was widened on time and the permit confirmed in early 1993.

The End of an Era

At last there seems to be peace in the canyon. Lange was no longer the evil pariah, but a respected and valued member of the Topanga community. He was active in the Chamber of Commerce, and in March 1995, he was named their Man of the Year, an honor he greatly appreciated.

Elysium membership, however, was starting to drop. The innovative New Age workshops of the 70's seemed out of date twenty years later. Massage was no longer a novelty. The fear of AIDS had reduced the number of people coming to look for easy companionship. Records show Elysium membership peaked in August 1985 at 1148. By February 1991, these numbers had dropped to 850. The membership was getting older, and with no legal battles to rally the troops, Lange faced the ironic situation of perhaps having won a Pyrrhic victory.

The workshops also changed in the 1990's. Long gone were the psychologists and esteemed pioneers of the help-help movement from twenty years earlier. In their place were a few Yoga and "Massage Magic" evenings, tennis lessons, and a couple of seminars run by the Human awareness Institute (HAI) which had incorporated all the "touchy-feely" ideas from the 70's and repackaged them into workshops costing several hundred dollars a person. Despite itself, Elysium had evolved into becoming more like any other nudist resort.

During the summer of 1994, Ed suddenly fell ill with severe intestinal cramping and blood in his urine. Tests revealed he had prostate cancer. A series of surgeries seems to cure him, but he appeared weak and sat on the porch overlooking his constituents on the lawn less and less often. To the members, the grand old man seemed suddenly aloof and disinterested in the affairs of the Institute. On May 7, 1995, Ed finally succumbed to the cancer. Many members were shocked to hear of his passing because it was not widely known he was so ill.

Leadership of Elysium now fell to Ed's daughter, Dana, who had grown up on the Fields. But, although she had watched her father for many years, she lacked any business experience herself. Within four years she and her sister Lisa had made so many poor decisions that members began leaving in droves (Elysium's membership dropped from 900 in 1996 to 200 at the end of 1998) for other nudist clubs in the Inland Empire, an hour's drive away.

Next, Ed's daughters sold off Elysium Growth Press, which was the financial floor keeping the Institute solvent. Ed's Estate Trustee retaliated by firing Dana from her father's Board of Directors. Within six months, Lisa was also removed, leaving the members in charge. Lisa retaliated by firing the Trustee and hired a new one with the expressed orders to sell off the Topanga property, since the land was now more valuable than the club. The members rallied and offered to buy the property but the daughters wanted more than the members could afford. In the end, the property was sold to the Vice President of Hyatt Regency Hotels to be a private family compound. Escrow closed September 30, 2000 for an estimated \$2.6 million.

To those of us who remember it fondly, Elysium was a special, magical place. Its closing marked the end of an era.

