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Photos courtesy of the PVLD
Above is a portrait of the pioneering meteorologist, Ford Ashman Carpenter, whose work helped in the development of the Palos Verdes Project. Right, a Weather Bureau staff member takes an anemometer reading at weather station C.

Pioneering meteorologist aids development of Palos Verdes

By Monique Sugimoto and Dennis Piotrowski
Special to the News

"No place in all the country is there a region so ideally located as the beautiful tract of land known as the Rancho los Palos Verdes."

So wrote Ford Ashman Carpenter, the much-acclaimed chief of the Weather Bureau's Los Angeles office, upon being hired by the Palos Verdes Syndicate to conduct a weather survey of the Peninsula. This was just months after Frank Vanderlip made his historic site-unseen November 1913 purchase of 16,000 acres of the Peninsula.

Carpenter's landmark survey, the first-of-its-kind ever produced, not only provided a rare view of the undeveloped Peninsula, but also a glimpse of the beginnings of the practical applications of meteorological data.

At the start of the survey, Carpenter established five weather stations, lettered A through E. Carpenter equipped each with instruments to automatically record temperature, relative humidity, wind velocity and sunshine. Observations started in June 1914 and continued until 1920.

Carpenter's data showed daily highs and lows, areas with the least and most wind and humidity, and total days of sunshine. Of particular note is the yearly average for days of sunshine: 355. The most days of sunshine were recorded in 1917, when all but two were sunny.

Included in the first year of monthly reports are interesting tidbits about the Peninsula: a description of Peninsula-specific cloud formations, the local effects of Santa Ana winds and a detailed report of the wildflowers in spring. In October 1914, Carpenter updated the Palos Verdes Syndicate on its request to rid the Rancho of the pestilent ground-squirrels. A few months later, he described the great kelp beds off the coast, calling them the "most productive fishing grounds in California."

Carpenter's data was put to use almost immediately. At the end of the first year, 50 percent of the cattle-grazing land was turned into barley fields to better match the climate. By the second year, fields originally planted with barley were replanted with beans, and areas originally planted with beans were replaced with vegetables that better suited the climate. The combined changes raised the income of the area by several hundred percent.

No doubt Carpenter's data was used to guide the Peninsula's early development. By 1918, the Palos Verdes Syndicate had the data necessary to help determine building and dwelling sites and areas for reservoirs, roads and marinas. This use of weather data to solve practical problems of modern farming and planning for development was the first of such uses ever made.

In 1919, Carpenter's interest in applying weather data to other areas led him to end his 31-year career with the Weather Bureau. He accepted a position with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, heading its newly created meteorological and aeronautics department.

Until his retirement 22 years later, in his new profession of "practitioner of meteorology," Carpenter consulted, lectured and advised on all matters related to weather and climate. The motto of the chamber during his tenure was "to make the air safe and the ground productive."

Carpenter continued to conduct research. He reportedly attached a hythergraph, a meteorological instrument he invented and patented, to the shock absorbers of Charles A. Lindbergh's trimotor plane on a flight from San Diego to Los Angeles. This recorded temperature

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and humidity at various altitudes.

He also gave courses to military pilots at bases across the United States and consulted with the budding aviation industry in Los Angeles, giving pilots the best courses and safest altitudes to fly. He also assisted in developing efficient mail routes across the United States for the nascent airmail service.

In a lecture to the Advertising Club of Los Angeles, Carpenter boasted that Los Angeles had the best year-round weather of any large city in the world and that the positive health effects of the mild summer and winter climates should be promoted. Such advertising was in fact included in early promotional material for the Palos Verdes Project where Carpenter was listed among its key staff members.

He took his message of weather and its effects on the health and business of a community on the road, lecturing in East Coast cities and explaining how city zoning could take advantage of weather data to situate factories and buildings.

Carpenter's lifelong dream was to make "meteorology practically valuable outside of the Weather Bureau." The Rancho Los Palos Verdes weather survey, the first of its kind, was the start of realizing Carpenter's dream and also of seeing significant advances in agriculture, aeronautics, commerce and city planning.

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