

## “Grossmont Beginnings”

*Grossmont . . . It is the chosen spot of many of the gifted in art, literature and science as a place where they may establish a quiet home, with delightful climate, beauty of surroundings and the peace that comes from dwelling in high places.*

--Overland Monthly, March 1912

One of San Diego’s most picturesque communities is named for a man poorly remembered today. William B. Gross, namesake of “Grossmont” came to San Diego in about 1903 after a chance meeting with Ed Fletcher, a young produce salesman with an eye for opportunity.

Fletcher was returning to San Diego after visiting friends and relatives in his home state of Massachusetts. Deciding to make a brief detour to visit Yellowstone Park, Fletcher took a tour of the park on a six-horse "Tally Ho" stagecoach. Sitting next to him on top of the coach was a vacationing theatrical producer from the east, named Bill Gross.

Gross had been an actor and well-known producer for many years. Born and raised in Philadelphia, he had tried many jobs before his success in show business. He imported and manufactured embroidery in Philadelphia, clerked in a dry goods store in Greeley, Colorado, and even studied medicine for a time. Now 42 years old, Bill Gross was restless and looking for new ventures.

“Gross and I hit off well together,” Fletcher recalled in his memoirs. “He was an actor; looked like King Edward. . . I invited him to look me up when he came to San Diego and a year or so later he did.”

Gross joined the Fletcher family as a house guest in their Lemon Grove home. The large household immediately adopted the life-long bachelor. On a three-day horse and buggy tour of the San Diego backcountry, Gross confided to Fletcher that he was wealthy and looking for a place to retire, and, by the way, did he know of a good investment?



WILLIAM B. GROSS

Fletcher did. Several hundred acres of land on a boulder-covered hill east of La Mesa were up for sale. The Villa Caro Ranch, originally developed by the late Hervey C. Parke, a pharmaceutical magnate, was in foreclosure. The property included a house overlooking the El Cajon Valley and forty acres of neglected orange and lemon trees.

The two men walked the property and “Gross fell in love with the place immediately.” When Fletcher told him the bank’s price was \$11,500, the excited theater impresario said, “Let’s buy it.” Gross wrote out a check for \$5750. Fletcher financed his half of the purchase with a loan from San Diego banker J. W. Sefton.

Although Fletcher was inexperienced in real estate, Gross left the management to him. Soon the Fletcher family moved to Villa Caro. When Fletcher suggested subdividing a hillside portion of

the property for roads and housing tracts, his partner agreed. Fletcher named the subdivision Grossmont at the suggestion of his sister, Bess, "to whom Bill Gross took a tremendous liking."

The two friends set out to develop and promote their investment, which seemed perfect to Fletcher with "its marvelous view; its closeness to the city, similar to Hollywood and Beverly Hills; no city taxes and splendid soil, particularly on the north and west slopes, especially adapted to avocados, oranges and lemons and nearly frostless."

But many onlookers derided the development as "Fletcher's Folly." The terrain was certainly not conducive to construction. Huge granite boulders and thick chaparral covered the hill. Fletcher carved out a path for the first road by walking up and around the hillside and tying rags to bushes to mark out the route. The *La Mesa Scout* ridiculed the project with a headline: F F F F, spelled out as "Freaky Fletcher's Fancy Flight."

Ridicule turned to amazement with the completion of the first narrow road, El Granito Avenue in 1913. House lots began to sell with a starting price of \$2,500 per acre. But even before the road's completion the entertainment friends and contacts of Bill Gross were moving in.

Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the renowned opera contralto, purchased 15 acres for \$20,000 in February 1910. Her "Casa Ernestina," built among towering boulders high on El Granito, was completed in late 1912. Musician and song writer Carrie Jacobs Bond's "Nest-O-Rest" on El Granito was finished soon after. Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian*, built a house but lived only briefly on his property. Poet John Vance Cheney, music critic Havrah Hubbard, Chicago baritone singer Charles W. Clark, and many other "friends of Bill" came to live in the growing Grossmont artists' colony.

Fletcher and Gross also built homes on the mountain. Fletcher's Grossmont Inn at the summit was a commercial venture at first—a "model home" to promote the development. Later the family would move here from Villa Caro and live for many years in the house.

Gross built a much smaller home, a secluded Craftsmen style bungalow at 9633 El Granito. Here he "spends quiet week-ends," wrote a reporter for the literary *Overland Monthly* magazine, "working in his garden, irrigating his trees, and when invited guests are there, serving bachelor dinners that have become famous among those fortunate enough to be invited guests."

Leaving the real estate management to Fletcher, Gross busied himself with other interests. He moved to downtown San Diego and became an active member of the University and Cuyamaca clubs. He served as a Harbor Commissioner for many years and was a founder and manager of the San Diego Symphony Society.

Gross also became a successful writer. There were articles in magazines such as *Sunset* and *Overland Monthly*, and three books: *An Economical Trip Through Europe*, *144 New Epigrams*, and near the end of his life, a very successful historical novel, *The Conquest of California*.

Ed Fletcher, Jr. recalled visiting Gross in his later years: "He always loved to cook and after my wife and I were married we used to visit him in his apartment in San Diego and I remember he'd cook pot roast. He always joined our family for Thanksgiving and Christmas and was really just considered part of the family."

Gross died in his home at 943 Tenth Avenue on May 24, 1933, at age 73. “He was a lovable soul,” recalled Ed Fletcher, “very lonesome in a way and I always regretted that he did not have a wife and family—why I do not know.” Fletcher also knew he owed the start of his rewarding real estate career to Bill Gross. His name on a mountain is a fitting memorial.

---

Originally published as “Entertainer founded Grossmont,” by Richard Crawford in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Apr 3, 2010. p. EZ.1