



**City of San Bernardino  
Historical and Pioneer Society  
P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402**

**LIBRARY NEWS JANUARY 2009**

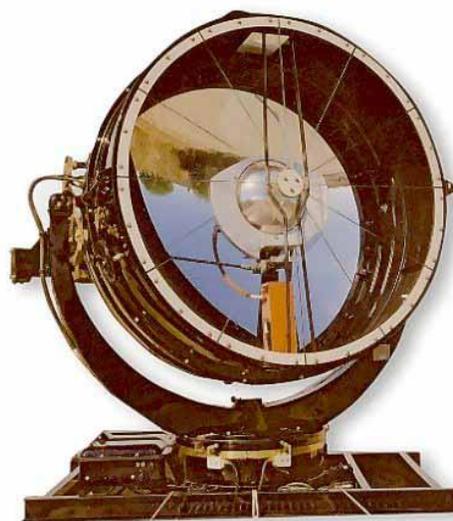
By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

In last month's issue of Library News, we ran Ronnie Featherstone's illustrated business history about Lier's Music Company. This month we present another of Ronnie's stories, this one featuring Irvan Stumph, the amazing man responsible for those searchlights many of us remember back in the 1940s to the 1960s. It so happens that Ronnie operated those lights for a while, and he offers us some inside information in yet another of his interesting stories

**THE SEARCHLIGHTS OF IRVAN WILLIAM STUMPH (1917-2004)**

**By Ronnie Featherstone**

I think most local old-timers can relate to seeing searchlights in the Inland Empire, at one time or another, back in the early days. Quite often there were several beams lighting the skies at the same time. This was an impressive sight to see, and everyone knew there was something special going on wherever the lights were running. They were called "searchlights" because in WW II these lights were designed to seek out and find enemy aircraft so that our artillery troops could shoot them out of the sky. The lights were used by all our military and our allies.



**Sixty-inch frame mount searchlight**

As a young man, before he branched off into searchlights, Irvan William Stumph owned a stage lighting and sound company with his father, doing business under the name "Chester W. Stumph & Son." Irvan Stumph (Stumpy) lived in San Bernardino and was an independent businessman for years. He was a multi-talented man, with very few limitations. He was not only an electrician, but he was also an electronics technician. He and his company set up lighting and sound for performances at the Orange show, and at stage shows all over San Bernardino and California.

He played many musical instruments, and wrote music. He was a very talented musician and had his own band. He liked to carry many instruments in the trunk of his car, and always had them with him. He was an avid collector of antiques and cars. He had a beautiful collection of antique Model A and Model T Fords, and he always had a project or hobby going on.

He was also a very good friend of my father-in-law Bob Drott. At that time they were both electricians together, and before that they went to school together in San Bernardino. I met Stumpy through my father-in-law when I was 16 years old.

Stumpy bought many of the 1940s vintage searchlights from the Army surplus of WWII for the Stumph searchlight business. By the early '50s he had dozens of them, which he repainted white, covering the Army green color. Many might remember that Stumpy kept his lights on Oak Street, west of E Street and just a block north of the Orange Show. Later on he moved his operation north, off of Baseline.



**Irvan Stumph (Stumpy) at age twenty**

Whenever the new models came out at the car dealerships, or a new business started up, or a sale was going on somewhere in the Inland Empire, Stumpy's searchlights were there as a locator to find where



**Carbon arc searchlight control panel**

the special events or big sales were happening during the nighttime hours. Inland Empire residents could see his searchlights for 35 miles or more, and in any direction. Those Army searchlights were extremely powerful.

I operated Stumpy's searchlights for a while in 1961, my junior year in high school, when I was 17 years old. The way it worked was, Stumpy would have his day shift workers place the light at the designated site where it was to be operated, and then lock it up. As one of Stumpy's many operators, around 30 minutes before dark I would go to the site he told me I would be working. All of us operators had keys to unlock and prep the lights for

operation, which would be just before nightfall. These searchlights would be full of fuel and ready before we got there. About five minutes before dark, we would start the generator and set the arc. A lot of these mid-1945 searchlights were called "carbon arc" lights. Many of the lights were models that were manufactured a little later. The carbon arc lights were by far the brightest and boldest lights made

back then. Still to this day, very few can match the intensity of the carbon arc searchlight of the mid-1940s.

These were 800 million candlepower back then, powered by 175 to 200 hp DC generators. They used two long carbon rods. One was powered positive, and the other negative. The high amps of the DC generator created a steady and fierce arc between these two rods, and the parabolic mirror in the rear would send this light outwards. The 6- to 8-inch flame they produced was not the light source that everyone thought created the powerful beam. The 1200-degree flame was from the heat of the rods touching. The actual intense light was from the arc between the two rods. These rods only lasted around 2 to 2½ hours. A shut down, and rod change, took place quickly so as not to have long periods of downtime during operation.



**Stumpy's 60-inch carbon arc searchlight**

These carbon arc searchlights shot a 5-foot wide (60 inches) stream of light approximately 5½ miles into the sky. It could be seen easily from 40 miles away on a clear night. On the cold nights of winter, the operations were considerably longer, because it got dark earlier and lasted longer into the evening. I remember very well being huddled in a sweatshirt with a hood, and staying close to the light to keep warm from its heat. The hot generators put off a lot of heat. The summer nights would get dark later, with shorter times of operation.



**Rebuilding the generators**

Back then there were no cell phones, no beepers or pagers, and an operator couldn't leave the light at all. Even going to a pay phone, or any phone, was out of the question, unless you shut down the light first. There was no excuse for an unattended light. And when the operator was running a light, he had to stay focused on what he was doing; he could not let his attention wander.

Stumpy didn't go home just because it got dark and he'd already worked a full day. He was always out in his car in the evenings and went by to see the operators at their locations. On cold winter nights he would bring by a hot cup of coffee, or a drink, and ask if everything was going okay. He'd check to see if the

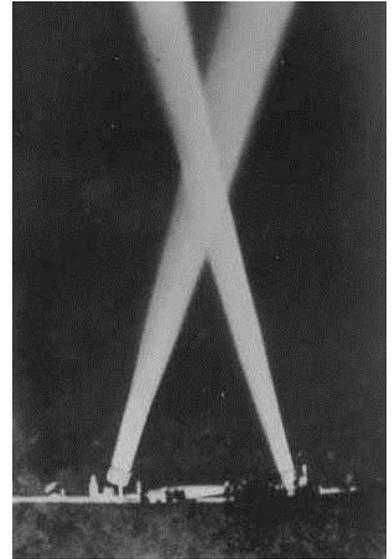
operator needed more generator fuel, or had enough rods to last for the duration. He'd also check for performance of the lights, and made sure there were no problems. It was a pleasure running searchlights for Stumpy, and it sure paid more than pumping gas in 1961.

Crowds would gather around the searchlights all during their operation, and keeping the kids away and answering numerous questions from adults was an ongoing matter. During those days kids were awed by the searchlights. Adults were also intrigued by their powerful output. Many times the searchlights drew crowds of people who were not even there to see what we were promoting—they came to see the lights.

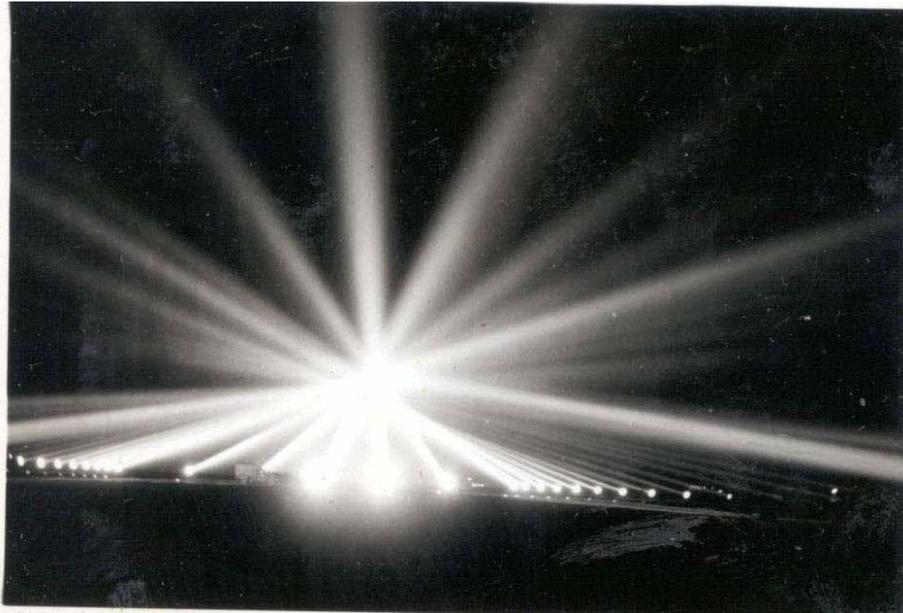
I remember running lights for furniture companies back when they had huge sales. I recall running lights for the new Chevrolets when they came out in 1961 at Friendly Chevrolet and at Jack Coyle Chevrolet, and also for the Cadillac dealership on E Street. Just about all the dealerships used Stumpy's searchlights to advertise their new vehicles.

Another very popular location for the searchlights was the Orange Show grounds. During the Orange Show, the number of lights varied. I remember running lights there with 10 other operators working at different locations around the show grounds.

The lights were used at grand openings and small fairs, and also when the circus was in town. While running a light at night, I could see many others running around the Inland Empire at the same time. I even ran lights out in front of movie theaters when top name movies arrived in town. Searchlights were a big part of the Inland Empire's growth years, and I'm sure many remember that.



**Stumpy's searchlights at McDonald's grand opening – December 12, 1948**

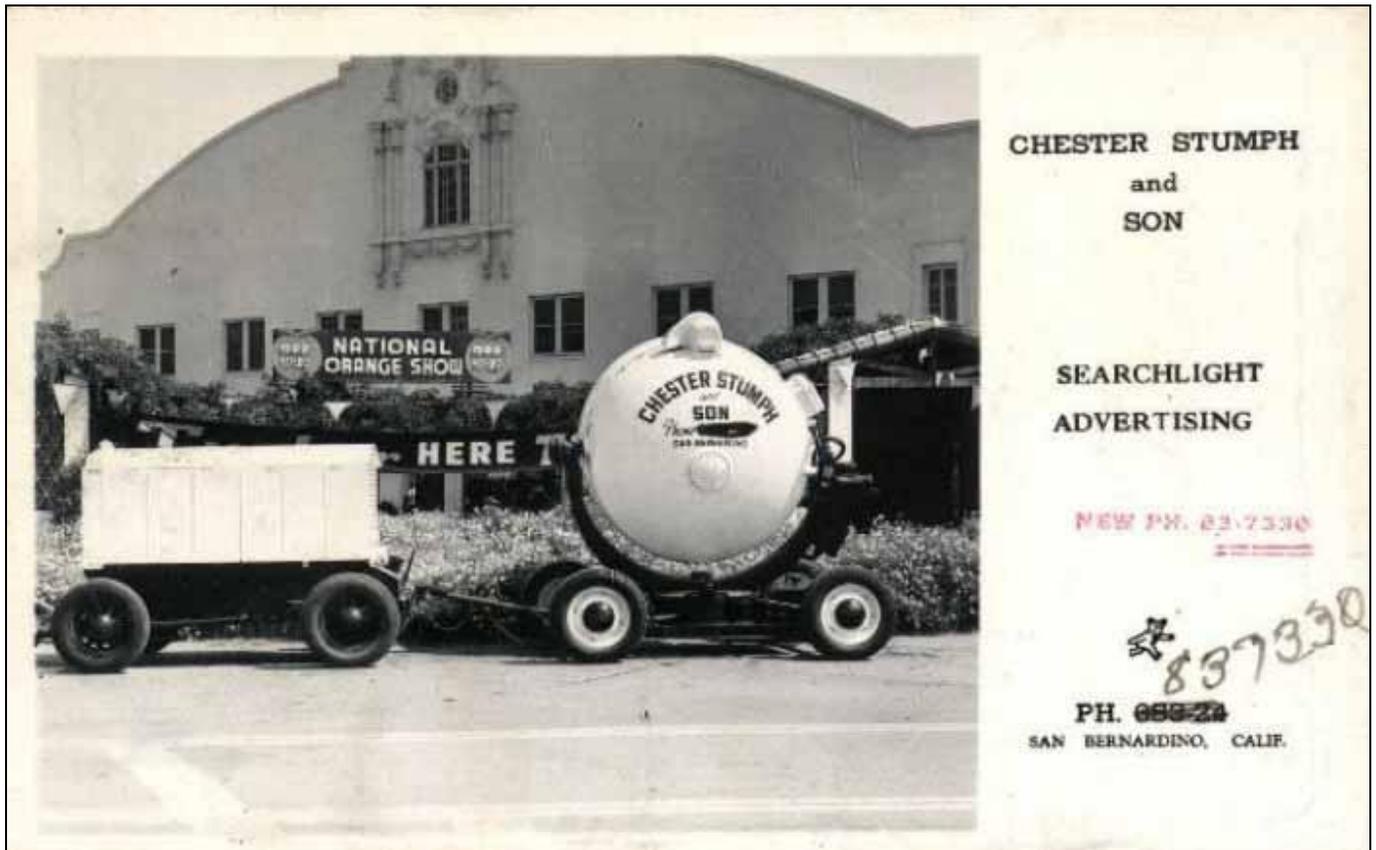


This starburst photo was taken at the Orange Show, and it is a most impressive display of lights. They are all aimed to meet together, and the clash of the powerful lights created a starburst that could be seen all over the Inland Empire.

**Starburst of searchlights at San Bernardino's National Orange Show**

Irvan William Stumph was one of the most talented businessmen in San Bernardino during his day. His abilities and talents were well known all over California. His ability to mood light the shows and run the spotlights made for some spectacular entertainment. Movie stars and top name singers praised him for setting up their shows so

well. His skill with searchlights, his expertise in stage lighting and sound, and his musical talent created great memories for many people.



**Postcard ad shows generator and searchlight at National Orange Show**

*Bobby Jean's website [navylights.homestead.com](http://navylights.homestead.com)*



Army green color before hubs were painted white



Old spares at the Stumph yards



Closer view of searchlight during operation



Testing lights over San Bernardino

~Another Little Bit of History ~

Ronnie Featherstone

For those who want some more details on the varied careers of Irvan Stumph, use this link to see pages and pages of the Stumph story as told by his daughter Bobbie Jean.  
<http://navylights.homestead.com/Index.html>

This link is to the last page of her website, which has an index of links to some of her pages  
<http://navylights.homestead.com/Last.html>

—————*End of Featherstone History*—————

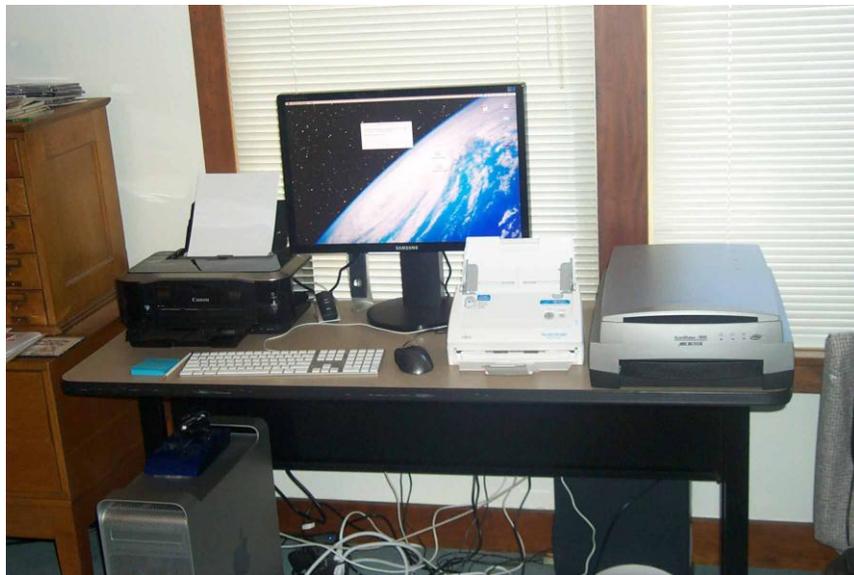
## **LIBRARY OFFICE MACHINES UPGRADED**

Recently we acquired some new equipment for the library. A few of us were sitting around lamenting the fact that we could not scan photograph negatives, or at least we could not do it very well. Steve Shaw said that he personally used a MicroTek scanner, and he recommended it as being just the thing for doing photography work, whether scanning negatives or original photos. John Hockaday opened his wallet, drew out a bill and said, "I'll contribute \$100." Thank you, John.

Well, we agreed to purchase the Microtek, but next we discussed another scanning problem, that of volume scanning. We have been working on several projects which involve scanning a large number of data sheets. The existing machine we had was fairly slow: an item was placed on a glass surface and the lid was closed; a light mechanically moved up and back to preview the item, two or three seconds each way; the item then was trimmed and sized, which took another few seconds, and then the scanning was done. Finally, the scan had to be titled and saved to a file folder. Ordinarily there would be no problem, but when doing volume scanning projects, a faster process is needed. The Fujitsu Scan Snap is designed to do just that, and so we purchased one of those as well.

Let me add here that the office equipment will be paid for through contributions from our members, so that there is no impact on the general operating budget of the Society.

In the photo below the Microtek scanner can be seen at the far right of the table, and next to it is the Scan Snap. The latter machine is about half the size of a lunch bucket, and it does amazing things. It scans very fast, at the rate of 18 per minute, but it also scans both sides of the document, or, if one side is blank, it ignores the backside. It also converts text to a searchable pdf file. It truly is awesome, and Society members are invited to the library to see it in action.



**High Tech Headquarters at the Heritage House Library**

Steve took the occasion to donate a relatively new computer to the library. I would give the technical description here, except that it probably would be wrong. Suffice it to say that our computer speed, memory, etc., is much enhanced. He also got us a new screen and printer. The screensaver is set up to appear as an aquarium with rare fish, and the visuals and audio are unbelievable. You have to be there to appreciate it. Also, Allen Bone got us some new toner cartridges for our copier, plus did some troubleshooting, and it is now in top operating condition.

## MARK B. SHAW PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM

Recently we received a visit from Joy Schrader, a descendant of Mark B. Shaw. She is also a descendant of Peter Filanc, an 1852 San Bernardino pioneer. Filanc's farm was on South E Street, below the Santa Ana River in the vicinity of "Fort" Benson. Joy has been researching her family genealogy for some time, and upon our request she agreed to make a copy of her work for our library.

During her visit she donated to the Society a Shaw family photograph album, which is not dated, but is probably from the 1920s. She said she would come back and try to help identify those she knew in the roughly 80 to 100 pages of pictures. Below is a sample page from the album:



Page from Shaw family album  
Old Dobbin (right) looks so forlorn—just like he knows it's the end of an era

**Saving the past for the future since 1888**