

LOREN JOSEPH MEAD Ag '16
PiKA's "Old China Hand"

Loren enrolled at Cornell from Santa Ana California. In addition to Alpha Theta, he was a member of Janus, and the freshman debate team. He was born February 23, 1894 in Santa Ana, Orange County, California¹, the second child of Ralph Waite Mead (1863-1937) and Jennie McMurry (1863-1955). His father was a bookkeeper at a local orange packing house.

Loren is one of perhaps a half dozen alumni of the house who, were he living, would make for one helluva stimulating and engaging weekend as a VIP guest of the house.

At the turn of the century, Santa Ana, and more broadly Los Angeles, was far from today's "great big freeway" of tinsel town. It was largely a community of orange groves, and vegetable farms. Loren appears to have been a solid kid: his activities in the community were frequently noted in the local papers. He had a newspaper route, was a leader in his class, socially engaged, and stood up for his beliefs. At his high school graduation, when the school board withheld the diploma of one of his classmates, Loren protested vigorously, and his classmates cheered him with equal vigor. On another occasion, he fell thirty feet in the Santiago canyon, breaking several bones while seeking mistletoe for a Christmas party²; in yet another, he broke a collarbone in a dust-up with a classmate.³ The Meads were devout Congregationalists, and the local papers carry numerous stories of Loren teaching a Sunday school class, or undertaking a fundraiser for the YMCA. These values of being involved and giving back would continue throughout his career.

Probably straight out of Cornell, Loren signed on as a salesman for Standard Oil of New York (later Mobil) in Shanghai, China, where he was when he registered for the draft on April 17, 1918. His paperwork didn't get to his home in Santa Ana until two months later. His draft board probably figured if they called him up for service, there was no way to get written notification to him, and for him to return in less than four months. So he instead of making the world safe for democracy, Loren spent World War I and many years thereafter making China safe for Standard Oil.

Loren married Alma Elizabeth Plavan, a Santa Ana neighbor on February 23, 1919. Alma's father had emigrated from the Waldensian valley of southern France in 1883, where he was a horticulturalist and teacher of French and Italian in the local schools. He eventually settled in Santa Ana. He owned a large ranch with up to 500 acres in which he raised at various times sugar beets, celery, lima beans, and maintained a dairy herd. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Ana, and one of its elders for three years.⁴

Loren would become Standard Oil's (and our) "old China hand" until the Communist takeover in 1949.⁵ His letters home about life in China, living in the midst constant rebellions and other political turmoil, and how business was conducted were frequently reported in the Santa Ana papers.⁶

¹ *California Select Births and Christenings*, Loren Joseph Mead Feb 23, 1894, File # 1290433.

² *Santa Ana Register*, December 9, 1907, page 1

³ *Santa Ana Register*, November 30, 1909, page 1

⁴ Samuel Armor, *A History of Orange County: With Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with its Earliest Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present, 1921*, (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1921) pp. 710 – 713. (Copy in the Cornell University Library)

⁵ International travel records of the period between the two World Wars show heavy international travel and residence abroad as an export manager for Standard Socony Vacuum Oil Company. In 1920, he registers with the consulate as having lived in Shanghai and Szechwan between 1916 and 1919, and planning to move to Paotingfu, then he registers as living in Tientsin in 1920, then back to the US from Shanghai and Hong Kong in 1926, and 1934, and to and from England in 1930. He even manages to join the Sinim Lodge of the Masons in Shanghai while he's there. And in the middle of World War II, he returns from Standard Oil business in Basra, Iraq, via Calcutta and Columbo to New York on September 6, 1943.

⁶ See for example, "Santa Anans See Chinese Uprising" *Santa Ana Register*, August 30, 1920, page 9; "Lowell Teachers Are Guests at Unique Chinese Dinner", *ibid.*, May 9, 1930, p. 17; "Chinese Need Strong Leader, Says S.A.

On his home leaves to Santa Ana, he speaks frequently and reflectively on doing business and living in China – to the local Rotary, Elks, Masonic and Kiwanis clubs and lodges, at churches, and at the country club. On one return trip, his wife Alma hosts a lunch for the teachers of Loren’s sister’s school in Lowell, where she is its principal. It features a full course Chinese dinner prepared by their personal cook, Yang, who accompanied them. It was the lead story on the social pages of the area’s newspapers.

Until forced to evacuate from China several months after Pearl Harbor, Loren spent all his years after Cornell there. In fact, his boss, the head of China operations for Mobil was trapped and interned in Hong Kong when it fell to the Japanese in late 1941, leaving Loren as the head of China’s Mobil operations. For several months, it was a lonely existence: on July 17, 1942, The *Santa Ana Register* reports “Loren Mead, the Santa Ana man who is a big gun with Standard Oil in China, the top man in that country since his only superior officer was trapped at Hong Kong, never has heard the result of the 1942 Rose Bowl game. In a letter just received here by Flo Flo Plavan, his niece, Mead said he was anxious to learn about the outcome of the transplanted classic. ‘We hear the baseball scores quite regularly,’ Mead wrote. ‘We get these by shortwave radio from San Francisco. But we never found out whether Oregon State or Duke won the Rose Bowl.’”

Somehow in all this life overseas, Loren and Alma managed to have two sons, Donald Edwin Mead (1921-1999) who graduated in engineering from Cornell in 1942, and Rodney.

In 1947, they are back in Santa Ana, living at 2335 Heliotrope. By 1978, now well retired, he is living in Oceanside, near San Diego.

Loren died at age 89 on May 24, 1983 in Oceanside, San Diego County California.⁷ The *Cornell Alumni News* of September of that year noted his death on page 65, stating that he was a “retired oil company executive, for 28 years with Standard Vacuum Oil Co., and for 20 years in China with Mobil/Exxon.”

As they say in the Army when you complete your assigned mission, “Well done!”

Man”, *ibid*, September 26, 1926, p. 6; “He’s Only 3, But He’s Traveled to the Far End of the Globe” (reporting on the Mead’s son Donald), *ibid.*, May 13, 1924, p. 9.

⁷ Social Security Death Index and California Death Index