



Photos courtesy of PVL  
 Left, Paul Muni's house as it was being built in Palos Verdes Estates; right, Muni as Scarface

# Scarface escapes to PV

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto  
 Special to the News

*"On a clear day, the view of those mountains is magnificent."*

So remarked actor Paul Muni from his home in Palos Verdes Estates. Muni was a Hollywood legend known for his extraordinary preparation for movie roles. He played the lead in the original "Scarface" (1932), received six Academy Award nominations and won the Best Actor award for his role in "The Story of Louis Pasteur" (1936).

Along with his highly regarded acting abilities, Muni was shy and uncomfortable with public adulation. The mountain views, seclusion and even the climate of the Peninsula were a good match.

According to the biography titled "Actor, the Life & Times of Paul Muni" by Jerome Lawrence, on a hot day, Muni drove toward the ocean looking for a retreat where the weather was cool and he could breathe sea air. A short while later he told his wife, Bella, that he purchased

"a little place in Palos Verdes." So in early 1937 they leased their San Fernando Valley estate and moved to PVE.

According to the California State Data center, the population of Los Angeles County at this time was almost 2,800,000 — with fewer than 1,000 people residing on the Peninsula.

Muni and his wife lived "quietly and unostentatiously" in their not-so-little 10-room, six-bathroom mansion. They reportedly loved their home deeply and felt it was the first real home they ever had.

He bought the house built in 1929 at a bargain price. The woman who owned it, Margaret A. Keith, was a reclusive millionaire who owned another mansion in Beverly Hills. When Keith committed suicide in her Beverly Hills home by inhaling chloroform, her death ignited a legal battle involving her estate as to whether she was of sound mind when she executed her will.

Muni did not miss Hollywood. Shortly

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after he moved to PVE, he remarked, "What I would like is to take a long vacation from the screen and only make, say one picture every few years ..."

PVE not only was his oasis from the movie industry, but the city also allowed the hard-working actor to focus and prepare intensely for the movie roles he did accept.

While living in Palos Verdes, Muni studied everything he could on Ludwig van Beethoven for a biographical film that ultimately was never made. Later, over the course of months, Muni read everything he could find on the life of Mexican leader Benito Juarez for a film co-starring Bette Davis that was released in 1939.

In his spare time Muni led a mostly

nondescript life. His dog, Simon, enjoyed bounding around the home's terraces and the wide outside staircases. Muni would say nonchalantly, "I'm going for a walk," and Simon would arrive quickly, bark and eagerly await their long strolls through the winding local trails.

Muni appreciated the majestic views from his home high above the Pacific, and was fond of watching ships cruise by. He entertained friends at the La Venta Inn, and surprised locals by riding to the market on a tandem bicycle with Bella. This was Muni's exercise because Warner Brother's Studio wanted him to slim down for his role in the movie "We Are Not Alone."

In early 1939, the Hollywood press reported that Muni was moving from his perch in PVE in favor of a less lofty home in the Toluca Lake district. Muni had grown tired of the 40-mile drive to work each way to the studios.

By the summer of 1939, Muni reportedly sold his PVE home and was planning to go to New York to do a stage play.

The Muni mansion would have other famous owners. Acclaimed Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti owned the home for many years. Szigeti was almost on the plane that crashed and killed actress Carole Lombard in January 1942. He had given his seat to soldiers who also perished in the crash.

The renowned aviator and motion picture stunt pilot Frank Tallman bought the home from Szigeti in 1959. Among his many aerial exploits, Tallman smashed his plane through a Coca Cola billboard in the movie "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," filmed partly in Palos Verdes.

Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto are Adult Services librarians in the Palos Verdes Library District.