

Laguna Beach Historical Society  
Murphy-Smith Bungalow  
278 Ocean Avenue  
Laguna Beach CA 92651



# Laguna Life

The Laguna Beach Historical Society

Newsletter: Fall 2006

Historical Society Program

## Lives of Photographer William Mortensen and Writer/Model George Dunham

By Larry Lytle

Monday, September 18, 2006

7:30 PM to 9:30 PM

Laguna Beach City Hall Council Chambers  
505 Forest Avenue, Laguna Beach, California

William Mortensen and George Dunham were both born at the end of the 19th century. It took 35 years for them to meet in Laguna Beach and begin their collaboration. Mortensen already a renowned photographer, and Dunham a well know director of theater in Laguna Beach, together wrote nine books and over one hundred articles on photography.

Larry Lytle is a native Angelino. He has an MA in Art from California State University Northridge, and is a Lecturer at California University Channel Islands. Larry is a fine artist whose work has been seen at the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles and the Society for Contemporary Photography in Kansas City. He is also a commercial artist specializing in theatrical and video key art photography, and is an instructor at the Otis College of Art and Design continuing education. Larry contributed to "William Mortensen: a Revival," published by the Center for Creative Photography, author of the article "Command to Look: The William Mortensen Story" and is currently at work on a biography of William Mortensen.



*William Mortensen as a Magician, Self Portrait.  
Photo courtesy of The Center for Creative Photography.*

## Lives of Photographer William Mortensen and Writer/Model George Dunham



Mortensen's Salon of Photography - Laguna Beach, Calif.

*William Mortensen Studio*

*903 South Coast Highway at Thalia Street*

*Photo courtesy of The Center for Creative Photography.*

**Was William Mortensen, who lived in Laguna Beach from 1931 to 1965, a historically important photographer?**

Our speaker Larry Lytle, a Lecturer on Art at California State University Channel Islands, has been researching the lives of William Mortensen and George Dunham. William Mortensen was a very famous photographer in his time, always included as an important California Pictorialist, but is barely mentioned in books about photographic history. Is Mortensen's reputation ready for a rebound?

Mortensen's images seemed like photographs but then again they didn't. They have an unreal quality.

His compositions were steeped in Gothic and Romantic traditions, his subject matter often whimsical, often bizarre.

Mortensen using soft-focus and darkroom techniques produced luxuriously toned and finished prints. However, he was severely criticized as the straight unadorned "purist" photography style became seen as the ideal. There has been a long held contempt for his work by many critics and historians.

Mortensen was born in 1897 in Park City, Utah. Upon his release from the army in 1918, he attended Arts Students League in New York City, and in 1921 traveled by train escorting a friend's sister to Hollywood [the sister was Fay Wray].

He worked at the Western Costume Company photographing silent film stars in costume. In 1926 he worked for Cecil B. DeMille on the King of Kings movie, shooting all the stills with a small format (3-1/4" x 4-1/4") camera during filming. His work was published in Photograms of the Year, American Annual of Photography, Vanity Fair, the Los Angeles Times, and others. Mortensen was in tremendous demand from the late 1920s into the early 1940s including photographing Hollywood legends such as Fay Wray and Marlene Dietrich.

The final phase of his life took place in Laguna Beach (1931-1965) and Mortensen opened a studio on the corner of South Coast Highway and Thalia Street. The Mortensen School of Photography officially opened in 1931. In 1933 Mortensen married Myrdith Monaghan and met George Dunham who became a friend and model.

Together William Mortensen and George Dunham collaborated on nine books as well as over a hundred magazine and newspaper articles.

Mortensen was a restless and relentless darkroom technician. Among other darkroom techniques, Mortensen utilized the metalchrome process which is a chemical color process that utilized chemical toning—locally applied—to turn black and white prints into color prints.

Please visit the Laguna Beach Historical Society Murphy-Smith Bungalow, located at 278 Ocean Avenue  
Volunteers are needed to greet visitors to the Murphy-Smith House and should call 939-7257.

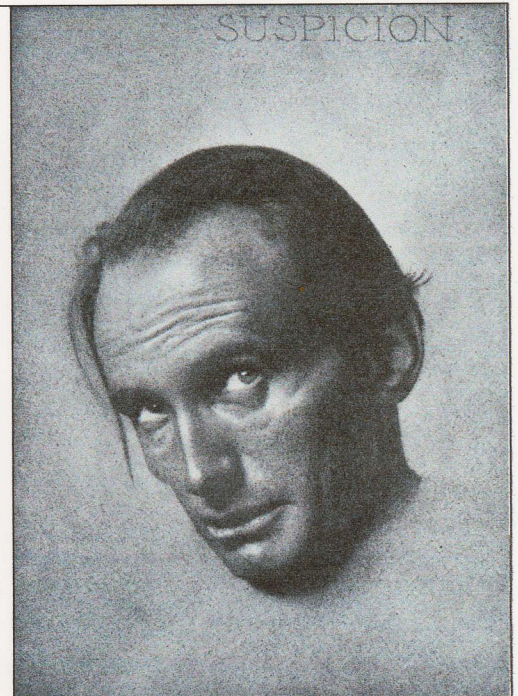
## William Mortensen and George Dunham

In his essay, "Beyond Recall," photographer A.D. Coleman -- who is quite sympathetic to the "purist" aesthetic -- presents a scathing indictment of the active campaign against the Pictorialist William Mortensen.

Mortensen was, in a sense, photography's first superstar, leveraging the celebrity he created for himself to merchandise products bearing his name.

Sadly, little remains of his artistic output: Most of Mortensen's negatives are missing, whereabouts unknown. He also left few notes or letters. No conclusions can be drawn, but it is strongly suggested that by the time he died Mortensen felt so irrelevant to the history of photography that he never bothered to leave much behind. The William Mortensen School of Photography remained open until a short time after his death from leukemia in 1965.

Information taken from Larry Lytle's "Command to Look: The William Mortensen Story" published by theSREAMonline.com Magazine  
See <http://www.thescreamonline.com/photo/photo06-01/mortensen/commandtolook1.html>

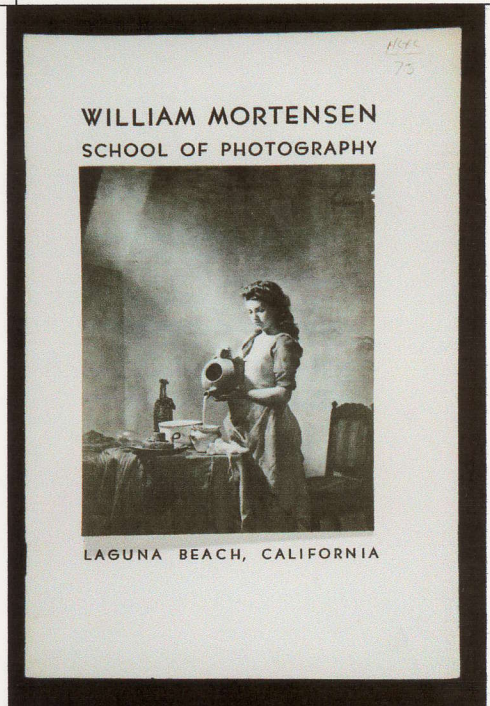


*George Dunham as Model  
"Suspicion" by William Mortensen  
Photo courtesy of Larry Lytle.*



*Myrdith Mortensen as Model,  
"Wind" by William Mortensen.  
Photo courtesy of Larry Lytle.*

*Mortensen School  
Brochure Cover  
Photo courtesy of Larry Lytle.*



The Historical Society Board calls for residents to donate historic artifacts and photographs. The Board is concerned that every day some of Laguna's history is being lost. For those having treasured historic photographs or printed material, the Historical Society is happy to scan them electronically and return them to the owners. This way there will be a record preserved for future generations without the necessity for the owners to relinquish the item.

**Laguna Beach Historical Society information is at [www.LagunaHistory.org](http://www.LagunaHistory.org)**

## President's Message

By Kimberly Stuart

Thanks to Dr. Louis F. D'Elia for the great program in May on Photographer George Hurrell and Pancho Barnes in Laguna Beach. The Historical Society's next program will be Monday, September 18th by Larry Lytle on one of Laguna Beach's most famous photographers William Mortensen. Please come. It's at the Laguna Beach City Council Chambers, Monday, September 18, 2006 from 7:30 P.M. to 9:30 P.M.

We certainly thank Gene Felder for his five years as the Society's President. We are grateful for Gene's knowledge, diligence and vibrant personality, which have brought greater awareness of the richness of Laguna Beach history to our community, particularly at the local government level. And, thankfully he has not gone away. Gene is very active on our Board, now serving as our Treasurer, trying to replace the irreplaceable Willa Gupta. At the Laguna Beach Historical Society Board of Director's July 11, 2006 meeting, I was elected President, Kevin Spencer was elected Vice-President and Nelda Stone was re-elected Secretary.

We have a strong board, but are now missing a long standing member and dedicated member, Willa Gupta who has moved to northern California. Willa has kept the business side of the Society for a number of years, but, she also kept the Murphy Smith Bungalow in tip top shape with her loving, no-fear handiwork and gardening. We will miss her greatly and wish her the best in her new adventures.

We were delighted that City Manager Ken Frank recently passed on to us historic photos of Richard Nixon campaigning in Laguna Beach, and a 1923 photograph of a Laguna Beach baseball team from the collection of Amos Stricker. Also, Jim Kreder donated a photo of community leaders at the City's entrance.

The Board is most thankful to Wells Fargo Bank for leasing to us the Murphy-Smith Bungalow for \$1 per year, and thank the City of Laguna Beach for its annual \$1,000 grant. The top priority of the Board is to ensure that the bungalow is open to be enjoyed and experienced by members and the public.

Step back into 1920s Laguna by visiting the Laguna Beach Historical Society Murphy-Smith Bungalow, located at 278 Ocean Avenue, which is opened to the public at no-charge every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Thanks to Jane Janz, the Murphy-Smith Bungalow includes a new display about the romantic adventure movie "Her Jungle Love" starring Dorothy Lamour and Ray Milland. The movie was a 1938 Island tale with Dorothy Lamour in her sarong. The beach and boat scenes were filmed at Goff Island - later called Treasure Island - now the location of the Montage Resort and Spa.

Volunteers are needed to greet visitors to the Murphy-Smith House and should call 939-7257. Those interested in supporting and joining the Laguna Beach Historical Society should send \$15 per individual, \$25 per household (or \$50 per business) to 278 Ocean Avenue, Laguna Beach CA 92651.

## Laguna Beach Historical Society Board of Directors

- Kimberly Stuart  
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- Kevin Spencer  
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- Jane Janz
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## Thanks to our Business Members

- Andrus Plumbing
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- Charles' Wig  
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- Laguna Beach  
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Freeman Films
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Service

**If you haven't paid 2006 annual dues, send \$15 per person, \$25 per household or \$50 per business or organization to Laguna Beach Historical Society, 278 Ocean Avenue, Laguna Beach CA 92651**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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