

John Thomas Hamner

(Tone: start very personable and welcoming)

Good afternoon. I am John Thomas Hamner. My friends call me Tom or JT. If my name sounds familiar to you, it's probably because there is a road named after me. In fact, it starts just over there (gesture north of 91, west of 15). Where Main cross Mountain, it becomes Hamner Avenue and continues all the way out to highway 60.

(more introspective)

We are gathering here today in a place that reminds me of a full life, filled with love, adventure ... and some sadness, of course, but we'll get to that. First, I'd like to tell you something of my success in life.

(Proud, but not so much that he can't be personable later)

I was born in Alabama in 1862. My father died when I was young and I had little formal education, but I didn't let that stop me. I came to California by the time I was 25. After working in San Dimas for a time, I moved to Corona, where, with my own mules, I hauled clay from Pacific Clay. That being seasonal work, I also used my mule team to plow farmland I leased near "the Circle" and to build roads and was elected "road overseer" for 4 years – my first foray into elected office.

In 1891 I married my bride Martha Ann – known as Mattie. She was a native Californian, born in Crafton, near Redlands, before moving to Temescal as a young girl. By 1898 I was able to buy 60 acres of land in what is now called Home Gardens. There I built a home for my family and eventually we owned 540 acres. I grew walnuts and alfalfa, raised Holsteins, mules, and draft horses. I even had two ostriches, in addition to a few peacocks and guinea fowl.

My business and civic enterprises included, helping organize the Corona National Bank and serving on its board of directors. I helped start the Corona Home Telephone Company, and was a member of the board of directors of the Riverside Water Company. I devoted 20 years, to serving on the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, starting in 1902. I was chairman of that board for 12 of those years. When I retired from office, Hamner Avenue was named for me.

(Change of tone – no longer proud, now quiet, reflecting, and more personal)

Now I will share about the most important part of my life – my family. My son John Arthur married the daughter of Corona Mayor Ed Davis and purchased his own ranchland on Magnolia Avenue in the town of Arlington, now part of Riverside. You've probably been to his place – I believe it is now a shopping mall on Tyler Street.

My youngest child, our daughter Ellen, married Elvin Larson and lived on Palm Avenue in Riverside, where she raised a beautiful family.

(now very personal and reflective)

And finally, I can no longer avoid sharing the sadness I mentioned earlier. I had two other sons – Henry Bennett, whom we called Ben, and young Emmett.

(snapping out of it a bit, to share the facts)

As you've heard, this area was not spared the tragedy brought on by the influenza epidemic. Our entire family was infected with the dreaded disease.

(now slowing down)

Our youngest son, Emmett was a student at Poly High School and at 17 was considered a stalwart and healthy lad. But despite this, the influenza took him from us on December 8, 1918.

(pause and take a breath, as if remembering and gathering courage before continuing)

Just nine days later on December 17 our second son, Ben, also succumbed. He was just 23. Ben followed his younger brother to this place and was buried here beside him. The Riverside Enterprise referred to his death as “unusually regrettable”. His passing was almost too much for Ethel; Ben's bride of just 20 months. They had lost their child, Virginia Jane (point to marker) the last day of August 1918.

But let me end on a happy note. Despite the heavy hand of sorrow in 1918, Mattie and I lived long, full lives. Mattie preceded me to this place. When I joined her four years later, we had a total of eight great-grandchildren, among them was a grandson named Ben and another named Emmett. More generations followed, all with roots firmly planted here in Corona.