

# **New Life for a Legacy: Material Culture, Collective Memory, and Inman Conety's 1938 International**

**by**

**Benjamin Jenkins and Sherry Best**

In the city of La Verne, located approximately 30 miles east of Los Angeles, California, residents have resuscitated a historical automobile and transformed it into a fixture of social memory. The vehicle, a 1938 International truck driven by longtime La Verne resident Inman Conety, has become an expression of the town's collective memory. Residents recently undertook a campaign to restore Conety's truck, investing significant amounts of time and old automobile parts into the preservation of the vehicle. Previously, Conety's many voyages in the car, which totaled over 900,000 miles, fixed the truck as an icon of the city of La Verne. By the late-twentieth century, the vehicle had fallen into disrepair, requiring extensive improvements before it could become mobile again. The La Verne Historical Society led a campaign to invest in the reconstruction of the vehicle, hoping to include the 1938 International in the city's major Fourth of July parade. Ultimately, by financing the reconstruction of Conety's truck, citizens of La Verne have married the concepts of thing theory and collective memory, demonstrating the ability to attach shared understandings of the past to material objects.

In this essay, we argue that the community of La Verne, California, has given new life to Inman Conety's 1938 International truck. By recognizing the value of this historic vehicle and restoring it to usable form, resident of La Verne have inscribe new meanings on this material aspect of their history. The 1938 International has now become a vessel of community memory, linking important facets of the city's history to contemporary uses.

While Inman Conety's truck may not have hauled oranges from the famed citrus groves of Southern California, as the new logo of the La Verne Historical Society implies, it does carry a full load of collective memories that modern residents of the city have ascribed to this vibrant historical artifact.<sup>1</sup>

Wesley Inman Conety (always referred to as Inman), a resident of the city of La Verne, died at age 93 in 1992. His colorful life and contributions to the city continue to reverberate as today's residents see tangible evidence of Conety's work and thriftiness in the form of a 1938 International truck. The "International" logged over 960,000 miles before it was retired and sold to the La Verne Historical Society for its original cost of \$1350.00. The story of Inman Conety and the 1938 International is a ribbon that runs through the city's history and continues to excite pride in its residents.

In 1887, approximately 30 miles east of Los Angeles, a small agricultural town was founded and given the name of Lordsburg. Isaac Wilson Lord, a land speculator and entrepreneur, founded the town in hopes of capitalizing on the growing citrus industry and railroad infrastructure that would shape numerous cities situated along the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains in Southern California. Lordsburg was incorporated in 1906 and renamed itself La Verne in 1917 to meld with the surrounding unincorporated area with that name.

In its early days, La Verne was christened "The Heart of the Orange Empire." Citrus groves flourished in La Verne, managed by farmers and ranchers who were lured to settle in its moderate climate. Initially they maintained groves of stone fruit but switched to

---

<sup>1</sup> We borrow the notion of vibrant materiality from Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Bennett believed that matter exerted agency in affairs, as this article asserts that the 1938 International Truck has done in the city of La Verne.

farming citrus, which flourished with the advent of railroads and the subsequent expanded markets. A rate war between the two transcontinental lines that serviced Southern California resulted in a huge influx of migrants in the late-1880s and early 1890s, laying the groundwork for Lordsburg (and subsequently La Verne) to flourish. Citizens of Lordsburg planted the first oranges in 1890, and these citrus fruits soon became the dominant crop that flourished until the postwar era.<sup>2</sup>

Into this community came Wesley Inman Conety, lured by the warm California weather and the prosperity of the orange empire.

### **A Colorful Figure in Early La Verne History**

Born in 1898 in Glen Summit Springs, Pennsylvania, Inman Conety began his driving career as a 14-year-old, guiding his horse “Dick” who pulled a spring wagon filled with Conety’s siblings and neighbor children to school. He worked around the train station in Glen Summit Springs where his father was the station agent. While living in Glen Springs, Conety also worked as a contractor, caretaker, and handyman.<sup>3</sup> He attended Harry Hillman Academy in Wilkes-Barre and Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and was later employed in Bethlehem Steel’s machine shop.

From an early age, Conety felt a strong connection to history. Describing the origins of his middle name during an interview, Conety remarked that “As for the name Inman; it’s a family name. In Wyoming, Pa., there’s a monument commemorating the battle fought there in 1776. The name Inman is on the monument six times. It was my father’s middle

---

<sup>2</sup> Norman Eicher Ramseyer, “A History of Lordsburg California,” 14, 47-48, 50-51.

<sup>3</sup> *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, January 22, 1977.

name, and his father's, too!"<sup>4</sup> After his arrival in Southern California, Conety's fascination with the past would manifest with a decade-long dedication to preserving community memory. His work at the Glen Summit Springs train station instilled in Conety a deep love of train travel. Obedient to an urge to escape the cold weather, he traveled to Southern California on vacation in 1922 and took a Pacific Electric excursion, known as "The Orange Empire Trip," to La Verne. He decided to stay in La Verne and took a job spraying trees in an orange grove.<sup>5</sup>

The Pacific Electric Railway, an interurban streetcar system that linked Los Angeles to various communities across Southern California, played a key role in the place-making process of towns like La Verne. Envisioned by Henry Huntington as a method to transport passengers and freight across the Los Angeles Basin, the Pacific Electric (or PE, as contemporaries labeled it) facilitated movement between the City of Angels and its citrus-producing hinterlands. The PE brought land development and the establishment of utilities wherever it went, modernizing communities like La Verne as it stretched east from Los Angeles in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Historian William B. Friedrichs has argued that the PE united communities in Southern California into a distinct geocultural entity, affirming the role of transportation in place-making.<sup>6</sup> As the ensuing discussion of Conety's 1938 International will show, residents of twenty-first-century La Verne have extended this trend to automobile transit.

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Ettelman, reprint of an article appearing in the Fall, 1975 issues of the Lehigh University Alumni Bulletin, La Verne Historical Society files.

<sup>5</sup> *La Verne Leader*, August 19, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> William B. Friedrichs, *Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 6-7.

While visiting La Verne in 1921, Inman Conety met schoolteacher Ruby Louise Sheldon at the Methodist Church and a courtship began.<sup>7</sup> They were engaged in 1925 before Inman returned to Pennsylvania. He returned in 1926 to marry Ruby, and they returned to Pennsylvania and settled in the town of Mountain Top. Inman and Ruby had two daughters, Louise and Charlene. Conety worked delivering ice and coal, first in a horse-drawn wagon and later in a truck. He always stated that the Great Depression did not severely affect his family, as his work did not involve farming but concentrated on delivering essential home heating and cooling supplies. Conety stated, "People needed ice in the summer and coal in the winter, so we weathered the Depression very nicely."<sup>8</sup>



Inman Conety's wedding to Ruby Louise Sheldon, 1926.

In 1937, Conety was offered a job managing an orange grove in La Verne, much to Ruby's pleasure as she wanted to return from California to escape Pennsylvania's cold weather.<sup>9</sup> He purchased a new 1938 International D-35 truck, packed up his household

---

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Ausmus and Drew Schlosberg, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66: Vintage Auto Restoration at Bonita Unified," *California School News Radio*, December 2, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1850096/9674142>.

<sup>8</sup> *La Verne Leader*, August 19, 1976. The citrus industry also remained profitable during the Great Depression, despite (or perhaps in part due to) the low wages paid to fieldworkers. Benjamin Jenkins, *Octopus's Garden: Citrus, Railroads, and the Emergence of Southern California*, 296-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

goods (including a 1934 Buick sedan), and the family traveled west for a permanent home in California. Conety purchased part of what had once been the grove belonging to his father-in-law, Henry Samuel Sheldon.<sup>10</sup>

The International has become integral to community memory about Conety. He once bragged to a reporter at his alma mater, Lehigh University, that he had traveled across the United States more than forty times, frequently using his own vehicle to do so. When he came to La Verne in 1938, Conety packed all his belongings into the International for a cross-country trek from Pennsylvania to the Golden State.<sup>11</sup>

Conety's plan was to sell the truck once he arrived, but there were no buyers. As a result, he decided to become a contract hauler. The "International" remained in his possession beyond his retirement and the miles piled up during his 38 years working as a contract hauler for the Swift Chemical Company in Vernon.



Conety and his truck, ca. YEAR.

Conety's deliveries took him from East Los Angeles to Hemet (located in adjacent San Bernardino County), where he delivered "Vigoro" fertilizer and other agricultural supplies in his International. He said of his truck, "She's a little temperamental, but we

---

<sup>10</sup> Personal Communication, Bill Lemon, April 21, 2022. Lehigh University's alumni file maintained that the grove had belonged to Ruby Conety's uncle. Ettelman article on Conety, La Verne Historical Society files.

<sup>11</sup> Ettelman article on Conety, La Verne Historical Society files.

understand each other".<sup>12</sup> He recalled being stopped several times for driving slower than the freeway speed limit so he changed the truck's gear ratio to maintain the 45 mile per hour minimum. Although not a trained mechanic, Conety took meticulous care of the International, changing the truck's oil every 2,000 miles and checking its fluid levels every morning before beginning his work.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Conety carefully logged the maintenance he performed on his vehicle. "His preventative maintenance record book," one article published in 1975 explained, included "every oil change, tire change, gas mileage check, [and] repairs." Conety "can tell you just about eveyrhting from that little brown truck." Although he originally purchased the vehicle in Pennsylvania, Conety racked up most of the International's almost-1,000,000 miles in Greater Los Angeles. He originally planned to sell the vehicle after arriving in Southern California, but kept it when he was unable to find a buyer.<sup>14</sup>

The Conetys had arrived in Southern California as the region's romance with automobiles bore tremendous fruit. In 1938 and 1939, the Automobile Club of California launched a Traffic Survey to determine where to buit a large highway through Los Angeles. This resulted in the Arroyo Seco Parkway, the first major freeway in Southern California.<sup>15</sup> For several decades, significant local, state, and federal investment in the highway system expanded the freeway network from Los Angeles to its citrus-growing hinterlants like La Verne, giving Conety and his 1938 International plenty of roadways to traverse.

---

<sup>12</sup> *La Verne Leader*, January 16, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1979.

<sup>14</sup> "Almost a Million," p. 1, 1975, La Verne Historical Society files.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, *Octopus's Garden*, 340.

Conety took advantage of California's developed highway system when hauling fertilizer across Greater Los Angeles. He and the 1938 International regularly plied the freeways linking Los Angeles to Pasadena, Pomona, Riverside, and San Bernardino. Conety described the city of Hemet, in Southern California's Inland Empire, as his most farflung destination; when visiting that town, he clocked more than 90 miles.

Following the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the citrus industry slowly began to decline in Southern California. Servicemen and industrial workers from across the country had streamed into Greater Los Angeles for military service or to participate in the defense sector. The need for residential districts for these workers enticed many citriculturists to sell their lands, which developers used to build tract homes.<sup>16</sup> The highway system that had expanded in 1930s grew even more dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, while Conety's agricultural clients largely vacated Southern California in the postwar years, he and the International enjoyed a vastly more developed road system.

This economic expansion came at the expense of the citrus industry. The growth of suburban tract houses enticed many orange- and lemon-growers to sell their land, uprooting their trees to make quick money selling to land developers. Additionally, a malaria called quick decline, or *tristeza*, killed many citrus trees in the immediate postwar years.<sup>17</sup> The citrus industry that had played a key role in Conety's coming to La Verne had all but left the city by the mid-twentieth century.

The International posed a number of challenges for Conety. Likely because of its size and the weight of its cargo, the International averaged about 11 miles per gallon.

---

<sup>16</sup> CITATION

<sup>17</sup> Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 309-10.



Additionally, Conety recalled being stopped on the freeway for “impeding traffic,” and the slow speed of the truck forced Conety to modify the axle gear ratio to meet the minimum speed limit of 45 miles per hour. Conety conceded that the International was “temperamental,” but insisted that he and the vehicle “understand each other.” These challenges aside, Conety took excellent care of the International, as exhibited by his practice of covering its hood with a blanket to keep the engine dry. “The International truck,” Conety proclaimed, “has brought me a good living and I never abuse it.”<sup>18</sup>



The 1938 International truck on the road, ca. YEAR.

During his years with Swift Chemical Company and after his retirement, Inman Conety was busy with community service activities. Shortly after the formation of the La Verne Historical Society, which grew out of activities of a Cultural Heritage Commission first established in 1969, Conety served as its corresponding secretary. Shortly thereafter, in 1971, he was elected President of the Historical Society. He worked to incorporate the Historical Society, became its second President, and as such, signed incorporation papers for the organization in the summer of 1973. He served as President, Board Member, and President Emeritus of the Society for the next eighteen years. As the Society began to accumulate artifacts from its citrus history, and with no funds to purchase a museum location, Conety established a collection center for newspapers and glass. Hauling these

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

recyclables in the “International,” he made weekly roundtrips of more than 40 miles to a recycling center and recycled more than 400 tons of materials. Proceeds from his recycling efforts exceeded \$20,000 and were used by the Historical Society to fund its projects.

Among the most important of these initiatives were the installation of bronze markers at historic homes and the raising of funds for construction of a new city library.<sup>19</sup> Conety also raised fees for speaker programs, supported the publication of a book about the history of La Verne, and joined the town’s City Beautiful Committee. The recycling center was active in La Verne until 1989, when it was closed to create a parking lot.<sup>20</sup>

Widowed in 1958, Conety remained active in community affairs. He was a member of the La Verne Beautiful and Bicentennial Committees, a member of the Methodist Church choir and Toastmasters, and received a 50-year pin from the Masonic Order. Every evening he dined at the Crystal Cafeteria in the nearby city of Pomona, sitting at the same table and enjoying a home-cooked meal. He traveled every year to visit one daughter in Mexico City and was reported to have made over 40 trips across the United States. However, he never travelled by air, remarking “I don’t mind how high I fly, just so I have one foot on the ground.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1985, Conety was named La Verne’s Citizen of the Year. In bestowing this honor to Conety, the City of La Verne revealed how the mythos surrounding one of its favorite sons and his 1938 International held such a special place in the community’s memory. After introducing Conety as “a truly exceptional individual,” the City of La Verne wrote that,

---

<sup>19</sup> Memo on Inman Conety from Evelyn Hollinger to Marty Lomeli, January 12, 1984, p. 1 La Verne Historical Society files.

<sup>20</sup> *La Verne Newsletter*, May 20, YEAR, p. 1; La Verne Chamber of Commerce, “1985 Citizen of the Year: Inman,” p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *La Verne Leader*, August 19, 1876.

“Though he retired in 1979 after 60 years of work as an independent businessman operating a truck, he is devoting a considerable amount of energy to a variety of community services and charities. Beyond leading the historical society, serving as president emeritus by 1985, Conety continue to opearted the Inman Conety Recycling Center and to serve as treasurer of the Wesleyan Day Care Center and the La Verne Coordinating Council. “Near and dear to his heart,” explained the explanatory brochure commemorating Conety’s award, “is his 1938 International truck which he says has traveled over 951,000 miles.”<sup>22</sup> Conety once averred that “one of the requirements of a happy life is good health. The exercise I get in loading, unlading and driving the truck, has kept me in good shape,” even as he advance in years.<sup>23</sup>

Conety once measured his vitality by his ability to carry large sacks from the International. As the packs declined in size, Conety conflated this with his aging. “No doubt,” he once wrote in a Christmas letter to family members and his friends, “ you are wondering what I will do when I quit driving the International truck and carin for the grove.” Even in Conety’s mind, the 1938 International had become an indelible part of his public persona.<sup>24</sup> The vehicle itself played a key role in carrying Conety into La Verne’s collective memory.

Although he remained employed as a contract driver well into his 70s, Inman Conety sold his grove to make way for a mobile home park development. The citrus industry had been declining for years, and the post-WWII housing boom made land more valuable than the groves that occupied them. Conety remarked, “It is a relief not to have the orange grove.

---

<sup>22</sup> La Verne Chamber of Commerce, “1985 Citizen of the Year: Inman,” p. 2

<sup>23</sup> Ettelman article on Conety, La Verne Historical Society files.

<sup>24</sup> “Almost a Million,” p. 2, 1975, La Verne Historical Society files.

When I think of getting out those cold nights to light those heaters and walking on the frozen ground, I am glad the trees grew into mobile homes. It was a lot of hard work, but a good investment.”<sup>25</sup>

### **The 1938 International Finds New Life**

The 1938 International had logged almost a million miles when it was retired from active service. Purchased from Inman Conety by the La Verne Historical Society in 1991 for its original cost, the truck was moved to a barn at La Verne’s Heritage Park and was a fixture in their “Hands on History” program for third-grade students in the school district. Heritage Park is the site of the last orange grove in La Verne, linking the International to the “Heart of the Orange Empire.”<sup>26</sup> Rusting and no longer functional, the truck sat until 2019 when it was towed to the home of the current President of the Historical Society. Another member of the Society stepped forward to direct its restoration. The International was evaluated and cleaned during a “beautification” event. Sadly, the wooden bed was not salvageable. After it was removed, the metal cab protector came off and what remained received a much-needed power wash.

After the vehicle had fallen into disrepair from old age and disuse, Best envisioned restorations to the vehicle that would transform it into a vibrant historical artifact. “Long a fixture at La Verne Heritage,” Best wrote, “the International was recently moved to the home of La Verne residents John and Sherry Best to undergo extensive renovation. It will retain its original look while receiving a mechanical restoration (new engine, tires, brakes, drive train, bed, and interior refurbishing) to make it street worthy.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1979.

<sup>26</sup> Ausmus and Schlosberg, “Get Your Kicks on Route 66.”

<sup>27</sup> La Verne Historical Society newsletter, May 2020, p. 2.

Repairs to the truck began modestly in February 2020. The La Verne Historical Society hosted its first “1938 International Beautification Day,” designed to have members of the community learn about the vehicle and see it undergo power washing and cleaning. The event also doubled as an advertisement to entice donors from the community to contribute to the project.<sup>28</sup>



Coney's 1938 International as it appeared in 2020.



Members of the La Verne Historical Society prepare to move Coney's truck from its previous storage location to Bonita High School for repairs.

---

<sup>28</sup> “LVHS Update” email from Sherry Best to members of the La Verne Historical Society, February 14, 2020.



To raise money for repairs to the 1938 International, the La Verne Historical Society turned to crowdfunding. Websites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe have become increasingly critical platforms for cultural institutions like museums, archives, and historical societies, especially in an age when funding for public humanities projects has become scarce.<sup>29</sup> Sherry Best, Conety's successor as the president of the La Verne Historical society, designed and launched a GoFundMe page to "Help Restore the 1938 International Truck." Best explained that the vehicle "was used from the time it was new to support our local citrus growers, ranchers and farmers starting in 1938!" She positioned it as a vibrant historical artifact, "a wonderful mobile addition to our history courses for our students in our school district."<sup>30</sup>

The board of directors of the La Verne Historical Society decided to collaborate with high school students enrolled in the auto shop class at the city's Bonita High School. The historical society had collaborated with the Bonita Unified School District in the past, strengthening students' understanding of local history and providing opportunities for

---

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Smith, Raising Cash and Building Connections: Using Kickstarter to Fund and Promote a Cultural Heritage Project, in *Management: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, ed. Kate Theimer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 15-28.

<sup>30</sup> Sherry Best, "Help Restore the 1938 International Truck," *GoFundMe*, retrieved May 23, 2022, from <https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-restore-the-1938-international-truck>.

learning directly from historical artifacts. Additionally, Bonita's history of successful auto repair projects made the school an ideal partner.<sup>31</sup> In an homage to Inman Conety, the truck body will be treated for rust and sealed but retain its original, much-used look. However, the status of the mechanical parts was such that replacement was necessary, so it will be outfitted with a new engine, tires, brakes, drive train, bed, and interior refurbishing to make it street worthy.

Rob Zamboni, the shop instructor at Bonita High School, described students' interactions with the 1938 International:

The students have done restorations before, but nothing quite like this. For 50 minutes a day, Monday through Friday, our kids are focused and engaged on their project, making a little bit of progress every day. This is a true community collaboration. Many of our students have families that go back several generations in La Verne, and everyone is excited to see the truck get back on the road.

Zamboni divided his Auto 102 class into three teams. One worked on the rear part of the truck, along with its axle. Another completed the middle section and the transmission. The final team completed the front of the vehicle, including its engine and suspension. Students enthusiastically participated in the repair work. Sophomore Rylan Blancett noted the challenge of undoing the cab of the International. "It was welded in place by the owner," the student noted, so he and his peers relied on "grinders and saws to get the old bolts off." Despite such challenges, students remained determined by the prospect of completing the repairs. "We are all motivated to see what the truck will look like when it is fully restored," Blancett commented. In addition to seeing the vehicle participate in the Fourth of July

---

<sup>31</sup> Ausmus and Schlosberg, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66."

parade in 2022, students commemorated their work by engraving their names into the stakes of the truck.<sup>32</sup>



Students at Bonita High School in La Verne repair the 1938 International truck, 2021.

The La Verne Historical Society kept its members well apprised of the progress of repairs to the 1938 International. Monthly newsletters sent to members of the historical society offered periodic updates to the restoration project. By July 2020, historical society president Sherry Best wrote, workers had already removed the motor and determined the parts that would require restoration or outright replacement. The article framed the restoration as a community project, highlighting the financial donations by historical society members in funding the undertaking. Perhaps hinting at her plan to include the 1938 International in La Verne’s Fourth of July parade in the future, Best released this update about the truck on Independence Day. The article that appeared under the historical society’s new logo, featuring the 1938 International, and an American flag.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> “Bonita Unified Auto Shop Students Hone Technical Skills, Restore Vintage Truck for Community,” Bonita Unified School District News Release, December 6, 2021, retrieved from <https://do.bonita.k12.ca.us/documents/Superintendent/Press%20Releases/12-06-2021%20NEWS%20RELEASE%20Bonita%20Unified%20Auto%20Shop%20Students%20Hone%20Technical%20Skills%20Restore%20Vintage%20Truck%20for%20Community.pdf>. Auto 102 is Bonita High School’s advanced auto class. Ausmus and Schlosberg, “Get Your Kicks on Route 66.”

<sup>33</sup> La Verne Historical Society President’s message, July 4, 2020, p. 1.



In restoring the International, the leaders of the historical society struck a balance between modernization and maintaining the vehicle's historical identity. "Our Project Director," read one article in the historical society's newsletter, "will remove the cab and fenders, pull apart the chassis and remove the tires and axles, pull apart the chassis and remove the tires and axles, then sandblast and weld any cracks in the frame." However, "Dents in the cab and fenders will retain their vintage look but rust and metal surfaces will be buffed out and sealed."<sup>34</sup> The historical society tapped into a variety of revenue streams to fund repairs to the car. Proceeds from historical house tours, the sale of t-shirts, marmalade made from locally grown oranges and lemons, and other memorabilia, and tapping into the general fund all allowed for significant progress on repairs to the International by January 2021.<sup>35</sup> Subsequent repairs include painting the chassis, installing a rear end unit, installing breaks, and placing the steering gear in the vehicle.<sup>36</sup>



The truck was disassembled to its component parts, the frame was sandblasted, and then carefully welded and painted. A steel frame will be constructed to hold the bed, and

---

<sup>34</sup> "Rolling with the International," *Legacy Links* (La Verne Historical Society newsletter), September 2020, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> "Rolling with the International," *Legacy Links*, January 2020, p. 8; "Pucker Up!" *Legacy Links*, March 2022, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> <sup>36</sup> "Rolling with the International," *Legacy Links*, March 2022, p. 4.

the mechanical components are expected to be installed by the fall of 2022. A decision was made to salvage and restore the rims as iconic reminders of the time when the “International” roamed the freeways and streets of Southern California. While still at the high school, students carefully buffed off the dirt while retaining Inman Conety’s name and California registration numbers on the cab’s doors.<sup>37</sup>

Cooperation among different groups in La Verne facilitated the International’s return to prominence. In September 2021, the historical society delivered the truck to students in the auto shop at Bonita High School. Within a month, students had attended to the car’s motor and transmission, receiving news coverage from television stations and newspapers. By the end of the year, students had disassembled the vehicle, preparing the frame for welding, sandblasting, and repair.<sup>38</sup>

Best remarked that the “project represents the best example of collaboration among stakeholders that results in lasting benefit to members of the community.” She highlighted the experience students would gain in working on the truck, and how students would be able to learn from the vehicle after it become mobile again. Additionally, the local television station, LVTV, covered the International repair project, further bringing public attention to the dream of “a drivable truck that can be part of La Verne’s ‘Hands on History’ program and make an appearance in parades and city events. It is a project in which we can all take great pride.”<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Javier Rojas, “Bonita High School students revive historic La Verne truck,” *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.dailybulletin.com/2021/10/13/bonita-high-school-students-revive-historic-la-verne-truck/>. This story also appeared in the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* on October 13, 2020, at <https://www.sgvtribune.com/2021/10/13/bonita-high-school-students-revive-historic-la-verne-truck/>.

<sup>38</sup> “Rolling with the International,” *Legacy Links*, October 2021, p. 5; “LVHS Update” email from Sherry Best to members of the La Verne Historical Society, November 12, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> “Rolling with the International,” *Legacy Links*, October 2021, p. 5; “LVHS Update” email from Sherry Best to members of the La Verne Historical Society, October 28, 2021.

Despite Best's optimism, the 1938 International required extensive repairs. Erik Chaputa, one of the leaders of the project, noted severe cracks in the frame of the truck, suggesting Conety had not repaired the vehicle until he felt it absolutely necessary.<sup>40</sup> A local auto repair shop sandblasted the frame, which students at Bonita High School had stripped from the truck. New parts required for the vehicle to function again included a steering gear assembly, brakes, and transmission.<sup>41</sup>

By spring 2022, repairs on the vehicle had reached a turning point. The La Verne Historical Society cooperated with the Old Anvil Speed Shop, a local business that specializes in automobiles. These included new rims designed to mimic the original Dayton wheels on the International. This marked the final step in preparing Conety's vehicle for an appearance in the Fourth of July Parade in La Verne.<sup>42</sup>

The 1938 International truck became the official logo of the La Verne Historical Society in 2019. Bearing an orange in its bed, it will represent the Society at local car shows and city events. Combining the giant orange with the truck in its logo is somewhat misleading, as it implies that Inman Conety used the International for hauling oranges in his groves. Although he owned grove property, there is no written evidence that Conety carried any products other than fertilizer and agricultural supplies as a contract hauler, and recyclables as Historical Society President.<sup>43</sup>

Because the city still lacks a museum, the truck will function as a "mobile museum" of sorts, transporting selected citizens through La Verne's streets during its Fourth of July

---

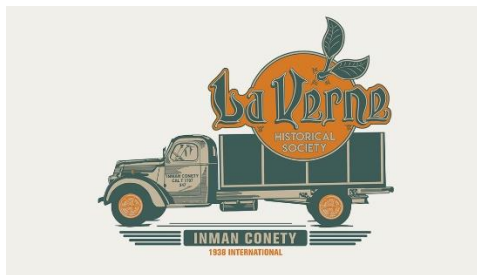
<sup>40</sup> "LVHS Update" email from Sherry Best to members of the La Verne Historical Society, January 7, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> "Rolling with the International," *Legacy Links*, January 2022, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> <sup>42</sup> "Rolling with the International," *Legacy Links*, June 2020, pp. 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Lemon, personal communication, April 21, 2022.

parade, and “making the scene” at car shows, the annual city-sponsored beer and wine walks, and La Verne’s Easter Egg Hunt. When not in active service to the city, it will reside at the homes of various members of the Society and be parked outside Society-sponsored event locations such as home tours. It can do additional duty by returning to the Heritage Park location to be displayed for students as part of their local history education. Seeing an exciting local artifact will add excitement to children’s engagement with local history and provide Society members to re-tell Inman Conety’s story.



The new logo of the La Verne Historical Society, which depicts the 1938 International hauling an enormous orange, the symbol of the city.

Allowing the 1938 International truck to remain at an historic park, rusting into oblivion, is a typical outcome for outdated equipment not consigned to scrap. However, its connection to the city’s orange grove history, its early farming pioneers, and a man who was actively engaged in the formation and continuation of the town’s historical society, made its restoration a necessity. The “International” is fitting symbol that will continue to inform residents as it rolls through the streets of La Verne once again.

The commitment of the La Verne Historical Society and students at Bonita High School demonstrates the allure of the 1938 International truck as a material agent. Viewed through the lens of thing theory, the care with which historic preservationists have restored the vehicle suggests a positive affective relationship between the vehicle and La Verne residents. In *The Comfort of Things*, anthropologist Daniel Miller productively

explores the relationship between physical things and human agents, offering a useful definition of thing theory. Most notably, unlike other commodity theorists, such as Karl Marx and Arjun Appadurai, who tend to view objects mainly in economic terms, Miller successfully mines the affective connections that people forge with objects in their homes. One major theme that permeates Miller's work is the idea that the author's subjects, the residents of Stuart Street in London, use objects to curate or perform their own identities. In this regard, Miller's work greatly resembles that of Russell Belk. That consumer studies researcher, in 1988, postulated that individuals often amass goods because they perceive physical objects as extensions of their beings. Physical things "both good and bad . . . are seen to attach to us through physical contact or proximity," and allow people to define themselves by molding their own identities through creation of their own immediate spaces, usually the home, but through other media, as well.<sup>44</sup> As demonstrated by Conety's International, citizens of La Verne have extended thing theory to a vehicle.

As a component of La Verne's history, Conety's 1938 International exemplifies how material culture offers communities ways to attach new meanings to the past. By refurbishing the vehicle, rather than allowing it to lapse into dilapidation, members of the La Verne Historical Society, students at Bonita High School, and participants in the GoFundMe campaign have affirmed Conety's truck as a productive historical artifact. Furthermore, by configuring a fundraising campaign and a new identity for the La Verne Historical Society around the truck, citizens of La Verne have expanded the significance of the vehicle beyond its original identity as a simple conveyance. One of the historical

---

<sup>44</sup> Russell Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (Sept. 1988): 140.

society's aims in resuscitating the vehicle was to integrate it into La Verne's annual Fourth of July parade.

A robust literature on the relevance and agency of things has developed over the past twenty years, a body of knowledge into which Conety's 1938 International fits comfortably. Bill Brown, one of the foremost advocates of thing theory, has argued that material items require theorization, critical analysis of how objects affect lived experience.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, anthropologist Daniel Miller argued that the physical objects with which people surround themselves contain meaning and inform human experiences and relationships.<sup>46</sup> Conety's affective relationship with his truck, and the positive memories that members of the La Verne community shared of the 1938 International, suggest that the discourse around objects can extend to this vehicle.

That the residents of La Verne, particularly members of the historical society, would sacrifice time and treasure to restore a vehicle that traversed the city for decades suggests that the 1938 International has embedded itself in the town's collective memory. The notion of collective memory emerged from scholarly historical discourse in the 1980s, and holds that what members of groups cooperate to remember shapes their shared understanding of the past. This leaves memory susceptible to shared perceptions of triumph or travesty.<sup>47</sup> Expressions of collective memory can range from interpersonal discussions to the arts, pageants, and literature.<sup>48</sup> Considered in tandem with thing theory, the preservation of Conety's 1938 International suggests a place for physical objects within

---

<sup>45</sup> Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-16.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel M. Otterstrom and James A. Davis, "The Uneven Landscape of California's Historical Markers," *Geographical Review* 106, no. 1 (2016): 29-30.

<sup>48</sup> David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 9-10.

the realm of collective memory. La Verne citizens' conscious efforts to maintain the vehicle reveals the productive intersection of thing theory and collective memory.

Focusing specifically on automotive restoration places the La Verne Historical Society at the heart of two local traditions with deep roots: car culture and the city's annual Fourth of July celebrations. The city of La Verne is located along Route 66, the historic road linking the Midwest to Los Angeles. Since the mid-twentieth century, La Verne has reoriented itself around this thoroughfare, with drive-through fast food restaurants and other businesses clustered along the town's major transportation corridor. A local raceway, located a few blocks south of La Verne in the neighboring city of Pomona, underscores the region's automotive history.<sup>49</sup> Resident of La Verne have a particularly strong affinity for classic cars, as expressed through the car shows periodically held downtown. Streetcars, muscle cars, and other vintage or exotic vehicles draw large crowds to the auto shows, one of the central traditions for which La Verne is known.<sup>50</sup>

Citizens of La Verne also express their passion for vintage automobiles during the town's Fourth of July celebrations.<sup>51</sup> For over forty years, a parade held on the morning of Independence Day that winds its way through La Verne has drawn large crowds.<sup>52</sup> Festivities lasting for the whole day unite local community organizations like the historical society, schools, business, and churches. Vintage cars, motorcycles, and trucks carry

---

<sup>49</sup> Ausmus and Schlosberg, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66."

<sup>50</sup> "Cruisin La Verne Holiday Car Show," retrieved from <https://cruisinlaverne.com/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ausmus and Schlosberg, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66."

<sup>52</sup> Javier Rojas, "La Verne's July 4 parade returns," July 3, 2021, *Pasadena Star-News*, retrieved from <https://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2021/07/03/la-vernes-july-4th-parade-returns/>. Once city counselor estimated the parade had operated for over fifty years. See University of La Verne, "Leos on Parade," *University of La Verne*, July 6, 2016, retrieved from <https://laverne.edu/news/2016/07/06/leos-on-parade/>.

participants on a route that runs past the auto shop at Bonita High School.<sup>53</sup> While the coronavirus pandemic that wracked Los Angeles County forced the event to close in 2020, the parade made a triumphant return in 2021.<sup>54</sup>

The following year, thanks to the partnership of the La Verne Historical Society and Bonita High School, with funding and automotive expertise from community members, Conety's 1938 International has joined the fleet of vehicles participating in the Independence Day parade. As part of their repairs to the vehicle, the students at Bonita High School installed seating in the bed of the truck, making it ideal for carrying parade participants through the streets.<sup>55</sup> Drawing the 1938 International into the most prominent annual event in La Verne and, more broadly, the region's car culture, cements the truck as a vibrant historical agent and an epitome of community memory. [ADD INFO on 2022 parade here.](#)

### **Riding into the Sunset**

Late in life, Conety remained a humble, hardworking man. "Since retiring from 60 years of truck driving," he explained in one of his annual Christmas letters, "I have settled into a pattern of volunteer work that has changed very little in the past five years." He continued to visit the recycling center to handle newspapers for the La Verne Historical Society, estimating that he had processed 575 tons of material by 1983. He also served as treasurer of the Methodist Church's Day Care Center, and librarians for its choir.<sup>56</sup> When

---

<sup>53</sup> Imani Tate, "La Verne celebrates the Fourth of July," July 9, 2010, *The Sun*, retrieved from <https://www.sbsun.com/2010/07/09/la-verne-celebrates-the-fourth-of-july/>.

<sup>54</sup> Rojas, "La Verne's July 4 parade returns."

<sup>55</sup> Ausmus and Schlosberg, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66."

<sup>56</sup> Christmas letter from Inman Conety, 1938, La Verne Historical Society files.



Conety passed in 1992 at age 93, his extensive retirement work, paired with years hauling materials in his 1938 International, cemented his place in La Verne's heritage.

Conety's truck sustains his impact on La Verne and continues to serve the community in new ways. With students at Bonita High School having completed critical repairs on the truck, the 1938 International is closer than ever to the million-mile mark. It has become emblematic not just of Conety, but a vehicle to carry the community history of La Verne into the future. "The Conety image," one local writer in La Verne concluded nearly fifty years ago, "is one of a gentle man, past three quarters of a century in age, who works hard, loves his fellow man, his family, his God – all of this behind the driver's seat of his 1938 International truck. Inman Conety and his International – one in a million reaching almost a million."<sup>57</sup> The next generation of La Verne residents will benefit from the campaign to restore the 1938 International. Children enrolled in California's public schools study community history in third grade as part of their state-approved Social Studies curriculum. Exploring one's immediate community in third grade is followed by study of California history, United States history, and world history. Opportunities to visit places, meet people, and compare traditions help to establish a shared sense of identity and provide a familiar focus from which to explore more challenging social issues in changing societies. Learning from the 1938 International will provide dynamic opportunities for today's residents, specifically the historical society's plans to place the truck in community events and to affirm its status within La Verne's collective memory.

---

<sup>57</sup> "Almost a Million," p. 2, 1975, La Verne Historical Society files.