Jean Stein devoted decades to writing the oral histories of Hollywood legends in *West of Eden, An American Place.*

At last. Jean Stein’s long-awaited oral history of her Hollywood years, titled *West of Eden, An American Place,* arrives in bookstores this week from Random House.

*West of Eden* is a gem. Predictably a classic.

Jean’s the daughter of the late powerhouse Jules Stein, the Indiana-born ophthalmologist who booked and led bands, before launching the Music Corporation of America that later included Universal Studios. Jules liked challenging us and friends to spell ophthalmologist.

We crowned Jules and his wife Doris Jones Stein as Hollywood’s Emperor and Empress, when we first met him.

Jean is a former editor of *The Paris Review* and a long-time editor of *Grand Street,* purportedly an investor. Also renowned as the innovator of the oral histories of Robert Kennedy and Santa Barbara wild child Edie Sedgwick, a rich Andy Warhol groupie.

Since our datebooks were burglarized along with our irreplaceable possessions, we’re thinking aloud about when we met Jean for our luncheon interview. Very likely during the mid-’80s at the popular Orlando Orsini Ristorante on Pico Boulevard favored by Michael Douglas, Sean Connery, James Bond producers Barbara Broccoli with dad Cubby Broccoli, who hired snow machines to cover the lawn for his Beverly Hills Christmas parties.

The interview went very well. No hitches. However, Jean phoned later that day and asked us, please, not to publish it.

Bewildered we were. Until a source wondered that Jean worried we might expose her affair with the Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning view-Willy-Frankie-Face driver other in truth, we had no intention of disclosing. That clandestine affair is now legend, documented here and there.

Jean is the mother of daughters Katrina vanden Heuvel, the lauded editor of *The Nation,* and Wendy vanden Heuvel, actress, producer and philanthropist. Jean’s sister, Susan Shiva, lost her life to breast cancer in 1983. As did Jean’s mother the following year.

Quick and charming and worldly-knowledgeable, educated at Wellesley and the Sorbonne and committed to the world of the arts, Jean profiles the compelling histories of five California families in *West Of Eden.* The oil-rich Dohenys, the Jack Warners, Jane Garland, Jennifer Jones and her own fascinating family, the Steins. Abounding with curious facts and anecdotal gossip, *West Of Eden,* dedicated to Katrina and Wendy, is a lively and rewarding read. Truly unputdownable. A book you’ll be pleased to gift fellow Hollywood insiders.

In Jean’s *Welcome to Los Angeles* prologue, she includes a harrowing interview with Gray Line bus driver Mike Davis about driving tourists and conventioneers. He discusses the awfulness of his Hollywood At Night tours during the early seventies, with passengers jumping out and exclaiming over Ava Gardner’s corpse. Meanwhile, the sidewalks teemed with “runaway kids, teenage prostitutes (male and female), people raving, heroin addicts with two weeks to live — the absolute epicenter of human misery. It was absolutely eerie and sent me back to *The Day of the Locust.* The point that author Nathaniel West made, of course, is that the masses want to kill and devour, to cannibalize their celebrity gods.”

In her biographical notes, Jean mentions that Mike Davis became the recipient of a 1998 MacArthur Fellowship and is the author of several revelatory histories, including *Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* and *Planet of Slums.*

The cast that Jean assembled over time for their oral histories is a heady and generous mix, every one speaking freely and vividly with vigor. Not to be missed is a long, apologetic love letter from Jennifer Jones to husband David O. Selznick (pages 191-194).

We discover how Doris and Jules met from the recollection of Gerald Oppenheimer, one of Doris’ two sons from her first marriage to Harold Oppenheimer, a failed businessman who she divorced after seven years.

“Doris had gotten to know Jules through the Jewish community at the dances he would organize at the Muehlebach Hotel in Kansas City. Every Sunday afternoon you’d go down there and dance and listen to the orchestras. Jules was the leader of the orchestras. Like a Sinatra. He owned a raccoon coat and a Stutz Bearcat car …”

“Doris is a gem. She married Mother despite her being a divorcee and having two children. He softened a bit when you and Susan came along. But he was a relatively cold individual, actually.”

Jean Stein on 1330 Angelo Drive: “I remember listening at night to the coyotes around our family house, which was known as Misty Mountain. It was built by Wallace Neff for Fred Niblo, the director of the first Ben-Hur. Its site high up in Beverly Hills led me to imagine that we were far removed from town. I recall my mother boasting that Orson Welles had come to the house with Dolores del Rio and praised it by saying, “This place reminds me of Berchtesgaden.” In the mid-thirties when Katharine Hepburn lived there, she had to fend off snakes in the living room — or so I was told.”

Months after Doris died, Barry Diller negotiated buying the house for Rupert Murdoch. “The price was six-two or sixty-seven or something like that.” The Murdochs kept everything that was in the house, with its priceless antiques from Stair Hall to the fish filets from a dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

“Much less than the forty-seven million David Geffen paid for the Jack Warner house.”

“I remember we were standing around the entrance hall at Misty Mountain before we said, you know, ‘this is too good to be true. Edie was wearing a diamond pin that said Love.’ The Wassermans were Jules’ heirs, apparent for MCA and Universal Studios. Edie was considered difficult and controversial.”

“When I visited the house a few years after the estate sold it to Rupert Murdoch, it was a shock to discover that nothing had changed. The Murdochs had even put up our family photographs from parties during the forties and fifties along the wall. I felt like an apparition as I described the cast of characters to Murdoch’s estate manager, William Sheeetz.”

More, much more, page after riveting page about the Who and the Who of Tinsel Towners. The Jennifer Jones and the Warner Bros. histories could be books in and of themselves.

“Strip away the phony tinsel Hollywood,” decreed witty raconteur Oscar Levant, “and you’ll find the real tinsel underneath.”

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GEORGE CHRISTY

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