

# Eden

Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society

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# Eden

Journal of the California Garden  
& Landscape History Society

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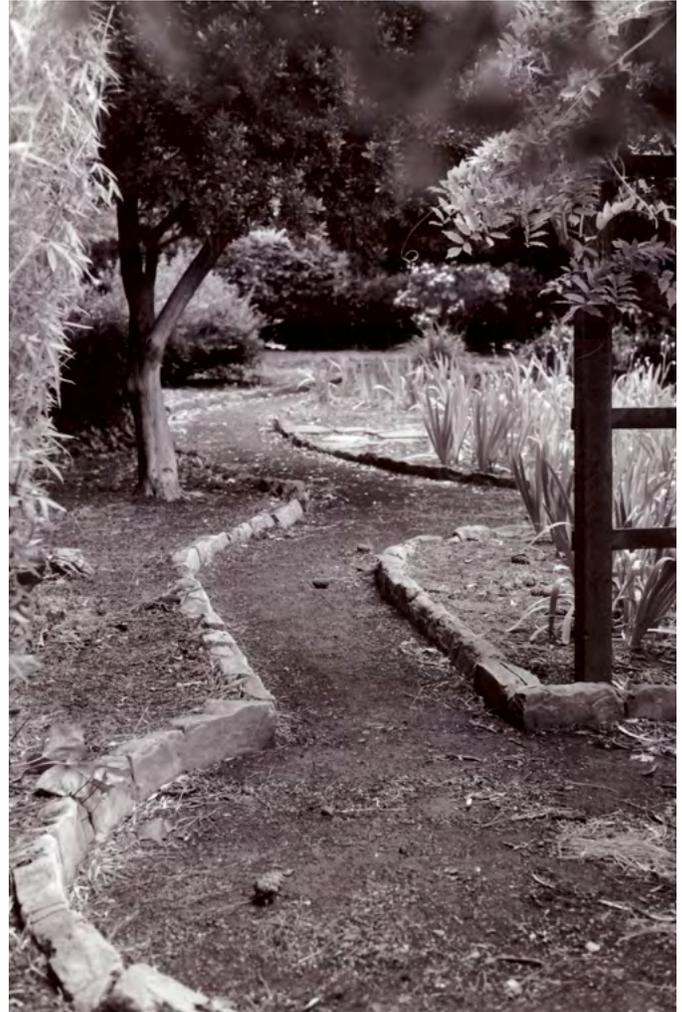
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Front Cover and Right: *The Willows*, one of Palm Springs' first great estates is renowned for its spectacular gardens and remains one of Palm Springs' most important and cherished landmarks. Image by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio Collection. Courtesy of Tracy Conrad.

Above: Rediscovered path leading from the wisteria arbor to the iris bed in the front of the old Palo Alto garden of the Williams family, c. 1995.

# The Willows and Its Historic Gardens

Steve Vaught



In the winter of 1924, longtime denizens of the village of Palm Springs became increasingly uneasy over the growing buzz of activity swirling around the base of the mountain just behind the Desert Inn. The story was that another Hollywood millionaire had come to town to build a pretentious desert hideaway in what was rapidly becoming known as the “Garden of the Sun.”

The house itself was not what concerned them. After all, over the last few years an ever-increasing contingent of wealthy individuals were doing exactly the same thing—turning what had only recently been desolate acreage into handsome winter retreats. Rather, it was the location that brought the worry. From time immemorial, the chosen spot had served as something of an oasis, with a stand of desert willows growing against the almost perpendicular shafts of granite boulders jutting out from the foot of mighty Mount San Jacinto. For

thousands of years, the Agua Caliente tribe passed along this spot on their way to and from nearby Tahquitz Canyon, no doubt pausing beneath the willows for a cooling rest before continuing their journey.

In the 1830s, the site gained even more importance with the construction of a flume, known as the Tahquitz Ditch, which funneled crystal clear snowmelt from high above down to the thirsty village below. Later lined with stone, the Tahquitz Ditch and its bubbling waters added immeasurably to the charm of this peaceful, bucolic haven. To obliterate it all with a boxy, showy mansion just to satisfy the oversized ego of an out-of-town millionaire seemed nothing less than a desecration. But if the locals had known William and Nella Mead, the couple who were building this house, they would have worried no more.

When William Mead passed away unexpectedly in November of 1927, tributes

to his memory appeared in newspapers throughout Southern California. Among the most fitting was one in the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT): “Los Angeles has lost a citizen, who, though more than ordinarily successful in piling up worldly wealth, was more thoroughly interested in the perpetuation and creation of beauty than in the acquisition of money.”<sup>1</sup>

Time and again, Mead proved that through his words and actions. He had indeed been quite successful in a variety of interests, including business, real estate, and civic affairs, and had even gained prominence in politics, serving for a time in the California State Assembly as well as on the very first Los Angeles Board of Water Commissioners. It was this board that made the momentous decision to approve construction of the Owens Valley Aqueduct, one of the most transformational engineering projects in the history of Southern California.

Mead's greatest passion, however, was the concept of home. As a millionaire several times over, he was able to afford whatever home he desired, yet his thoughts were never far from those struggling to achieve their piece of the American dream. For years, he advocated for affordable housing and when Los Angeles created its first housing commission, Mead was the natural choice to head it. Mead and Nella felt that a beautiful home was one of the keys to happiness, and they lived that philosophy in each of the homes they shared during their decades-long marriage. And the gardens were a critical component.

In 1901, the couple purchased a picturesque four-acre estate in the hills of Hollywood, above Franklin Avenue and Vine Street, and began indulging in their mutual interest in horticulture. The Meads were not only avid gardeners, they were skilled and innovative ones as well, experimenting with and propagating various types of subtropical fruits and ornamental plantings that would become important additions to Southern California. "These two," according to the LAT, "pioneered the growing of plants, collected with all the zeal of collectors, in many lands, and growers and scientists alike plodded up the Vine Street hill to study and learn in that private arborum."<sup>2</sup> The Vine Street gardens, beautiful as they were, offered just a foretaste of the Meads' horticultural genius.

In 1911, Mead had managed an impressive real estate coup when he successfully negotiated with the wily Colonel Griffith J. Griffith the sale of some 400 acres of prime Griffith land running along the foothill slopes of Los Feliz below Los Angeles' Griffith Park. Mead planned to turn the land into a high-end real estate development called Hillhurst Park. The profit potential for development was high, particularly if Mead flattened out the hilltops into building pads, but Mead would have none of it. The intrinsic natural beauty of the area was to be preserved. To him this was of far greater value than the quick profit he could turn by gouging out the natural topography.

Before allowing even a single lot to be

Above: *The enchanting terraces of the Willows offered views of the gardens and the stark desert landscape beyond. Image by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio Collection. Courtesy of Tracy Conrad.*

Opposite: *William and Nella Mead pose somewhat precariously at the edge of the historic Tahquitz Ditch as it runs through the Willows gardens. Valentine's Day, 1926. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.*



sold, Mead expended large sums in carefully laying out the streets to gracefully follow the contours of the land. Burying utility lines in underground tunnels added enormous expense, but not wanting to mar the district with unsightly telephone poles, Mead considered it worth the cost. Finally, Mead scattered millions of wildflower seeds across the empty lots, which with the coming of the first spring rains turned the entire hillside into a glowing carpet of California poppies. Visible for miles, the profusion of poppies was such a delight to Angelenos that the LAT rapturously declared, "Never has a city seen a more gorgeous sight."<sup>3</sup>

And it was in this new development that the Meads built their showplace estate in 1912, which they named "Dreamwold." Designed by the prominent Los Angeles firm of Hudson & Munsell, Dreamwold was sited on a high promontory above Vermont

Canyon. Its gleaming white walls and green tiled roof made an impressive contrast to the brown hues of the mountain rising behind it. As spectacular as the house was, the real treasure of the estate lay in its nine acres of hillside gardens, which were filled with an astonishing variety of trees, shrubs, and flowers. The many rare and unusual plantings ranged from bananas to coffee, pineapple, apricots, peaches and oranges, as well as spices such as black pepper and cinnamon. The Meads loved the site's wild, natural terrain and worked their garden into the natural topography. "Deep in the mass of tropical plants," wrote the LAT, "a miniature grand canyon thrills the observer with its beauty and unexpectedness."<sup>4</sup>

So when the Meads turned their attention to their new desert home, which they appropriately called "The Willows," they lavished the same care and attention that had made their previous homes Hollywood



showplaces. They began by engaging the talented William J. Dodd of Dodd & Richards. Dodd was well suited for the project, having done exemplary work in a series of hillside villas he designed throughout Hollywood's exclusive Laughlin Park neighborhood.

As expected, Dodd was instructed to intrude into the natural topography as lightly as possible. The architect performed an impressive balancing act, designing a stately Italian-inspired villa that draped itself over the hillside terrain rather than gouging it out. Today, this accomplishment is nowhere better evidenced than by the large boulder rising majestically from the floor of one of the villa's bathrooms. Outside, the landscaped grounds took their cues from the existing features of the Tahquitz Ditch, an old stacked-stone wall running along the front of the property and, of course, the desert willows.

Whether a professional landscape architect was brought in or the Meads and/or Dodd handled the design themselves is unknown. Mead had previously worked with Wilbur Cook at Hillhurst Park and Dodd with Frank Lloyd Wright Jr., who, by coincidence, earlier in the year had been staying only a few hundred yards away in the Reginald Pole adobe during the construction of the Oasis Hotel. Whoever was responsible, their work was exceptional, beginning with a wide curving stone staircase that rose from street level and passed by bridge over the Tahquitz Ditch until it connected to the villa's terrace entrance. The stonework, which was made from exquisite rose stone, was smoothed down to provide a flat paving surface. Several smaller pathways emanated from the main staircase with one following the Tahquitz Ditch and another meandering over the lower grounds to a flat grassy area and the estate's orange grove.

Undoubtedly, the most delightful feature was the serpentine staircase and pathway



Top: *The newly completed Willows, in 1925, with the young palm trees that today tower over the estate. Author's collection.*

Bottom: *The press and the public couldn't get enough of the sight of New York's glamorous, high-living mayor "Gentleman Jimmy" Walker (right) "roughing it" in the wild west on a trip to the Willows in 1931. Tracy Conrad/Gayle's Studio Collection.*

Opposite: *No one attracted more attention at the Willows than Albert Einstein, who was so charmed by the desert retreat he visited three times between 1931-1933. He is seen here watching the sunrise from the estate's upper garden, 1931. Courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society. All Rights Reserved.*

carved directly into the hillside. It wound its way upwards above the house to a series of beautiful vista spots, one of which featured a palm-covered bench, later to be dubbed "Einstein's bench," for its most famous visitor. The original planting scheme around the Willows included several dozen young palm trees, agaves, cacti and other desert plants. However, in the lower garden, nonnative varieties, such as roses, were introduced as well. Upon its completion in the fall of 1925, the Willows, once so feared by the locals, was hailed as an instant Palm Springs landmark, fitting beautifully into its landscape rather than overwhelming it.

Sadly, the Meads were to enjoy their beautiful winter retreat for only a few seasons before William's death at age 65 in 1927. Yet their efforts would not be undone. The new owner of the estate, New York attorney Samuel Untermyer, was an even more accomplished gardener than the Meads. His 171-acre "Greystone" estate in Yonkers was considered one of the finest in the country, with a two-a-half-acre complex of greenhouses and hothouses said to be the largest in America.<sup>5</sup> Untermyer was delighted by the Meads' work on the Willows, making relatively few changes other than adding a series of orchid trees, the lawyer's favorite flower.



Untermyer began bringing his many famous friends to stay at the Willows, including Lord Beaverbrook; *New York Times* publisher Alfred S. Ochs; John Jakob Raskob, builder of the Empire State Building; film star Billie Burke; and New York's playboy mayor, Jimmie Walker, among many others. His most famous guest was Dr. Albert Einstein who came to stay at the Willows on three separate occasions between 1931-1933. Einstein was fascinated by the desert landscape and enjoyed spending most of his time outdoors in the gardens. A daily ritual was a trip up the stone steps of the upper garden where he engaged in a private sunbath in the nude.

Einstein had the hillside all to himself on these occasions, with one dramatic exception. Eleanor "Cissy" Patterson, famed editor of the *Washington Herald*, sneaked up the steps in the hopes of getting an Einstein "exclusive." She did, but not the one she had expected.

After Untermyer's death in 1940, the Willows remained in the family, becoming the winter retreat of his son, Alvin. As his father had done before him, Alvin lovingly maintained both the Willows and the gardens. His one major change was the addition of a large swimming pool on the lower grounds near the orange orchard. In

1952, landscape designer Chryse Coleman gave a glimpse of the Willows gardens, writing in the *LAT*: "Purple and yellow violas and varicolored lantana cling to the stone. Peeping around boulders are beds of primulas. Tuberos begonias thrive under the personal care of [Alvin] Untermyer himself."<sup>6</sup> By the time of Alvin's death in 1963, the character of Palm Springs and the surrounding area was changing somewhat dramatically, with new, modern buildings replacing the old. The Willows fell into the hands of a bank with plans to demolish the estate and incorporate the land into part of a new hotel/shopping complex. Although those plans ultimately fell through, the Willows did suffer a loss to its grounds when the swimming pool and orchard section were sold off to become a parking lot of the new Desert Art Museum. For the next 20 years, the once-magnificent house and grounds continued to deteriorate from neglect until by the 1990s it was practically a ruin.

Miraculously, the house found a pair of owners who both understood and appreciated the Willows unique history. They undertook a major restoration not only to bring back the house itself but its spectacular grounds as well, even building a new swimming pool to match the original. Reborn as the Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn in 1996, the estate today remains one of Palm Springs' most treasured historic sites. Its gardens today are still much the way they were envisioned by those "lovers of beauty," William and Nella Mead, nearly a century ago.

#### Endnotes

1. "He Loved Beauty," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1927, J2
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Magnificent Home Sold," *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1923, 11.
5. The City of Yonkers, assisted by Marco Polo Stufano of Wave Hill fame, has been renovating to great effect the walled garden, the six color gardens, the temple, rock garden, and woodland trails that formed the core of Samuel Untermyer's Hudson River estate.
6. Chryse Coleman, "Blossoms in the Sand," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1952, F40.

*Steve Vaught is an author/historian who specializes in Southern California architectural and social history. He has written five books as well as articles in publications such as Architectural Digest and Los Angeles magazine. He is currently collaborating with architect Marc Appleton and author/realtor Bret Parsons on the second volume of their series on the Master Architects of Southern California 1920-1940. He is also completing a book on the historic architecture of Hollywood.*

# Mar y Cel

## The Tea House of Montecito

Keith Park



If one looks up towards the hills above Montecito, one may spy an incongruous structure hiding in plain sight among the sandstone-speckled foothills. The structure, perched on a rocky ridge at 1,400-foot elevation, is one of the few conspicuous remnants of a derelict, improbable and fanciful garden folly once belonging to the Montecito estate known as Piranhurst.

At first, the structure that one sees from below appears to be nothing more than a rectangular wall standing 16 feet tall by 32 feet wide and punctuated by three evenly spaced Romanesque archways. Locals sometimes refer to this structure as “the arches,” but those in the know refer to it by its common name—The Tea House. The Tea House has been a landmark for generations of Montecito residents, including hikers, adventurers and local skateboarders, who in the 1970s named the location the “T-Bowls” for the numerous large water reservoirs surrounding the arches. However, we are getting ahead of the story. My purpose is to describe a garden, or more precisely a garden ruin without equal in the world of California gardens.

The Tea House was a late addition to the Piranhurst estate, which is located at the western edge of the Montecito valley adjacent to Westmont College. The original parcel of oak-studded land that would become Piranhurst was purchased by Julia and Daniel Richardson in 1901 from William Gillette, an actor best known for his silent film portrayals of Sherlock Holmes. The Richardsons

chose the name Piranhurst in honor of Saint Piran, a fifth-century Irish missionary and patron saint of tin miners.<sup>1</sup>

The Richardsons quickly had a modest, four-room shingled cottage built on the undeveloped 42-acre property. While the cottage was under construction, the Richardsons engaged landscape architect John Whipple to develop the grounds. Whipple had previously worked on the Richardsons’ residence in Riverside, Illinois, and was employed under a 3-year contract beginning in December of 1901. A second landscape architect from Pittsburgh, J. Wilkinson Elliot, was subsequently engaged by the Richardsons and within just a few short years Piranhurst had gained a reputation as “one of the best planted places in Montecito.” Unfortunately, the Richardsons’ dream of a grand Montecito estate was never realized, as Daniel Richardson died in 1903 at the age of 54. Despite her loss, Julia Richardson continued to improve the grounds of Piranhurst for the next 7 years until she placed the property on the market for \$75,000.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910 Henry and Ellen Bothin, then newlyweds from the Bay Area hamlet of Ross, were vacationing in Santa Barbara and learned of the availability of Piranhurst from a friend. By that time, Mrs. Richardson had lowered her price to \$45,000, and through intermediaries Henry Bothin negotiated a final price of \$35,000. In November 1910 he placed the property in Ellen’s name. Henry Bothin was a self-made San Francisco business man and



real estate magnate who at the time of the 1906 earthquake was said to be the largest single property owner in downtown San Francisco. The earthquake and subsequent fire consumed 79 of his commercial properties and his home, after which he relocated to Ross.<sup>3</sup> Ellen Bothin, née Chabot, was the only daughter of the visionary hydrologist and businessman Anthony Chabot. Dubbed “The Water King” as well as the “Father of Hydraulic Mining” by the media of the day, Chabot developed reservoirs and water delivery systems for San Francisco, Oakland, and other East Bay cities.<sup>4</sup> While not well known in her own right, Ellen Bothin was immortalized by a Marin County plant breeder, Richard Diener, in 1920 with a new cultivar of gladiolus named in her honor: ‘Mrs. H.E. Bothin’, described in the March 1920 issue of *The Flower Grower* as “Flesh-salmon pink, flame scarlet center; large size; strong 4 to 5 foot spikes. A first class show variety.”<sup>5</sup>

The Bothins used the Richardsons’ original shingle cottage as their winter residence until 1914, when they commissioned architect F. Garvin Hodson to design and supervise construction of a 20-room Mediterranean-style mansion, a project that was completed in 1916.<sup>6</sup> During construction of the new Piranhurst mansion, the Bothins continued their routine of wintering in Montecito until late in May and returning to their home in Ross for the summer.<sup>7</sup> In the same year he and Ellen acquired the Piranhurst estate, Henry purchased 160 acres of land adjacent to and uphill from Piranhurst and eventually expanded this parcel to 340 acres.<sup>8</sup> The

parcel of rugged, rocky and at times very steep canyon landscape sat directly across a public roadway from the main estate grounds. In 1916 as construction of the Mediterranean mansion was winding down, Henry Bothin ramped up an ambitious project to build a pleasure pavilion, complete with an elaborate system of water features, high atop a hill above the Piranhurst estate. What exactly inspired Bothin to create these water features? Perhaps he was inspired by his father-in-law’s background in engineering some of the most significant municipal water systems in the San Francisco Bay Area. In any event this project would become known as the “Tea House” by the Bothins, although publicly they used its formal name “Mar y Cel,” a Catalan derivation of the Spanish *Mar y Cielo* (“Sea and Sky”).<sup>9</sup>

To appreciate the unique grandeur of Mar y Cel in the 1920s requires some degree of imagination, since today this feat of engineering and hydrology is little more than a crumbling ruin. To paint a picture of the Tea House in its prime, we shall embark on an imaginary drive to it, describing the various landscape elements as we ascend the narrow and circuitous Tea House road to the top. Entering through the main gates off of East Mountain Drive, visitors pass the stone gatehouse and a pair of sandstone columns,

Above: *The trip up to Mar y Cel was circuitous, steep, and best done by car. Courtesy of the Bothin Family Archives.*



to the increasingly steep hillside. When the road ascends above the lower reservoir, one gets the first glimpse of the famed water works—an ornamental water cascade consisting of a single line of approximately 30 concrete scallop shells, 4 feet in diameter, supported on sandstone columns marching downhill from the right, crossing under the road via pipes and continuing downhill to the left. These shells spill into one another until the final scallop shell deposits the water into the lower reservoir. Impressive as this feature may seem, it is only the finale of what is a grander cascade above. Up the hillside to the right of the road, there is a fan of five more separate cascades in the shape of blunted triangular trays topped with dentil motifs. Water from this series of five cascading lines is supplied from above by five reservoirs, which are in turn fed by water still higher up the road. Water makes its way down the five cascades into a medium-sized reservoir and from there into the lower scallop shell cascades.

each supporting a wrought iron gate. The lower drive inside the gate is lined on both sides with Canary Island date palm trees, and beyond the palm allée are neatly arranged olive groves, each in its own semi-circular dry-laid sandstone retention basin and containing approximately 50 to 100 olive trees. At the first sharp curve in the road visitors come face-to-face with a towering, 30-foot-high, buttressed sandstone wall that forms the decorative exterior of a dam containing the lower of two large concrete reservoirs on the site. Regarding the quality of construction, the entirety of the sandstone construction at Mar y Cel is expertly crafted, whether dry-laid or mortared—a testament to the skill of the craftsmen who quarried native rock directly from the hillside.

As we round several more curves and continue to climb, views emerge of the coastline to the west. Soon the road swings upward again, passing yet more olive groves in sandstone wells clinging

Interlaced among the cascades and oak trees, narrow walking paths provide access to alcoves inset with marble statues that overlook the cascading water. Opposite these pathways is a terraced concrete structure with a small stage at the bottom supported by Greek columns. This stadium viewing platform was famous for accommodating up to 200 guests come to see plays (*A Midsummer's Night Dream* was one) or as legend has it, to watch the sun as it set over the Santa Barbara Channel.<sup>10</sup>

Moving past the spectacular reveal of the cascading waterworks and stadium, the roadway bends westward, providing a momentary glimpse of a steep and rugged canyon to the west before swinging east again and passing directly above the cascades. Below this next section of road at the 1-mile mark is a series of seven medium-sized rectangular reservoirs that supply the water for the cascades, while on the opposite side of the road on a relatively level shelf of land is the second of the two primary reservoirs. It is at this point that another interesting, if not less dramatic, water feature emerges in the form of a narrow water channel approximately 6 inches wide, running alongside the roadway atop the low retaining walls lining the downhill side of the road. Some lengths of this channel may be contiguous and run for long distances, or they may be broken into smaller sections to provide a gentle trickling counterpoint to the thunderous cascades of the main water feature.

Above left: *The Tea House garden, courtesy of the Bothin Family Archives.*

Bottom left: *The Piranhurst mansion as seen from the great lawn. The Tea House property is located behind and uphill from this portion of the estate.*

Above right: *A panoramic view of the Tea House garden, Santa Ynez mountains, and the Montecito coastline. Courtesy of the Montecito Association History Committee.*



Once beyond the upper reservoir the elaborate water features are no longer seen, as the surrounding canyons and the approaching Tea House façade take precedence. Atop a monumental sandstone foundation, the Tea House appears as though it were a miniature fortification. Rounding the final corner of the ascent one sees an assortment of native and non-native plantings loosely arranged around the perimeter of the Tea House pavilion. At the top of the driveway turnaround, visitors are drawn into a small formal garden parterre surrounded on three sides by low sandstone walls enclosing a rectangular gravelled patio. In the center of the patio are two brick-edged planter beds, designed in the form of abstracted Maltese crosses, that provide space for groundcover while statuary and potted topiary are interspersed around the margins of the garden area.

Crossing over gravel through one of the arches of the Tea House, one emerges onto a concrete patio shaded by a brown canvas awning. The reward for this surreal journey is an unbroken view of the Santa Barbara coastline, Montecito valley, and the Channel Islands. The effect is breathtaking, as though one has stepped into a Maxfield Parrish illustration. Then comes a bit of socializing and soaking in the views, until luncheon is served. This may sound fanciful, but there is one first-hand account of just such a visit by Elizabeth Kellam de Forest, co-editor of *The Santa Barbara Gardener*. Perhaps better known as the wife of Santa Barbara landscape architect Lockwood de Forest Jr., Mrs. de Forest wrote about a visit she and her husband made to Mar y Cel one sunny day:

It was in the late 1930's or early 1940's.... Mrs. Henry [Ellen] Bothin, a widow for about 15 years by then, invited us to a 'picnic'. We had heard a lot about the gardens, so we were very eager to go. On the day of the picnic, we drove up the private zig-zag road through the trees, orchards and sagebrush to this rather formal plaza or loggia overlooking the sea. My husband felt that the contrast between the wild sagebrush along the road and the trim, green garden itself was very interesting.

Mrs. Bothin called our luncheon a picnic, but it was really quite formal. There were two or three other couples. Everyone wore their best sports attire – blouses and skirts for the ladies, knickerbockers, sport coats and straw hats for the men. It was warm but not hot, and quite a festive occasion. There was much pleasant conversation, Mrs. Bothin was a good hostess, and the view

was simply beautiful. I don't remember what we had to eat but it was good and plentiful—three or four courses plus dessert. The young, red-haired butler brought each course up from Mrs. Bothin's house, one at a time, in their Model T Ford.

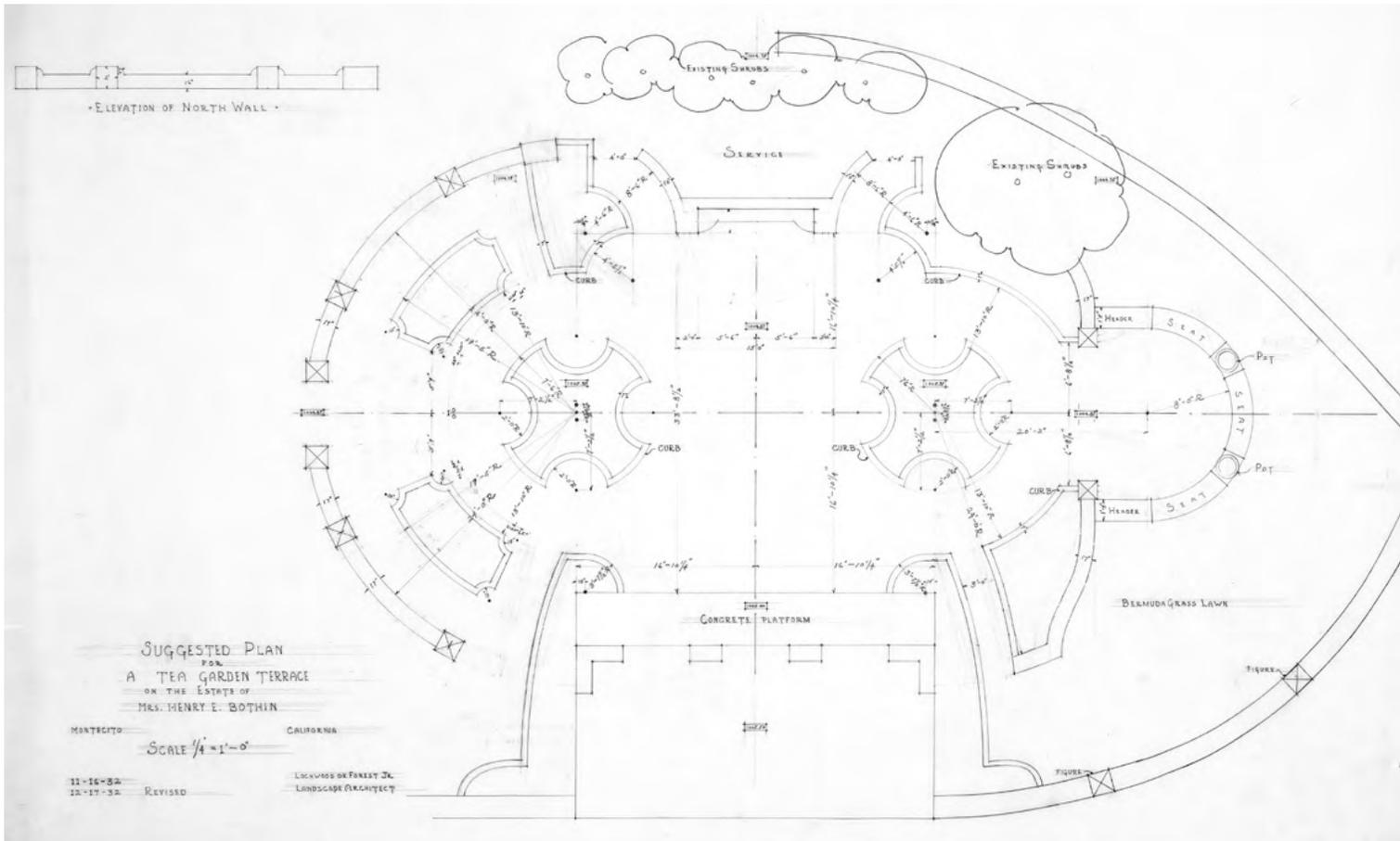
We all sat at one or two tables on the ocean side of the arches under a brown canvas awning. There were fancy tablecloths, vases of flowers and beautiful silver. The luncheon lasted from about one o'clock to three o'clock. All the way home we chuckled over the antics of the butler running up and down the hill in that Model T.<sup>11</sup>

Conspicuously absent in Mrs. de Forest's retelling is the fact that her husband designed the Tea House garden for Ellen Bothin in 1932!

No record exists of this small piece of the overall Mar y Cel ensemble prior to 1932, but what is known is that in November of that year Lockwood de Forest produced a series of scaled drawings that show the very design that exists at the Tea House today. These drawings, which are in the University of Santa Barbara's Architecture and Design Collection, include more than a dozen pencil-on-vellum sketches, studies, and measured construction plans for the pavilion parterre garden just east of the arch as well as a conceptual design for the entry gate and columns at the bottom of the roadway that appear to have also been executed. Also included in this archive are life-sized letters that when arranged spell M-A-R-Y-C-E-L, which are the exact working prototypes for the same letters that would be affixed to the wall above the center archway, facing the garden to the east. Constructed of thick metal wire these letters are still evident today, though some have fallen off or been removed.

Of all de Forest's landscape architecture achievements in and around Montecito and Santa Barbara (e.g., Val Verde, Casa del Herrero, and the meadow at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden), the discovery that he designed the landscape around the Tea House deserves to be better known.

Ellen Bothin died in 1965, and the Piranhurst and Mar y Cel properties remained unoccupied until 1968 when the mansion and surrounding grounds, except for the Tea House property, were



sold to new owners. Unmoored from the Piranhurst estate, Mar y Cel passed through a succession of absentee owners who spent little time or money to protect or preserve the place beyond hiring security guards tasked with chasing out trespassers. Vertical skateboarding in swimming pools was an emerging trend in the 1970s (drought prompting many pool owners to empty or abandon their pools) and local skaters discovered that the smooth concrete reservoirs inside the Tea House property made for a challenging ride. To discourage skating and avoid lawsuits, the owners at the time intentionally destroyed the bottoms of two of the main reservoirs by blowing them up. However, a second generation rediscovered and cleaned up the damaged bowls in the 1980s. Over time, many of the spectacular waterwork features, such as the concrete scallop bowl water chain that descended from the roadway into a reservoir below, were vandalized and today lie in ruins.

For 40 years after Ellen Bothin's death the ornamental vegetation slowly declined and disappeared or in some instances held on and continued to grow amidst the encroaching native scrub and chaparral. This successional overgrowth obscured the majority

of the elaborate constructions at Mar y Cel, including the viewing stadium, water rills, pathways, and olive tree wells. For many years only the "arches" were visible. Among the extant ornamental plantings at Mar y Cel are such hardy species as Canary Island date palm (*Phoenix canariensis*), olive (*Olea europaea*), blue gum eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), Brazilian pepper tree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), black acacia (*Acacia melanoxylon*), prickly-pear cactus (*Opuntia sp.*), pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*), trumpet vine (*Distictis buccinatoria*), and cape honeysuckle (*Tecomaria capensis*).

In 2008 students from a local college accidentally started a wildfire at the Tea House pavilion. The devastating fire burned 1,940 acres and destroyed 219 homes. Fortunately, the Piranhurst mansion and estate directly across the street from the Tea House remained relatively undamaged, though the fire did burn away all the vegetation within Mar y Cel as well as the surrounding 340 acres. This incineration inadvertently revealed some previously obscured landscape and garden features, such as the sunset-viewing stadium, several reservoirs, and many of the concrete water cascades.

Despite the ravages of time, Mar y Cel was and continues to be much more than just an arched wall at the top of a mountain. Although the full extent of the landscaping and ornamental plantings may never be understood, the landscape is none-the-less impressive, even in its ruined state.

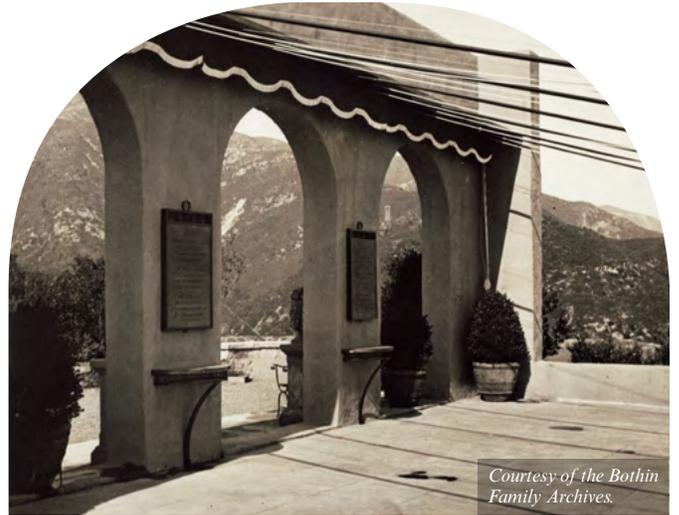
**Author's note**

The author would like to express his gratitude to the following for their help in providing photographs and material: Kellam de Forest; Bothin Family archive; Montecito Association History Committee; UC Santa Barbara Architecture and Design Collection.

Above: Lockwood de Forest's drawing for the landscape design of the Tea House, November 1932. Courtesy of the Art, Design and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Opposite top: Montecito Peak forms a dramatic backdrop for the Tea House. Courtesy of Art, Design and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Opposite bottom: Guests stand in the shade of the wall. Above them the name Mar Y Cel is spelled out in wire letters. Courtesy of Art, Design and Architecture Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara.



Courtesy of the Bothin Family Archives.

Visible in one of the historic photographs of the Tea House are two plaques hanging on the columns between the archways of the patio wall. The plaques were extant as late as the 1960s but by 1978 had been removed or stolen.<sup>12</sup> Research at the Montecito History Committee archives uncovered a transcription by a group of young women in 1959 of the poem on the plaques.

Arthur Guiterman's (1871-1943) "Hills" first appeared in the July 1915 edition of *Scribner's Magazine*. It is easy to imagine Ellen and Henry Bothin reading it in 1915 and feeling the poem embodied their vision of a mountaintop aerie from which they could relax, entertain and enjoy the view of their estate below:

#### HILLS

I NEVER loved your plains! —  
Your gentle valleys,  
Your drowsy country lanes  
And pleached alleys.

I want my hills! — the trail  
That scorns the hollow. —  
Up, up the ragged shale  
Where few will follow,

Up, over wooded crest  
And mossy bowlder  
With strong thigh, heaving chest  
And swinging shoulder,

So let me hold my way  
By nothing halted,  
Until, at close of day,  
I stand, exalted,

High on my hills of dream —  
Dear hills that know me!  
And then, how fair will seem  
The lands below me,

How pure, at vesper-time,  
The far bells chiming!  
God, give me hills to climb,  
And strength for climbing!



#### Endnotes

1. David Myrick, *Montecito and Santa Barbara, Vol. II, The Days of the Great Estates* (Glendale: Trans-Anglo Books, 1987).
2. Michael Casey, *Henry E. Bothin, Philanthropist of Steel* (self-published, 2015).
3. Myrick, *Montecito and Santa Barbara, Vol. II, The Days of the Great Estates* (Glendale: Trans-Anglo Books, 1987).
4. Sol Morrison, *A Rich Man's Folly: The Tea House of Montecito* (Montecito Magazine, Spring 1984).
5. Advertisement by Richard Diener Co. Inc., in *The Flower Grower*, March 1920.
6. Myrick, *Montecito and Santa Barbara, Vol. II, The Days of the Great Estates* (Glendale: Trans-Anglo Books, 1987).
7. Correspondence between William Sagar of the Fairfax Historical Society and Maria Churchill of the Montecito History committee, November 12, 1997.
8. Casey, *Henry E. Bothin, Philanthropist of Steel*.
9. Morrison, *A Rich Man's Folly: The Tea House of Montecito*.
10. George Logan, *Mar y Cel*, from an undated essay.
11. Morrison, *A Rich Man's Folly: The Tea House of Montecito*.
12. Email correspondence between the author and Susan Gulbransen, one of the women who memorized the Guiterman poem in 1959.

*Keith Park is a historical horticulturist for the National Park Service, at the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez, California.*

# Tahquitz River Estates

Steven Keylon and Steven Price

When Elizabeth Gordon, the influential editor of *House Beautiful* and an arbiter of taste for the American homemaker, visited the new Tahquitz River Estates subdivision in Palm Springs, she found a community with exciting innovations in site planning, architecture, and landscape design. Profoundly impressed, she announced to her devoted readers in 1948: “Attention! Armchair dreamers, land planners, home builders, homeowners, architects, real estate subdividers! Here’s an idea that may well change the course of your life and thinking. Study it well.”<sup>1</sup>

The largest and most ambitious standardized tract housing development ever attempted to that point in Palm Springs, Tahquitz River Estates was the product of a dynamic partnership, driven by a feisty Palm Springs pioneer with discerning tastes and an industrious developer, both of whom had the good sense to hire two talented designers to collaborate on creating the new community. Sited within the breathtaking natural beauty of this world-renowned resort, potential homeowners at Tahquitz River Estates were ensured that the new housing development would “capture the elegance of its exotic surroundings, your home an architectural salute to ‘Outdoor Living’ and a compliment to your exquisite taste.”<sup>2</sup>

## Pearl McCallum McManus and the Tahquitz River

The land on which Tahquitz River Estates was built was owned by Palm Springs pioneer Pearl McCallum McManus, the daughter of John Guthrie McCallum (1826-1897), the first white man to settle in what would become Palm Springs. McCallum, a prominent San Francisco attorney, had also served as a state senator, casting one of the first electoral votes in California for Abraham Lincoln. In 1885, after his eldest son developed tuberculosis, McCallum moved his family— wife Emily, three sons, and two daughters—to the desert, hoping the dry climate and hot mineral

waters of Agua Caliente would cure his son. Initially buying 320 acres, McCallum built an adobe house and opened a small store, befriending and employing the native Cahuilla Indians.

Pearl, the youngest of McCallum’s five children, shared a special bond with her father. “They both loved the desert and would take long rides together through the canyons, learning about the wildlife and vegetation. As the years grew into decades, the bond between father and daughter increased, and McCallum’s vision took root in Pearl’s heart.”<sup>3</sup> McCallum continued purchasing land over the next decade, and by the time he died in 1897, he owned nearly 6,000 acres of land in Palm Springs. After her mother’s death in 1914, Pearl took over management of the vast landholdings.

Now married to Austin G. McManus of Pasadena, Pearl felt it was her duty to fulfill her father’s vision of Palm Springs as the premier city in the Colorado Desert. She began subdividing the land, demanding that only buildings of the highest quality be built, adding conditions to deeds stating they could be reversed if she did not like what was being constructed.<sup>4</sup> Her high standards assured that her Oasis Hotel would be built by architect and landscape architect Lloyd Wright, with celebrated architects Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones designing additions to her famed Tennis Club.

“Auntie Pearl” became a dominating force who for decades controlled much of the evolution of her beloved village of Palm Springs. She felt strongly that for her father’s vision to become a reality, haphazard and uncontrolled building could not be allowed. After Frank Lloyd Wright visited Palm Springs in 1938 and dismissed what he saw as “erratic, unplanned subdivisions” peppered with “architectural monstrosities,” McManus was in complete agreement that some “architectural control was essential.”<sup>5</sup>

After World War II, with a building boom sweeping California, she decided to develop land she owned along the Tahquitz Wash. While she had often dreamed of improving the area, her plans always fell through, as the wash was prone to frequent flooding, making building problematic.<sup>6</sup> Finally, on September 22, 1947, the front page of the *Desert Sun* pictured Pearl and Austin

Right: Each home at Tahquitz River Estates came fully landscaped by Edward Huntsman-Trout. Here, a broad brick-paved lanai overlooks the spacious private garden. Beyond, a sunshade with red and yellow strips of canvas harmonizes with a redwood fence with a similar woven pattern on top. Photo by Maynard L. Parker. Courtesy Huntington Library.





McManus in the front seat of one of the several earthmovers that would stabilize the wash by lining it with concrete, making building possible.

### The “A” Team

To achieve a first-class community worthy of her name, McManus sought out the best, assembling an all-star team consisting of developer Paul Whitney Trousdale, architect Allen Siple, and landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout.

Trousdale (1915-1990) was a builder and developer whose activity was based mainly in California and Hawaii. Born in Wisconsin, raised in Tennessee and New York City, by 1932 Trousdale had arrived in Los Angeles and after a year at the University of Southern California, had embarked on a career in sales. Focusing initially on selling a variety of things, such as advertising and chewing gum, Trousdale finally decided to sell real estate, reasoning that if he was going to sell anything, it might as well carry a big commission.

By the end of his long career, Trousdale would calculate that he had constructed over 25,000 homes, along with the nation’s first regional shopping center (with three major anchor tenants) as part of his Baldwin Hills project in Los Angeles. He would advocate for the incorporation of features to benefit the community (parks, pools, recreation center, retail components) in virtually all of his developments. He was best known for his Trousdale Estates in Beverly Hills, built from 1954 to 1973 on 410 acres comprising the former Doheny Ranch (aka the “backyard” of Doheny-Greystone Mansion). He merged his company in 1974 with Lear-Sigler Incorporated, a NYSE-listed company that funded Trousdale’s first venture into “manufactured” housing (the concept today is called “prefab”) at Pearl Ridge, above Pearl Harbor, and retired from its board in 1980.

Architect Allen G. Siple, FAIA (1900-1973), graduated from the architecture program at the University of Southern California in 1923 and received his license in 1929. Focusing primarily on residential architecture, Siple’s work was described as “a forthright expression of our indigent California tradition in terms of contemporary life.”<sup>7</sup> Siple favored natural

materials, and always paid careful attention to detail, both in construction and planning. Architect A. Quincy Jones admired Siple’s “intimate relation of indoor spaces to garden, use of filtered light, concern for the distant as well as close-up view.”<sup>8</sup> Siple had a prescient understanding that the most successful projects are done in collaboration with a landscape architect, and his preferred partner was Edward Huntsman-Trout. The feeling was mutual, as Huntsman-Trout wrote of Siple: “... there is the true architect. Whose architecture is inevitably of his own flesh and blood: who knows at first hand the vocabulary of his craft, the essence and the aptitudes of the basic materials—brick and wood and stone—and of the humanity for which it is created.”<sup>9</sup>

Landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout, FASLA (1889-1974), was born in Canada and attended the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in science. He took courses in botany and geology as well as a few elective courses in architecture in the years before Berkeley’s landscape architecture program was established.<sup>10</sup> In 1913 he attended Harvard, and according to Jere Stuart French, “was the first Californian to receive professional training in landscape architecture.”<sup>11</sup> He worked briefly for Fletcher Steele in Boston and A.D. Taylor of Cleveland before returning to California to work at the Beverly Hills Nursery. Huntsman-Trout opened his own office in 1923, and like Siple his focus was primarily on large residential estates. He became a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1920 and a Fellow in 1933.

Siple and Huntsman-Trout would collaborate on a wide variety of projects, including the Webb School in Claremont, Trousdale Estates in Beverly Hills, and the Siple Residence in Mandeville Canyon. They even worked together on the camouflage that protected the Douglas Aircraft Company from enemy aircraft during World War II.

### Creation of a Community

In 1946, Trousdale was the client, engaging Siple and Huntsman-Trout to design a home for his family at the exclusive Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs. Like much of Siple’s work, the large house was contemporary in function and feeling but adhered to Smoke Tree Ranch’s rustic ranch house vernacular. Custom interiors by Greta Magnussen Grossman followed suit, with stylish ranch-inspired modern furniture and cowhide doors on some cabinets. Huntsman-Trout’s landscape, following Smoke Tree Ranch landscape standards,

left the natural desert around the house. Only a small, concealed panel of turf was adjacent to the house, enclosed by a low pony wall and dotted with a mature olive and soaring palms. Another Smoke Tree Ranch rule prohibited private swimming pools, as “Colonists” were expected to use the large community pool near the ranch house. Soon after the house was built, however, Trousdale surreptitiously installed a pool, which the ranch’s governing board demanded be filled in. Trousdale’s charismatic charm prevailed, and the pool remains to this day.

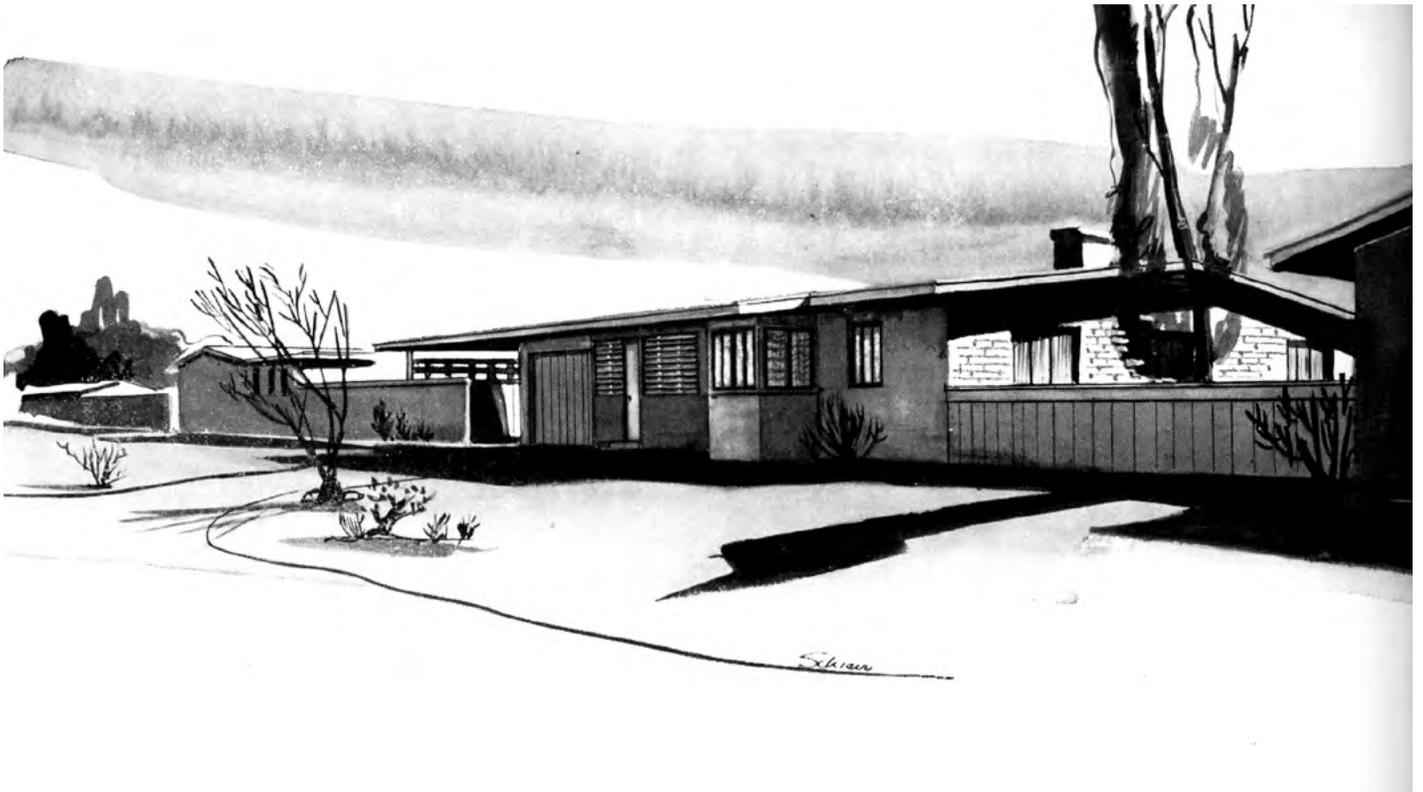
For the Tahquitz River Estates subdivision, the team set out to create a singular community, where the emphasis was on maximizing the usable outdoor living space. This was important, as each home would come fully landscaped. “Paul Trousdale recognized what is the matter with today’s small home communities,” declared Gordon. “He has created a new kind of neighborhood where every homeowner gets 100% use of his own land.”<sup>12</sup>

The community of 230 two- and three-bedroom single-family homes was planned to be self-contained, and would have apartments, a large park, a community center with a pool, and a retail shopping district.<sup>13</sup> Siple, working with architect Stephen Stephanian, developed 8 master floor plans, with 18 different elevations, in a contemporary ranch-inspired style. The houses, advertised as earthquake proof, were set on reinforced-concrete foundations and built using painted brick, stucco, and board and batten. The combination living-dining rooms featured exposed beam ceilings, wood-burning fireplaces, and “Walls of Glass,” and could be outfitted with central air-conditioning.

As interesting as the houses would be, the real story lay in the innovations of Huntsman-Trout’s site plan, which would ensure each lot (10,000 square feet) had optimum privacy. In the December 1948 issue of *House Beautiful*, Gordon described the program of “privacy landscaping”:

Privacy used to be the prerogative of only the rich. It came high, for you had to surround yourself with empty acreage in order to screen out the prying eyes of the “nosy nellys.” But these days even the rich can’t afford much acreage. Yet privacy is the keystone to good living. Without it you can’t do any of the desirable, up-to-date things with your house—like having big windows, or outdoor living rooms, or entertaining terraces. You can’t “bring in the outdoors” through window walls if you also bring in street traffic or the

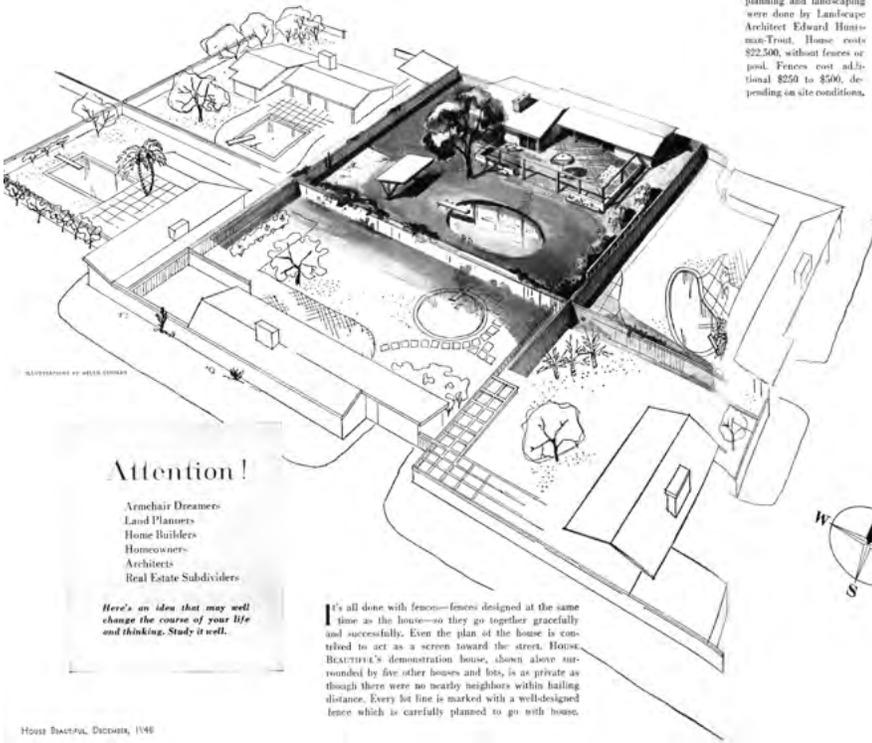
Right: *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon wrote an eight-page feature for the December, 1948 issue. Illustration shows Huntsman-Trout’s innovations in site planning to maximize usable outdoor space and create variety.



## How to have a Private Estate on 105' by 103'

By Elizabeth Gordon, Editor

*This winter go to see the new pace-setting home community in Palm Springs, California, that shows how anyone can have the amenities of a big estate on as little as 1,000 square feet of land. And study our model house, selling for \$22,500.*



Fences—all kinds of them—are part of "privacy landscaping." At right is rear terrace of House BEAUTIFUL's house. High board fence blocks neighbors' view of terrace. Site planning and landscaping were done by Landscape Architect Edward Hamman-Trost. Home costs \$22,500, without fences or pool. Fences cost additional \$250 to \$500, depending on site conditions.



Privacy used to be the prerogative of only the rich. It came high, for you had to surround yourself with empty acreage in order to screen out the prying eyes of the "nosy nellys." But these days even the rich can't afford much acreage. (Land costs are inflated as much as 150%.) So lot sizes are shrinking for people at all income levels.

Yet privacy is still the keystone to good living. Without it you can't do any of the desirable, up-to-date things with your house—like having big windows, or outdoor living rooms, or entertaining terraces. You can't "bring in the outdoors" through window walls if you *also* bring in street traffic or the back-lot trash pile of your neighbors. Yes, privacy is the cornerstone on which twentieth-century good living must be built.

But only a handful of community builders and land-planners have recognized this fact. They still treat your lot as though its main function, after serving to hold up your foundation, were to enclose the whole neighborhood with a park-like look. While the residential park is a fine ideal, it is a luxury the small homeowner can ill afford. For houses are also shrinking in size—making it crucial for the owner to get every scrap of utility and good living out of both house and land. If his lot can be made private, for his exclusive use, he can get more use out of it.

*(Text continued on page 172. More pictures on next six pages.)*

### Attention!

Armchair Dreamers—  
Land Planners—  
Home Builders—  
Homeowners—  
Architects—  
Real Estate Subdividers

*Here's an idea that may well change the course of your life and thinking. Study it well.*

It's all done with fences—fences designed at the same time as the house—so they go together gracefully and successfully. Even the plan of the house is conceived to act as a screen toward the street. House BEAUTIFUL's demonstration house, shown above surrounded by five other houses and lots, is as private as though there were no nearby neighbors within hailing distance. Every lot line is marked with a well-designed fence which is carefully planned to go with house.



back-lot trash pile of your neighbors. Yes, privacy is the cornerstone on which twentieth-century good living must be built. But only a handful of community builders and land-planners have recognized this fact. They still treat your lot as though its main function, after serving to hold up your foundation, were to endow the whole neighborhood with a park-like look. While the residential park is a fine ideal, it is a luxury the small homeowner can ill afford. For houses are also shrinking in size—making it crucial for the owner to get every scrap of utility and good living out of both house *and* land. If his lot can be made more private, for his exclusive use, he can get more use out of it.<sup>14</sup>

Huntsman-Trout achieved this desired privacy while maximizing the usable outdoor living space by minimizing front yards and giving houses on east-west sites 10-foot setbacks and north-south sites, 15-foot setbacks. Houses on corner plots came right up to the setback lines on both frontages. Side and rear yards throughout had 5-foot minimum setbacks.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, houses were not placed the same way on each lot, as “each plot has five variables (house, garage, motor court, fences and garden), thereby permitting many rearrangements, avoiding that regimented look which curses nearly

all developments.”<sup>16</sup> The comparatively small front yards were decomposed granite, planted as a unit with species native to the Sonoran Desert. Informally placed trees (Huntsman-Trout’s drawings indicate “scattered”) included palo verde, desert willow, cottonwood, ironwood, smoke tree, desert acacia, and ocotillo. These were underplanted with groups of yellow-flowering brittlebrush (*Encelia farinosa*) and a variety of native wildflowers, pink sand verbena predominating.

Working with Siple, Huntsman-Trout developed a wide variety of fencing options, designed at the same time as the houses and using similar materials. Huntsman-Trout’s drawings carefully made note of which materials would be left in their natural state and where they would be painted—most often to match the fascia trim on the house. Another innovation was the creation of a “breezeway porch” between the detached garage and house. The porch had a louvered wall facing the street and was open to the private backyard. This permitted the house structure to stretch to almost the full lot width and created privacy for the garden.

The private backyards featured large panels of turf, often inset with an optional Paddock swimming pool designed by

Huntsman-Trout in a variety of shapes and sizes, from freeform biomorphic shapes to geometric ovals, squares and rectangles. Drought-tolerant trees, such as California pepper, jacaranda, olive or Chinese elm, provided shade. Other trees included eucalyptus, crepe myrtle, Arizona cypress, almond, and a wide variety of citrus.

*House Beautiful* created a \$22,500 Demonstration House at 1157 South Riverside Drive, fully landscaped and stylishly furnished by Barker Brothers with modern “Precedent” furniture designed by Edward Wormley for Drexel. The Trousdale Company created another fully furnished and landscaped model house next door.

House sales were initially brisk. The Desert Sun reported that the “community is destined to become somewhat of a movie colony, judging from the large number of stage, screen, and radio personalities who are buying there. Swimming pools, and homes designed for ‘outdoor living’ added to the sun-kissed climate of Palm Springs makes living in the Estates a thing of natural desire.”<sup>17</sup>

By the end of 1949 Trousdale had completed 72 of the 230 homes originally planned. In October 1949, he was advertising improved



lots for sale for \$990.<sup>18</sup> In April of 1950, the *Desert Sun* reported that Carl Bohne, who had been developing lots in Tahquitz River Estates, had applied for a rezoning to residential use of the four lots set aside for public parks, arguing that “Paul Trousdale was now completely out of the picture as far as any further development of these lots.”<sup>19</sup>

The remainder of the lots were developed in piecemeal fashion, and in the years since, many of the original Trousdale homes have been heavily altered, with the breezeway porches becoming indoor space. Other than large trees and hardscape features, very little of Huntsman-Trout’s landscape plantings are extant.

Endnotes

1. “How to Have a Private Estate on 105’ by 103’,” Elizabeth Gordon, *House Beautiful*, December, 1948, 154.
2. Tahquitz River Estates advertising brochure, 1948.
3. “The McCallum Centennial – Palm Springs’ Founding Family,” *Palm Springs Life*, April, 1984
4. “Pearl McCallum McManus Helped Shape Palm Springs,” Renee Brown, *Desert Sun*, April 29, 2016.
5. *The McCallum Saga, the Story of the Founding of Palm Springs*, Katherine Ainsworth, the Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, California, 1973, 205.
6. *Ibid.*, 211.
7. A. Quincy Jones, American Institute of Architects Fellowship Nomination Form, 1966. AIA Member Files, Washington, DC.
8. *Ibid.*

9. “Image of an Architect,” Edward Huntsman-Trout, Southern California Chapter, AIA Bulletin. Summer, 1962, 18,
  10. “The Gardens of Edward Huntsman-Trout,” Susan Jane Gross, master’s thesis, 1976. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, 7.
  11. “Edward Huntsman-Trout: Innovation and Practicality,” *The California Garden*, Jere Stuart French, Landscape Architecture Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1993, 118.
  12. “How to Have a Private Estate on 105’ by 103’,” Elizabeth Gordon, *House Beautiful*, December, 1948, 156.
  13. “The Publisher’s Corner, by Oliver B. Jaynes,” *Desert Sun*, December 26, 1947, 1. Huntsman-Trout’s site plan shows space set aside for a park on the north side of the Tahquitz wash, placed symmetrically on Hermosa, but detailed plans in Huntsman-Trout’s papers for a park at Tahquitz River Estates. Aerial photos from 1952 show the area proposed for a park as undeveloped open land, but houses exist there today.
  14. Elizabeth Gordon, *House Beautiful*, December, 1948, 155.
  15. Preliminary site plan studies, dated . Edward Huntsman-Trout Papers, Collection 1186, Box 8, Folder 1, Young Research Library, UCLA.
  16. Elizabeth Gordon, *House Beautiful*, December, 1948, 173.
  17. Trousdale Homes Add Growth Here,” *Desert Sun*, December 14, 1948, 6.
  18. Advertisement, *Desert Sun*, October 18, 1949, 8.
  19. “Bohne Request Again Denied,” *Desert Sun*, April 14, 1950, 10.
- CGLHS President and landscape historian Steven Keylon serves on the Stewardship Council of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, and is on the boards of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation and DocomomoUS: SoCal.*

*Steven Price is an author, producer, speaker, historian, and preservation consultant based in Palm Springs. The author of Trousdale Estates: Midcentury to Modern in Beverly Hills (Regan Arts, 2016), Price is now a recognized authority on the subject, with sold-out speaking engagements on Trousdale Estates, developer Paul Trousdale, and Mid-Century Beverly Hills. He serves on the Board of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.*

*Opposite: Edward Huntsman-Trout designed a number of shade structures, this one named "The Sun Trap." Angled vertical posts in oiled redwood supported a gridded canopy painted white outside, with red paint inside the grid. Lounge chairs in a "beach" of white sand look out to an oval pool, set into a panel of turf, with white oleander against the back fence, a mature olive planted near the house. Photo by Maynard L. Parker. Courtesy Huntington Library.*

*Above: Architect Allen Siple's ranch-inspired modern homes were enhanced with landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout's landscaping. In lieu of traditional grass front yards, Huntsman-Trout unified homes with decomposed granite, scattering native trees and shrubbery. Photo by Maynard L. Parker. Courtesy Huntington Library.*

*Inset: From the brochure for the Tahquitz River Estates.*

# Update on a Palo Alto Garden

Betsy G. Fryberger



In the 1870s, Governor Leland Stanford, one of the “Big Four” tycoons of the Central Pacific Railroad, was buying large tracts of land on the San Francisco Peninsula. He and his wife, Jane, planned to build a summer residence with ample acreage for Stanford’s trotting horses. The death of their young son Leland, Jr. in 1884 transformed their original intention and in their grief they decided to build a university in memory of their son on the Palo Alto stock farm. Stanford University opened its doors in 1891, its campus surrounded by large open fields and stately California oaks. Governor Stanford’s young business associate Timothy Hopkins, who lived across the San Francisquito Creek in today’s Menlo Park, was selling parcels of land in the new town of Palo Alto where the historic Williams property is located.<sup>1</sup>

## The Williams Property

Thomas Merion Williams and his wife Doris (Dora) Estey Moody were among the earliest Stanford students, graduating in 1897. They married and moved back to

the East Coast—he had come from the hills of West Virginia, she from Brattleboro, Vermont. After he received his medical degree from Columbia University, the couple returned to California, living briefly in San Francisco, then deciding that being near the new University would be good for the young doctor’s practice. First, they purchased land up in the Coastal Range near La Honda, then bought one-half of a city block in downtown Palo Alto, bounded by Waverley, Forest, and Homer. They commissioned the well-known British architect Edward Coxhead, admired for his shingle buildings in San Francisco, to design a simple house with a separate wing for an office. By the time it was built in 1906-07, Governor Stanford had died (1893), followed by his wife (1905), and the devastating April 1906 earthquake had severely damaged the young University.

The Williams’ two daughters, Elizabeth (Betty) and Rhona were born shortly after the house on Homer Avenue was completed. A photograph shows them at a young age standing in front of the house,

long before the Virginia creeper covered its Homer facade. Little is known about the early years of the garden where three coastal redwood trees were planted near the pedestrian entrance to the doctor’s office. They still stand, majestic. Decades later, around 1950, another redwood was planted next to the driveway, along with a second that died. The land along Waverley Avenue was sold off before World War I; a series of bungalows lines that street. A second parcel, behind the house and garden, extending to Forest, was sold off in the early 1920s. There a Spanish-style apartment building welcomed San Francisco visitors escaping from its chilly fog to the Peninsula’s warm summers.

The remaining property (about two-thirds of an acre) was defined by a simple farm fence and a hedge of *Pittosporum euginodes*. In 2016 the original hedge proved too old and neglected to rescue and most of it was removed; the same pittosporum has been replanted. The old hedge along the inside of the driveway was saved to protect several rhododendrons from the

late afternoon sun and to see if this section could recover, given greater attention.

The most intense period of garden activity took place in the 1930s and '40s. Photographs show the front of the house with a glide near a sandstone wall and a fountain and grassy area next to the redwoods. In the adjacent flowering area, curved paths lined with rocks from the Williams' property in the Santa Cruz Mountains defined the different beds. Dora and her daughters, who both had graduated from Stanford in 1929, evidently participated in studying and trying to hybridize bearded iris, as did another early Palo Alto resident Elizabeth F. Gamble, whose garden on the other side of Embarcadero Avenue has been successfully rehabilitated.<sup>2</sup> The Elizabeth F. Gamble Garden features similar stonework and a fountain, which probably also dates to the early 1930s. Although I feel sure that the Williams daughters knew Elizabeth Gamble, no records survive at the Williams property other than a few photographs.

In trying to imagine and recreate pre-World War II gardens of the Peninsula, an essential source is Sydney B. Mitchell's books and his many articles in *Sunset Magazine*, where he was an editor.<sup>3</sup> Mitchell was instrumental in encouraging and nurturing interest in bearded iris, which are so well suited to this sunny climate. His own career started in library science and he was crucial in establishing that school at UC Berkeley. However, increasingly he devoted his time to raising and researching bearded iris, especially after the untimely death of his friend the bearded iris specialist William Mohr.

No plans for the Williams garden survive and none probably existed—the garden grew in an organic way. From the few photographs that I have seen, taken in the 1930s, bearded iris were a focus of the flower garden and were planted in several areas as well as in a central oval bed. A medium bearded iris, most probably 'Eleanor Roosevelt', which blooms out of season in the winter and even repeats occasionally, is found in large numbers. The first tall bearded iris to bloom is the stunning white 'Purissima', introduced in 1927 by Mohr-Mitchell. I have tentatively identified several other iris as 'San Francisco' (Mohr, 1927), 'Spun Gold' (1939), two bi-tones (one very similar to 'Dauntless' [1927]), and others in the purple range. I have photographs and would welcome information to help identify these bearded irises.

A simple wooden wisteria arbor divides the front part of the garden from the back kitchen garden and orchard, old compost



bin, and former area for drying clothes. A shed that has been described as a greenhouse but more probably was for potting stands in a back corner. Sandstone-lined paths once defined smaller beds, but over the years the edging stones had been buried and were only rediscovered in the mid-1990s.

Rhona Williams bequeathed the property to the City of Palo Alto in 1989, with the stipulation that the historic house and garden be maintained for the public

benefit. The city awarded a lease to the Museum of American Heritage (MOAH).<sup>4</sup> In 1992 Paul Rodrigues, a garden architect

Opposite: *Dora Williams in the garden, c. 1930.*

Above, top: *Williams family, c. 1916.*

Above, bottom: *View of the front flower area of the Williams' garden in Palo Alto, c. 1930. None of the historical photographs can be precisely dated. They are scanned from later reprints in the files of the Museum of American Heritage.*



in Santa Cruz, wrote a report urging immediate implementation of a watering system because of the stressed trees. He warned if this was not done the garden would be destroyed. He praised the garden as being a serene setting behind the tall hedge that offered privacy. The initial preservation oversight team was headed by Kathleen Craig and included Lucy Tolmach of Filoli, Scott Loosley of the Gamble Garden, arborists Barry Coate and Kevin Raftery, and Glenda Jones. The team drew up an historic plant inventory list in May

Above: View from across Homer Avenue of the house, c.1920.

Right Top: View of the wisteria arbor, c. 1995.

Right Middle: Beds in the rear of the Williams' garden, July 1995.

Right Bottom: Iris 'Purissima' in a bed near the old yew, 2017. Photo by Betsy Fryberger.

1998, and the following year Craig wrote an article about the garden for *Pacific Horticulture*.<sup>5</sup> But by 2000 the original garden team was no longer involved.

In 2002, Pattillo & Garrett Associates of Oakland prepared a report for Ron Benoit Associates of Palo Alto (*Museum of American Heritage: The Williams Garden: Cultural Landscape Report*), which includes 40 pages of photographs, a few diagrams, lists of plants that would be historically appropriate, correspondence, several interviews with people who knew the Williams daughters, and a bibliography. Section VI focused on the "Era of Significance 1920-1932," the period best documented in photographs and the one we are aiming to recapture.

Girvin and Lesley Peters planted rhododendrons and azaleas, sasanqua camellias, hydrangeas, and hellebores in the shade of the redwoods at about the time that Fabio

López Lázaro, a historian at Santa Clara University, described his complex plan for a Mediterranean garden with many plant details in 2009. He introduced many new shrubs in other areas, including rhododendrons (some native to California) under the ginkgo, as well as cacti and succulents along the side and back fences. Some of the latter have been relocated to the Arizona Garden on the Stanford campus because there is no indication that the Williams family was interested in such plants.

Currently we are transplanting and editing the most crowded areas. The short segment of the old hedge along the pedestrian path, where the roots of the redwoods made a replanting of the hedge impossible, now has plantings of Mexican mock orange (*Philadelphus*), moved from former dense shade to a more open and public area.

Here is a summary about the historic

plantings from the 1998 inventory. Historic trees include four coast redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and a female ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) in declining health, which with this winter's rain and efforts to fertilize it, is regaining strength. Two very large English yews (*Taxus baccata*) offer welcome shade but filter out the sun needed for bearded iris. Other trees include a common and dwarf myrtle (*Myrtus communis*); the specimen of the former is exceedingly large (Coate thought it among the largest in the state). Fruit trees and shrubs include a Japanese persimmon (*Diospyros kaki* 'Hachiya'), two apples ('Pippin' and 'Gravenstein'), a strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), Japanese quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*), Himalayan dogwood (*Cornus capitata*), green smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*), cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster pannosus*), mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*), Pittosporum tobira, and two roses ('Wind Chimes' and 'Belinda'). Recently I made cuttings from both roses and hope to add young plants of each to the garden. Among plantings that either died or have been removed are several eucalyptus, a Judas tree, a loquat, and variegated Algerian ivy.

Many small bulbs survived and rise to greet spring: freesias, grape hyacinths (*Muscari armeniacum*), and Peruvian lilies (*Alstroemeria*). In summer too many dense clumps of bear's breech (*Acanthus mollis*) and lily-of-the-Nile (*Agapanthus orientalis*) crowd the garden. Winter blooming irises include *I. unguicularis* and *I. douglasiana*. The historic inventory listed annuals, such as forget-me-nots and violas, which are no longer there but can be replanted.

### The Larger Picture

Reclaiming and preserving historic gardens is an ongoing challenge. Many years ago, I visited a great 17th-century garden in France—Vaux-le-Vicomte was still in private hands and looking as if it had been well cared for over the centuries. But I knew that shortly after its grand opening in 1661, Louis XIV (the Sun King) investigated and dismissed its owner, Nicolas Fouquet, his finance minister. Fouquet had the imagination and audacity to create a chateau and garden far greater than those of the king. The trio he assembled—painter Charles Le Brun, architect Louis Le Vau, and landscape designer André Le Nôtre—created what became the iconic French 17-century garden style.

The garden at Vaux-le-Vicomte has a complicated history, one at odds with the brief outline given at the site. By chance at a Parisian bookstore, I found a book that helped me understand a richer historical

narrative. After the French Revolution, the property fell into decay, as did many others, and during the early 19th century, the great parterre was a potato field. Not until the 1880s—about the same time the Stanfords visited Europe—was the property purchased with an intention to restore its former glory. Industrialist Alfred Sommier hired Henri Duchêne to replant the gardens, using 17th-century etched views as the basis of the design.<sup>6</sup> The Duchêne family firm rescued and created many other formal gardens in France and Britain, and even here on the Peninsula, at the Hillsborough estate Carolands (an extravaganza made possible by George Pullman, of Pullman Car fame and one of the wealthiest men in Chicago). The mansion has been saved, but the gardens were destroyed and the land sold off long ago.

Another example of renewal after neglect is a garden designed by Gertrude Jekyll in Hampshire, England. Created about the same time as the Williams and Gamble gardens, the Jekyll garden in Upton Grey was on property belonging to Charles Holme, an important figure in the British Arts & Crafts movement. After his death, the property changed hands six times before being purchased by John and Rosamund Wallinger. Early in 1984, when Roz began doing research, no one remembered that Jekyll had designed the garden, and very few plantings had survived. However, Roz found the evidence she needed in Jekyll's own designs, sketched and written out in her spidery hand, difficult to decipher. Using Jekyll's notations, Roz with boundless energy and dedication to detail recreated the garden, raising many heritage seedlings, which she describes in her book.<sup>7</sup> It was Beatrix Farrand who saved these documents when Jekyll's family sold them, but ironically Farrand destroyed her own garden in Maine rather than let it deteriorate.

Garden history offers other cycles of creativity, followed by lapses of neglect, decay, and destruction, set amid larger cultural patterns of peace, prosperity, and political pressures—and changing taste. Grand gardens are often well documented. In contrast, the small and simple Williams garden, while characteristic of its period, has little detailed historical evidence.

Currently MOAH has a garden committee with a small budget that permits some regular professional garden maintenance. Support from the Ruth Bell Lane Endowment Fund makes this possible. MOAH raised special funds to replant the historic hedge last year. Several beds, including two with iris, have been dug up, the

soil improved, and the irrigation system upgraded. Volunteers, of which I am one, are essential. The Garden Club of Palo Alto continues to offer financial support for projects, most recently for a World War II Victory Garden planted with historically appropriate vegetable varieties. Some 10 or more members meet regularly to tend these vegetable beds. Delia Laitin and I have done research and planning for other areas of the garden. Generally, while much has been done to bring back the health of the garden by addressing overdue pruning, weeding, and crowding, much remains to be done.

As the garden recovers, we hope that more visitors will discover the modest but serene setting the Williams family enjoyed. With the anticipated opening of the Palo Alto History Museum across the street, the garden will help create a sense of early Palo Alto. The garden at 351 Homer Avenue is open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 until 4.

### Author's Note

I want to thank Allison Wong, Executive Director of the Museum of American Heritage (MOAH), Steve Staiger, Palo Alto historian, Beth Bunnenberg, and Glenda Jones for many helpful conversations and for bringing to my attention documents and photographs appropriate to this article.

### Endnotes

1. See also *Palo Alto: A Centennial History* (1993) for information about the city's early growth.
2. Susan Woodman, *Gamble Garden: Landscape of Optimism* (2014).
3. Sydney B. Mitchell, *Gardening in California* (1923, reprinted 1939); Sydney B. Mitchell, *Your California Garden and Mine* (1947); Sydney B. Mitchell, *Iris for Every Garden* (1949).
4. The Museum of American Heritage/Invention & Technology 1750–1950 (MOAH) has a collection of over 10,000 electrical and mechanical artifacts, such as radios, TVs, and fans. It mounts temporary exhibitions in the house and offers classes for children and adults. See its website: <http://www.moah.org/>
5. Kathleen Craig, "The Williams House and Garden: A Work in Progress," *Pacific Horticulture* (Spring 1999) 13-18.
6. Jean-Louis Dumas (editor), *Henri & Achille Duchêne/Architectes Paysagistes (1841-1947) Le Style Duchêne*, (Paris, 1998). Introduction by Michel Duchêne, prologue by the Duke of Harcourt, essays by various authors, including Jacques Moulin "La Réinvention des parterres de Vaux" and an inventory of their projects and clients and bibliography.
7. Rosamund Wallinger, *Gertrude Jekyll's Lost Garden: The Restoration of an Edwardian Masterpiece* (2000). The Jekyll drawings for this garden are among those saved by Beatrix Farrand.

*Betsy G. Fryberger, McMurtry curator emerita of prints and drawings at the Cantor Center at Stanford University, is the author of The Changing Garden: Four Centuries of European and American Art (2003) and one of CGLHS's founding members.*



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*The pool that created a scandal at developer Paul Trousedale's house at exclusive Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs. Allen Siple, architect, Edward Huntsman-Trout, landscape architect. Photo by Maynard L. Parker. Courtesy Huntington Library.*