

One Hundred Years of Casa Barranca in the Ojai Valley

by Earl Bates

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The first morning light welcomed in by the windows and doorways of Casa Barranca, those mystical hues invited us out across the terrace to a boulder seated by the edge of Stewart Canyon. The timeless harkening to the sun rising across a majestic view of the valley awakened us from retreat in Ojai's Arts and Crafts masterpiece home and into the open morning. The pink-orange translucent ripples of clouds arched across the sky from above the Topa Topa bluffs far across Black Mountain. Along that skyline, miles away, the valley's necklace of oak trees danced branch in branch silhouetted by morning sun. Across the canyon a mid-ground of rolling foothills, beautifully clothed by the chaparral plant community, stood leaping toward Nordhoff Peak. The sound of the creek and the songs of birds came up to us from the canyon. Just 100 feet below, the water washed down the ravine on its way to the ocean, sluicing around the ancient shapes of the abounding rocks and

boulders. Near our feet at the rim of the canyon rows of selected stones hand-set into paths guided us back around to face the house in this warm early light.

Constructed of carefully situated stones upon boulders in their naked natural shapes, the foundation was simply and graciously built on lines of gravity. The venerable posts and beams of the structure stand and balance with the surrounding garden, forest and horizon. The geometries of the roof face the skies, singing along with the mountains.

In some ways, Casa Barranca could be described as little more than a deeply beautiful house, merely an extraordinary assemblage of wood, glass and stone. But like the morning sun rising across the Ojai Valley, it's filled with the sense of being much more than a fine collection of components. These are transcendental doorways into a dimension of spirit and the connectedness of the world. However much the house seems to have been co-created between the Earth and the sky, a number of enlightened people have been instrumental all along the way. One hundred years ago architects Charles and Henry Greene were inspired by this special site and these views of the Ojai Valley. Widely recognized today as one of the very finest creations of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Casa Barranca was commissioned by Charles Pratt and designed by the Greene brothers. Pratt, one of the most distinguished industrialists and philanthropist of the era, was able to

select any piece of property, hire the best architects and spare no expense in building and furnishing a house that redefined the high mark of rural domestic craftsmanship. "In the late spring of 1908, the Greens were asked to develop a series of sketches for a winter residence in the resort town of Nordhoff, in the idyllic Ojai Valley," wrote Edward Bosley, curator of Casa Barranca's sister house, the Gamble house in Pasadena.

If the Gamble house represents the high art of suburban domestic architecture of the period, the Pratt House and grounds represent its rural counterpart, according to Bosley.

The Greene brothers' reputation as pre-eminent masters of California domestic architecture is founded in five buildings. These are known as the ultimate bungalows, and Casa Barranca is in some ways the finest of the set. "The Pratt House commission provided the Greene brothers with more freedom than any of their other projects," said Bosley. The design of Casa Barranca, somewhat rigid in the earliest sketches, eventually became a co-creation with the landscape as the Greene brothers spent more time on the site overlooking the Ojai Valley, the views of the canyon, the mountains and the light. "The principle defining characteristic of the property," said Bosley, "was a steep ravine, or barranca, that ran from the foot of the Topa Topa Mountains to the valley below, and gave the house its name, Casa Barranca." Begun in 1908, the bones of the house were in place in 1909 and construction continued through 1910. The creation of Casa Barranca was seminal in helping establishing Ojai as a special place for art, culture, community, nature and spiritual studies. In addition to their home at Casa Barranca, the Pratt family made many generous and enduring contributions to the people of the Ojai Valley. The Pratt Trail has been one of Ojai's most popular



with hikers since it was built in 1912 thanks to generous funding by the Pratt family. The foot trail begins at the upper end of Signal Street and makes its way up Stewart Canyon through the National Forest and on to the Nordhoff Ridge.

In 1916 Charles Pratt addressed a letter to Sherman Thacher, president of the board of trustees of Nordhoff Union High School. "Dear Mr. Thacher, I have received copy of the resolutions passed by your board of trustees in acceptance of my offer to meet the cost of erection and equipment of the domestic science and manual training buildings for the high school work of the pupils in Nordhoff. It has been a great pleasure to me to make this gift and a greater pleasure also to know of its unanimous acceptance by your board as well as its hearty approval by the people of Nordhoff. With sincere appreciation of opportunity to co-operate with you and your associates in our joint effort to serve the people of this town of Nordhoff, believe me, sincerely yours, Charles M. Pratt."

The simple and refined aesthetics and the spirit of Arts and Crafts germinated in the Ojai Valley at Casa Barranca 100 years ago have continued growing and are alive and well today. The house and surrounding

land have been stewarded by current owner Bill Moses since 1994. The house had been somewhat neglected in previous decades and was in need of a caretaker sensitive to its original intent. Moses, a longtime lover of Arts and Crafts, has brought the house into high harmony. The electrical and plumbing systems have been upgraded and the kitchen was re-established in the 1990s. Moses has carefully adhered to historic preservation with period style and the finest craftsmanship. A beautiful Arts and Crafts-style yoga studio was hand-built on the grounds in 2002. Casa Barranca Winery became the first certified organic winery in California's Central Coast region in 2004 and its Arts and Crafts-style tasting room opened in downtown Ojai's Arcade in 2008. Casa Barranca continues its tradition of supporting the Ojai community, Moses has given his house many times for events including the funding of Libbey Park's Pergola, the Ojai Library and the Ojai Music Festival. The doors of Casa Barranca are open on occasion for artisans, historians, and people seeking a sacred space.

Visit casabarranca.com for more information.

