

Mountain Paradise, Mount Hermon has Bohemian Roots

By Ross Eric Gibson

The hallowed grounds of Mount Hermon's Christian retreat have a colorful past. In 1841 the redwood preserve hosted California's first power sawmill, and a Mexican-era distillery predated the temperance community. But the uninhibited bohemian resort that eventually became a Christian retreat left a more lasting legacy in its love of the arts.

Thomas Bell had co-founded Ben Lomond in 1887, and established Rowardennan Redwood Park south of it in 1895. But he sold these holdings when his house burned in 1897, and bought 440 acres around the confluence of Zayante and Bean creeks, the eventual site of the retreat.

Here he built the Tuxedo Inn and railroad stop for his planned Arcadia Resort. Craftsman log-porch structures filled the grounds, which included a bowling alley, campgrounds, guest cabins, tennis and croquet courts and creek boating. There were whispers of a hidden gambling hall. Bohemian artists and writers—turn-of-the-century hippies—were guests and gave Arcadia a wild reputation.

Then in nearby Glenwood in 1905, a mostly Presbyterian group met seeking a site for a non-denominational Christian retreat. They had considered Point Lobos, the Russian River and a site bordering Yosemite. But the size and diverse charms of Arcadia captivated them.

The organizers' pooled their resources and made the down payment. The balance would come from selling stock at \$10 a share, with the bonus of an equal value of land for every 10 shares. Six months later, the 1906 earthquake left many contributors penniless, so the association struggled to refund their money, incurring heavy debts. Yet with devalued land and precarious finances, Mount Hermon was dedicated July 24, 1906. A year later the debts were paid.

Organizers sought to transform the site's flamboyant reputation by renaming the hotel, [which was called] the Zayante Inn, although it came with an elderly resident who haunted the lobby with his foul language. They christened the resort Mount Hermon, named for the mountain where Jesus and his disciples went into retreat and witnessed the transfiguration.

The retreat was modeled after the Chautauqua movement, founded by New York Methodists in 1874. The tent chautauquas were traveling summer schools, bringing education, culture and religious training throughout the country, with special programs for young people.



Post card of the Zayante Inn with two carriages in front.

Mount Hermon started with a tent-roofed auditorium, in use for many decades. Prominent lecturers and evangelists have spoken at the center, including Billy Graham in 1958. Groups across the country have studied the center, hoping to duplicate it.

One of the leaders of the craftsman movement in California, Bernard Maybeck, who designed the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco and pioneered the California brown shingle style, designed Spruce Up Lodge for a friend. It later became the studio for two stained-glass and mosaic artists, until it was sold in 1968.

Cabins built for as little as \$100 showed the self-expression which the craftsman style encouraged. After the 1906 earthquake, several cabins were built entirely of surplus doors. A quake landslide opened up a mountaintop vista, and one resident built his home and lookout tower at the top. Other cabins had sun-heated water pipes on the roof, which gave enough hot water for two showers.



The caption on this undated post card reads, "Sequoia Trail, Mt. Hermon, Cal."

Mount Hermon's bohemian days, though tamed, were not entirely gone. A nearby San Lorenzo swimming hole was nicknamed "The Garden of Eden" because Mount Hermon boys swam there nude.

Renowned Santa Cruz artist Frank Heath, who later founded the Art League, built the art studio next to the auditorium to teach painting. And nationally recognized artist and teacher James Addicott established the Summer Institute of Mechanic Arts at the end of Sequoia Trail, in a grove called Seven Oaks Park. Here he taught metalwork, pottery, sculpture, woodworking, textiles and basketry. His curriculum for training teachers produced graduates of distinction. David Starr Jordan, founding president

of Stanford University, joined others in praising the school as one of the finest in the country.

The Mechanic Arts School has become today's Gar Dunsheath-Reyna art studio, which will be part of the Open Studios tour Saturday, Sunday and Oct. 22 and 23. It is at 21 Glen Alpine in Mount Hermon.

Sources

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