



Mary Porter Sesnon and the Magic of 'Pino Alto'

The palatial-country home that was celebrated by
artists, political figures, and other dignitaries

By Geoffrey Dunn

In January of 1910, a small notice appeared in the pages of the *Santa Cruz Evening News*, entitled "Beautiful New Home Planned." The article noted that San Francisco based financier William T. Sesnon, and his wife Mary Porter Sesnon, were in contract to build what would be dubbed in the press as their "palatial country home" on the grounds of the former Porter estate (and where Mary Porter Sesnon had been born and raised), located just east of Soquel, on a knoll with sweeping views of Monterey Bay.

(Above) Soquel pioneer Mary Porter Sesnon (left) with two friends while attending one of her lavish affairs, or salons, at Pino Alto.

By the spring of 1911, the construction was completed, and the Sesnons sent out invitations for an "informal housewarming," to their new summer estate, which was dubbed "Pino Alto," in honor of a tall and solitary pine tree that had been reportedly planted decades earlier by Mary's father, Benjamin F. Porter, on the grounds of his once thriving tannery and sprawling family estate (located both on and nearby what is today Cabrillo College).

The "informal" housewarming was a truly northern California affair, bringing artists, political figures, the state's business leaders and other dignitaries to the Sesnon summer home in Soquel. More than 300 visitors were in attendance.

During the week following the inaugural affair at Pino Alto, there were lengthy accounts of the celebrated gathering in the regional newspapers.

"The most notable social function in the history of Soquel was the magnificent reception given by Mr. and Mrs. Sesnon at their recently completed home," Grace Lee's "Social Chat" column in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* noted. "It is an epoch in the history of our town, and one of the most valuable assets of this locality."

The *Sentinel* also sent the celebrated writer and author Josephine Clifford McCrackin—the author of *Overland Tales* and *The Woman Who Lost Them*, as well as being a pillar of Bret Harte's distinguished staff at



(Above) Constructed in 1910, Pino Alto was dubbed in the press as a “palatial country home”. A decade later, with its lush landscaping established, the home was in all its glory.

Overland Monthly magazine—to cover the inaugural event in Soquel. McCrackin was lavish in her praise. She noted the beauty of the Pino Alto grounds and architecture, the cordiality of the host and hostess, and the performances of two celebrated San Francisco musicians performing at the event—European trained violinist Hother Wismer and the accomplished pianist Frederick Mauer—whom McCrackin noted, “were listened to with rapture.”

But the highlight of the afternoon, McCrackin asserted, occurred when three young children, one of them Sesnon’s daughter Katherine, “appeared on stage, charmingly costumed and executed the most graceful pas in a character dance taught by Mrs. Sesnon, which dance was a prelude, so to speak, to the appearance of Mrs. Sesnon, Terpsichore [the Greek muse of dance and song] herself. It was an entrancing sight, and people, without knowing it, crowded each other to get one last look. The applauding and positively wild cheering lasted even after the group had quit the stage.”

For most of the next two decades, the Sesnons would host lavish affairs, or salons, during the summer months at Pino Alto. And, as with the inaugural affair, Mary Porter Sesnon and her artistic sensibilities would assume center stage, both literally and figuratively, at all of these events.

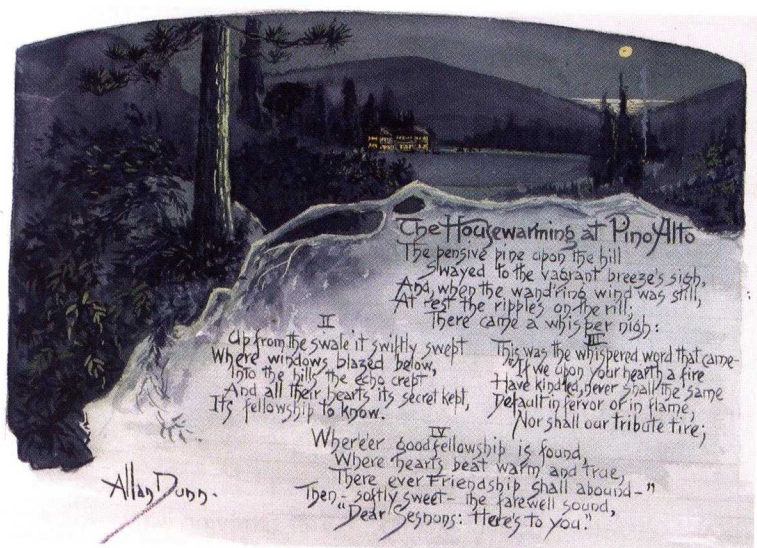


(Above) A group of more than 300 artists, political figures, the state’s business leaders and other dignitaries celebrated the “informal” housewarming to the Sesnon’s summer home.

The scion of one of Santa Cruz’s oldest and wealthiest families, Mary, or “May” as she was known to family and friends, was born in 1868 and raised on the family land, then located along the old Santa Cruz-Watsonville highway (today Soquel Drive). She was trained in the arts—music, dance and watercolor—and travelled extensively with her family, while her father, Benjamin F. Porter, expanded the family land holdings and business

activities to the far reaches of the state. Her father built her an art studio on the property that she always cherished.

Although the Porter name is literally omnipresent throughout Santa Cruz County—from UCSC, to Soquel, Cabrillo College and Watsonville—the family history is remarkably unknown in the region. The Porter legacy here actually stretches back to the Gold Rush Era, when a trio of Porter cousins—George



(Above) Pino Alto guest Alan Dunn, penned this poem and watercolor painting as a tribute to the Seshons and their magnificent housewarming.



(Above) A painting of Pino Alto created by Ferdinand Burgdorff, a prominent, early member of the Carmel Art Association, the second-oldest operating artists' cooperative in the United States.

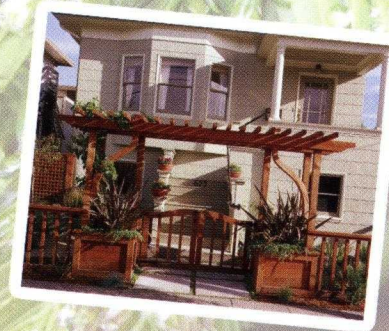
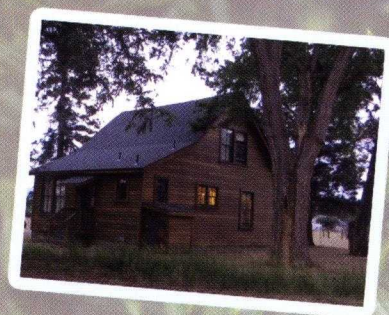
K., John T., and Edward F. "Ned" Porter—made their way from New England to Santa Cruz County and engaged in a wide array of entrepreneurial activities.

In 1854, another cousin, Benjamin Franklin Porter made his way to California by crossing the Isthmus of Panama on foot, before joining his protean family members in Soquel. Immediately upon his arrival, he became active in the local economy and, in the mid-1850s purchased the Soquel Tannery (along

with his cousin George and C.W. Moore).

In the autumn of 1867, Benjamin returned to New England, where he married his childhood family friend, Katè Hubbard. The couple returned to California, where they soon started a family. The couple's first—and only child to survive into the 20th Century—Mary Sophia "May" Porter was born in Soquel on October 9, 1868 (not 1869 as is recorded on her headstone). A sister, Sarah H. "Sadie," was born in February of 1871.

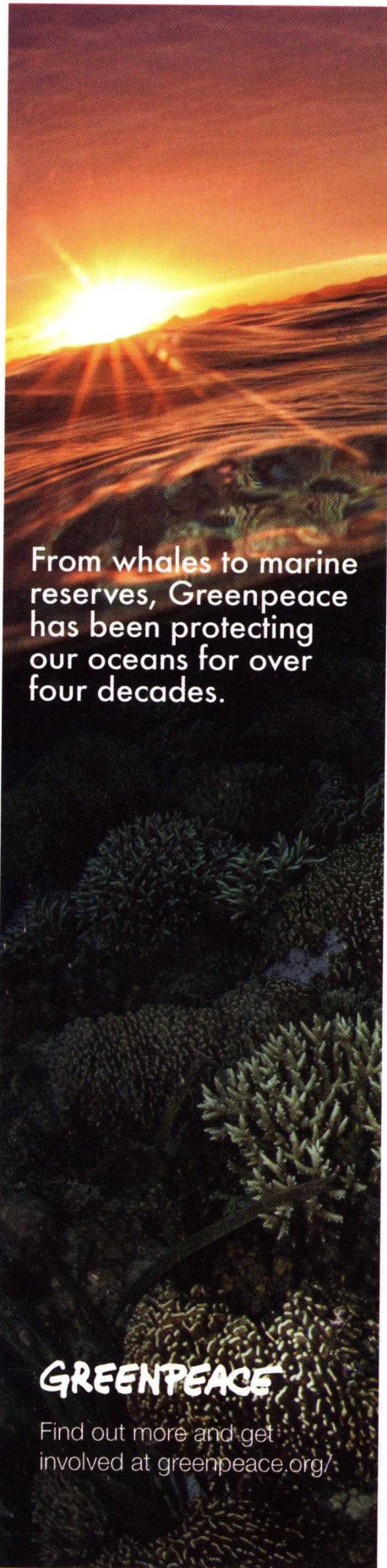
Big Creek Lumber
 Your local, sustainable lumber company. Visit Big Creek for your lumber and building materials needs.



Santa Cruz
 2801 Soquel Ave.
 (831) 477-1231

Watsonville
 1400 W. Beach St.
 (831) 722-7137

BIG CREEK
 LUMBER & BUILDING MATERIALS



From whales to marine reserves, Greenpeace has been protecting our oceans for over four decades.

GREENPEACE

Find out more and get involved at greenpeace.org/



Image: © Courtesy Porter-Sesnon Family

(Above) The only known image of Benjamin F. Porter's thriving estate, which featured his tannery, the area today is known as Porter Gulch or by some tannery gulch.

The two Porter girls were the darlings of Soquel and San Francisco. Then tragedy struck, when in 1895, shortly after a European tour, Sadie was struck with typhoid fever and died at the age of 24. Mary would be the lone descendant—and lone heir—of not only her father and mother's vast estate, but also of her Uncle Ned's, who also had extensive residential and commercial holdings in the Soquel township.

In 1896, Mary married William T. Sesnon, a native of Alameda, and a promising businessman and civic leader who had served as clerk of San Francisco County. William would expand the Porter family business and real estate holdings into successful oil ventures, manufacturing sites, and land development. The couple would have four children—Porter, Katherine, Barbara and William Jr.—who were raised spending their summers at the Pino Alto estate and were often involved in the various activities of the weekend celebrations.

When William Sr.'s health deteriorated in the late 1920s, the once thriving salons at Pino Alto came to an abrupt end. William died in 1929, and Mary passed away the following year. The property was eventually sold off, first to the Salesian order, before it was finally purchased by Cabrillo College in 1978, where it became known as the Sesnon House. The property was badly damaged during the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake (it was only a few miles from the epicenter) and was rebuilt to its present glory in the 1990s. Today the facility is used for college and community events, and serves as home to the Cabrillo College Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management Program.

Descendants of the Porter-Sesnon clan have also made large donations in honor of

their family at the University of California, Santa Cruz: Porter College is named after Benjamin Franklin Porter, while his daughter's love of art is memorialized at the Mary Porter Sesnon Gallery.

Award winning writer and filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn, Ph. D., is the author of Santa Cruz Is in the Heart, Volumes I & II. He is currently working on a third and concluding volume.

Special Events

'Mary Porter Sesnon & Pino Alto' Exhibit

An exhibition on the life and times of Mary Porter Sesnon
Thursday, April 12 to
Saturday, May 12, 2018
Mary Porter Sesnon Gallery
Porter College, UCSC

Opening Reception, Thursday, April 12,
5-7pm

Curator and alumni walkthrough
on April 28, 2-4 p.m.

Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 12-5 p.m.
Wednesday 12-8 p.m.

For more information: 831-459-3606

'State of Wonder'

Works by Mary Porter Sesnon's great-grand daughter, Molly Porter Cliff Hilts.
April 12, 2018 to May 12, 2018
Porter Faculty Gallery,
Porter College, UCSC

Opening Reception, Thursday, April 12,
5-7 p.m.

Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 12-5 p.m.
Wednesday 12-8 p.m.