

-HISTORY

Famous House on Beach Hill

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Major Frank McLaughlin's Santa Cruz mansion on Beach Hill now has a national reputation to live up to.

The spectacular structure was first recognized officially by the California Heritage Council in 1971, then by the State of California as a historic place. It now has been recognized by the Historical Preservation Section of the National Department of Parks and Recreation, and is officially listed in the National Registry of Historic Places.

This designation was made possible through the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Golden Gate Villa — that's what the tragic Major called his home. In later years it was named the Palais Monte Carlo and that name has stayed.

The owner today is Pat Wilkinson whose story in connection with the house is interesting too, and goes back to the Major's day, although it is not touched with the tragedy that ended the Major's story.

The old house seems to loom on Beach Hill like royalty of yesteryear, wearing its stained glass windows like royal jewels, imperious, impervious to the changes that go on at its feet, and always leaving its mark on those who love it.

Pat first visited the house as a child with her grandparents who were acquainted with the socially prominent McLaughlins,

and who paid formal calls there. She fell in love with the mansion then and there, she says, and "resolved to buy it some day."

In 1968 she did, and since has faithfully and painstakingly restored it to what it was when the Major lived there and entertained royalty. The house today contains apartments but with very few structural changes. And the important rooms are in their original condition.

The gold-plated chandelier still hangs in the elegant drawing room, fitted out for both gas and electricity as the Major had it. From the curving, sky-blue ceiling of the entry hall tiny gold stars still look down.

They looked down on Major McLaughlin's lifeless body in 1907 when he was carried out to a horse-drawn hearse, and on the lifeless form of his step-daughter Agnes when she was carried out.

It was the tragedy of the age as far as Santa Cruzans were concerned. Tongues wagged, heads shook and tears came into eyes that had formerly watched Agnes swish elegantly down the aisle at church on Sun-

days, and the Major dash about in the family's handsome coach drawn by a matched pair of black horses.

On November 17, 1907, two years to the day after the Major's wife died (November 17, 1905), he ended Agnes' life and his own. He went upstairs with his revolver and sent a bullet crashing into Agnes' brain as she slept. Then he sat down and drank his final cocktail — lemon juice and strychnine.

The Major's last words on earth were a telephoned farewell to his old friend, William Jeter, at a local bank.

Thus ended the career of the dashing bon vivant, friend of presidents, wheeler-dealer extraordinary, mining engineer and crack pistol shot.

It was the Major's career as promoter and engineer that brought the failure that plunged him into a deep depression. The death of his wife compounded his misery.

And the story goes back to 1879, to the Feather River Canyon and the mining town of Oroville. Major Frank

McLaughlin arrived there in June, smoking a large cigar, spending money lavishly and giving orders with the authority of one born to rule.

Gold mining had been lucrative along the Feather, and the Major got the brilliant (he thought) idea of diverting the river to get at the nuggets that should be lying in the river bed. It sounded good. Expensive and extensive operations were started with the building of a great flume, wall and a dam for the diversion, with a thousand men toiling at blasting and moving huge boulders.

The oldtimers sat back and watched with sly grins. They didn't bother to tell the Major that this very thing had been done 40 years before, by the 49ers.

The Major got financial backing from British investors, and his personal friend, Thomas Edison, came out to string up electric lights so work could go on around the clock. For four years, from 1892 to 1896, the work went on, and 12 million dollars were spent on it.

Pat Wilkinson, owner of the Palais Monte Carlo, in the drawing room. The gold plated chandelier shows in the picture, as does the onyx fireplace. At far left, a rare photo of Major McLaughlin.



Finally the great day came when the waters were diverted and the dry riverbed lay before the workers. Instead of gold nuggets for the picking up, there were old picks and shovels, buckets and odds and ends of the earlier mining operations. There also was several million dollars worth of gold, according to experts, but it was deep in the rocks and would have to be mined out. That would cost another bundle. With this dismal news, the whole project collapsed.

The investors were mad. They got even madder when they found that McLaughlin didn't have a cent invested in the fiasco — he had been on salary. And McLaughlin himself was crushed by the failure of his dream and the sting of ridicule from the oldtimers.

He ordered the flume, dam and wall blasted out of existence and the roar of the dynamite explosion shook the town of Oroville on November 1, 1897.



Rare photo of the house just after it was built, 1892. Painters and the Chinese cook, with Agnes' dog, posed in front.

Then he retired to his Santa Cruz mansion to brood. He actually entered politics and was asked to run for governor of the State of California, but turned it down. He was also offered a cabinet post by President McKinley but again

refused.

His wife died. The home that had been their pride must have seemed very lonely to him.

But most of all, he must have been haunted by the sound of laughter on the Feather — a reminder that

he had been had. It was too much for the Major.



Rear view of the mansion, as seen from downtown Santa Cruz. Elephant hide lines the walls of room with large window. The carriage house has its own tower and servants' rooms above. Stained glass windows in the house have been valued in five figures. The house is now on the National Registry.