

Vine Hill's Villa Fontenay Gives Way To Development

By RUBY DANIELS

What would you find today if you were to pass by Villa Fontenay, just off Highway 17, on Vine Hill Road?

You would see bulldozers scraping away at the hillsides; winches moving enormous trees, which until recently, comprised an 100 year old eucalyptus grove; and rows of construction stakes with their yellow flags whipping in the wind.

More important, is what you would not see. That is, the rich and varied history of this property, 250 acres, known as Villa Fontenay.

Hidden from the roads, nestled amongst the hills and trees, sits the Mel de Fontenay family house, more mansion than home, built in 1889 by Henri Mel de Fontenay, son of French emigrants. You can no longer hear the voices, as they once rang through the woods, of Henri and Nellie Mel's nine children. And though the old Vine Hill schoolhouse still stands within the Villa's gates, the bell no longer calls children to class.

On the hillsides a few scattered, long untended fruit trees and an occasional weathered grape stake are all that remain

of the once productive orchards and vineyards which the Mels developed. There is no clue as to where the old winery once stood.

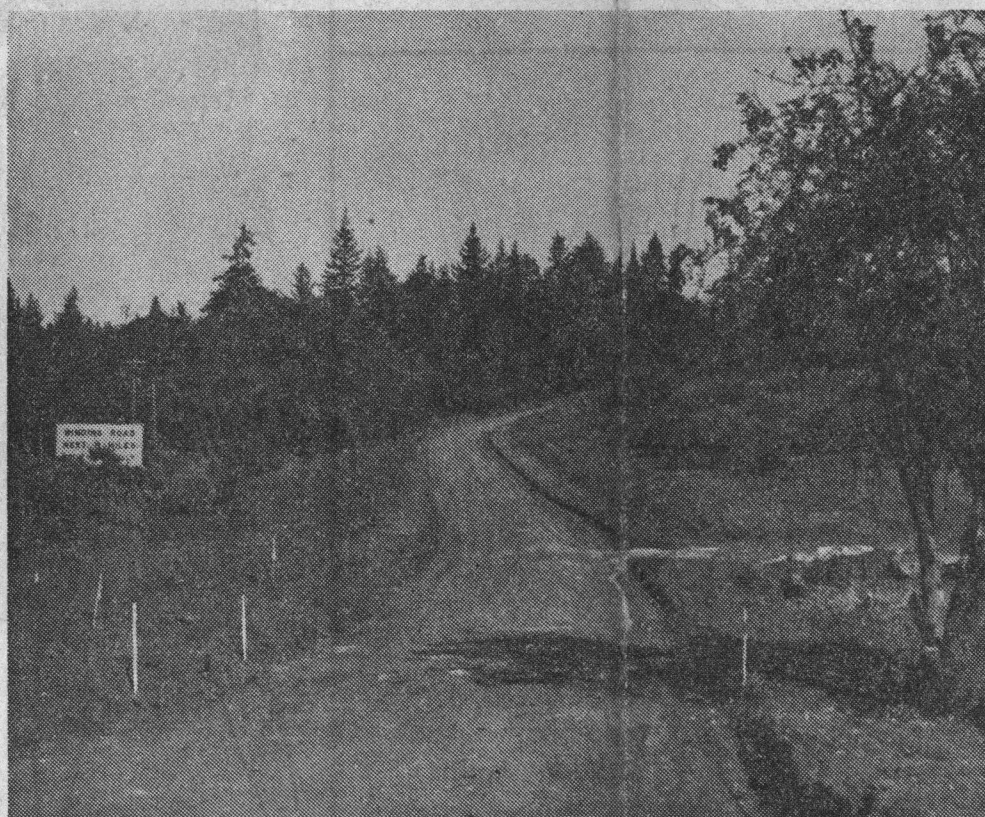
For 20 years the family struggled to retain ownership of their land. But by 1916 financial problems forced the Mel family to leave. It was their fervent hope to reclaim ownership of their beloved home.

Soon after the Mel's departure the property became known as Villa Fontenay, summer resort for fun-loving and affluent city folk. The old Southern Pacific Railroad, chugging through the mountains, brought laughing, carefree vacationers to Laurel and Glenwood stations. There they were met by the Villa's driver, and continued the last leg of their journey in a fringed surrey drawn by shiny ponies.

Long-time local resident, Jenny DeLucchi, remembers the Villa well. "As kids, my sister and I would ride over to the Villa to deliver grapes to the winery or visit the school teacher. We loved to watch as the surreys arrived with guests. There wasn't much entertainment then and we enjoyed seeing the fancy city ladies parading with their parasols."



The Villa Fontenay mansion off Vine Hill Road.



A new road is being cut up the hill off Highway 17.

caretaker, and forest creatures.

Then in 1975, two blazes (of unknown origin) destroyed the Villa's two smaller houses. The mansion and old schoolhouse were spared.

One year ago the Kulp harvested 20 per cent of the merchantable timber. Today bulldozers and caterpillars are planting roads where once redwoods stood.

According to Gerald Tucker, planner for the new develop-

ment, lots will be offered to the public in about one month.

"The three to five acre lots will sell in the range of \$60,000 per lot," says Tucker. He indicated buyers will probably be from the San Jose area.

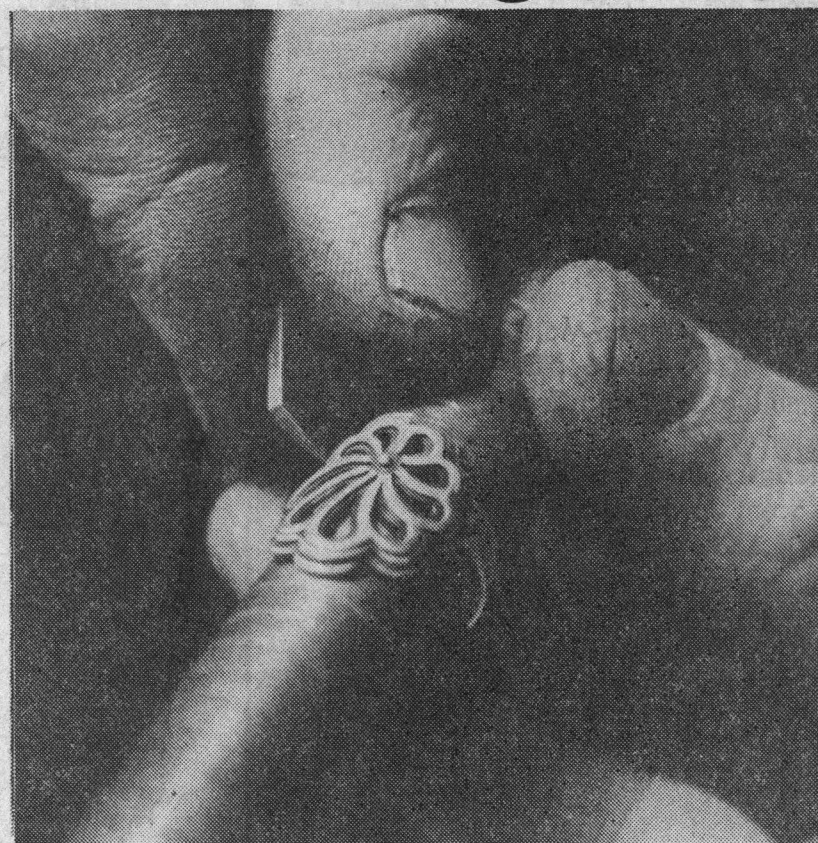
As for the old school and the mansion, both will be retained. Kulp states, "My husband and I plan to restore the old house and live there someday. It has sentimental value."

What do neighbors think of the changes? Neighbor June

Costa speaks candidly, "I used to ride horseback through the property, but not for a long while now. It's like a freeway and I hate to see so much timber down. I guess that's why I don't go there anymore."

With taxes high and land at a premium, development of Villa Fontenay and other similar property may be inevitable. But for those who have a love for history and an appreciation of the past, change is not without a certain sadness.

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During the 1920s the community often met in the old schoolhouse. On Saturday nights the little building shook

"There was the winery on the bottom; the next floor was for shuffleboard and other games; and on the top floor was the tenay. It became a dream of their grandchildren also, to reclaim their family's home."

HAPPY NEW YEAR

with music and dancing. Jenny says the Villa had its own, separate entertainment and was often rumored to be a speakeasy during Prohibition years.

Mrs. Fusari, neighbor to Villa Fontenay since 1914, recalls the Villa fondly. She smiles and says, "It was a beautiful resort. Besides the main house there were two other houses, built for guests, plus a cook house and barn. There was also a dance pavilion, for guests of the Villa only. "It was three stories tall," explains Mrs. Fusari;

and on the top floor was the dance hall." As for the school, Mrs. Fusari says, "Each of my four children attended the old school. When there weren't enough children to meet the quota (five) to keep the school open, I kept extra children at my house." Finally, despite efforts, the school closed.

Then came the Depression and the resort, Villa Fontenay, closed. The property was eventually purchased by the Leonards, both of whom were physicians. The dance pavilion was torn down and the Villa became a quiet, private estate.

Years later a variety of owners held the Villa for speculation. United Airline's Mainliner Club purchased it with the idea of developing a recreational area for club members.

The Villa changed hands again, this time to developers planning to turn the property into a high density trailer park. Plans were thwarted when requirements for a cloverleaf exit from Highway 17, and city-style water system made development too impractical.

Over the years Henri and Nellie Mel's children brought their families to visit Villa Fon-

ten. In 1972, Dorothy Mel Kulp, Henri's granddaughter, acquired the land. For several years the property lay quiet, inhabited only by the

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ed Chicken.

