

HOLLYWOOD in the HILLS



The Brassfield home is reminiscent of old California with the one-story center portion made of adobe. In the foreground is the Brassfield's master bedroom, which opens to a sun deck.

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Couple offers a glimpse of Alfred Hitchcock's
old home that they restored with loving care

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Santa Cruz County

✓ It's hard for me not to wonder what Alfred Hitchcock must have thought about this steep, curving driveway that leads up to his former home near Scotts Valley.

The mile-long road is toothpick thin and clings to the mountain like a desperate woman. In fact, there are spots where it seems like my car tires might slip right off the edge of the road, sending me and the car plunging into the vineyard of brilliant-green pinot noir and pinot grigio grapes below.

Hitchcock, the master of suspense, probably would have appreciated the fact my palms were sweaty by the time I got to his house.

"We have people who don't want to visit, because the road is so narrow," admits Bob Brassfield, who now owns the house outside of Scotts Valley with his wife, Judy.

"You get used to it after awhile," he says.

The Brassfields recently opened the old Hitchcock home to the Sentinel, giving the first glimpse of the life the Oscar-winning film director had on a hilltop that was once called Heart O' The Mountain.

It's a glimpse into a world of old elegance, soft silence, bright sunlight — and a few secrets.

It is also a look at how the Brassfields have made the home their own retreat and are reviving a piece of the land's pre-Hitchcock history.

Vertigo

I wonder how Hitchcock must have felt driving up this serpentine road, which skirts gnarled oaks and crosses over a narrow, wood bridge before it reaches the house's two high gates.

But it turns out he never did.

Hitchcock rarely drove, remembers his granddaughter, La Selva Beach resident Tere Carubba, who spent summers at the home.

It's because the director of spine-tingling movies like "Psycho" and "The Birds," had an

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an inspiration for Hitchcock films

Santa Cruz County was reportedly the inspiration for three of Alfred Hitchcock's films.

In 1941, he used the north coast of Santa Cruz for an English coastline in "Suspicion."

In the 1960 film, "Psycho," Hitchcock is reported to have used the dilapidated Hotel McCrary (now Sunshine Villa) on Beach Hill with its nearby hotel as inspiration.

The design of the mansion, however, looked exactly like the decayed Bernheim House that stood at the corner of Broadway and Ocean Street, reports historian Eric Ross Gibson.

And while filming his 1963 film, "The Birds," crazed sooty shearwaters — high on some ocean neurotoxin — crashed into homes and cars from Pleasure Point to Rio del Mar, prompting Hitchcock to call the Santa Cruz Sentinel, according to television columnist Ron Miller.

Hitchcock had Miller read him the Sentinel coverage — including a report of a man who took refuge in a phone booth.

— Peggy Townsend



Contributed photo

Alfred Hitchcock chats with Grace Kelly, the princess of Monaco, while Alma Hitchcock and Prince Rainier look on at the house.



Judy and Bob Brassfield sit in the same spot as Hitchcock and his royal visitors, beneath a mosaic of the Immaculate Conception.

Hitchcock: Director bought Scotts Valley villa for \$40,000

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intense fear of — the police.

When Hitchcock was a boy, according to Carrubba, his father had a constable throw the boy in a jail cell to teach him a lesson after he did something wrong.

Hitchcock never forgot that time behind bars and so refused to drive because he worried he might be stopped and arrested, Carrubba says.

Instead, he would let his wife, Alma, guide their car up the narrow, then-gravel driveway. Or, when they would fly into San Francisco, a chauffeur would pilot a black limousine up the steep hill.

It was a good thing, Carrubba says.

The few times Hitchcock got behind the wheel, he was a terrible driver.

The driveway, I think, is probably one of the reasons the Hitchcocks bought the remote nine-room Spanish-style adobe and surrounding 200 acres for \$40,000 in August 1940.

It gave them the privacy they sought when they came to get away from the hubbub of Hollywood.

It's also the reason Brassfields didn't have much competition when they went to buy the home in 1978.

"You have to be a little adventurous to go up the road here," Bob Brassfield says.

The first home

The former Hitchcock home nests near the top of a 1,490-foot mountain peak. It is white with a red-tile roof and looks a little like a villa in Spain. I imagine that is how Bruce Cornwall might have thought of the place when he built the original adobe in 1930.

Bruce's father, Pierre Cornwall — a member of the first state Legislature — had purchased this manzanita- and redwood-studded property in 1881, paying \$500 for 85 acres he planned to use as a weekend retreat, according to a history Bruce wrote of the land.

Pierre built a two-story Victorian home, which still sits partway down the hill. It was, said Bruce, a "haven of rest and quiet."

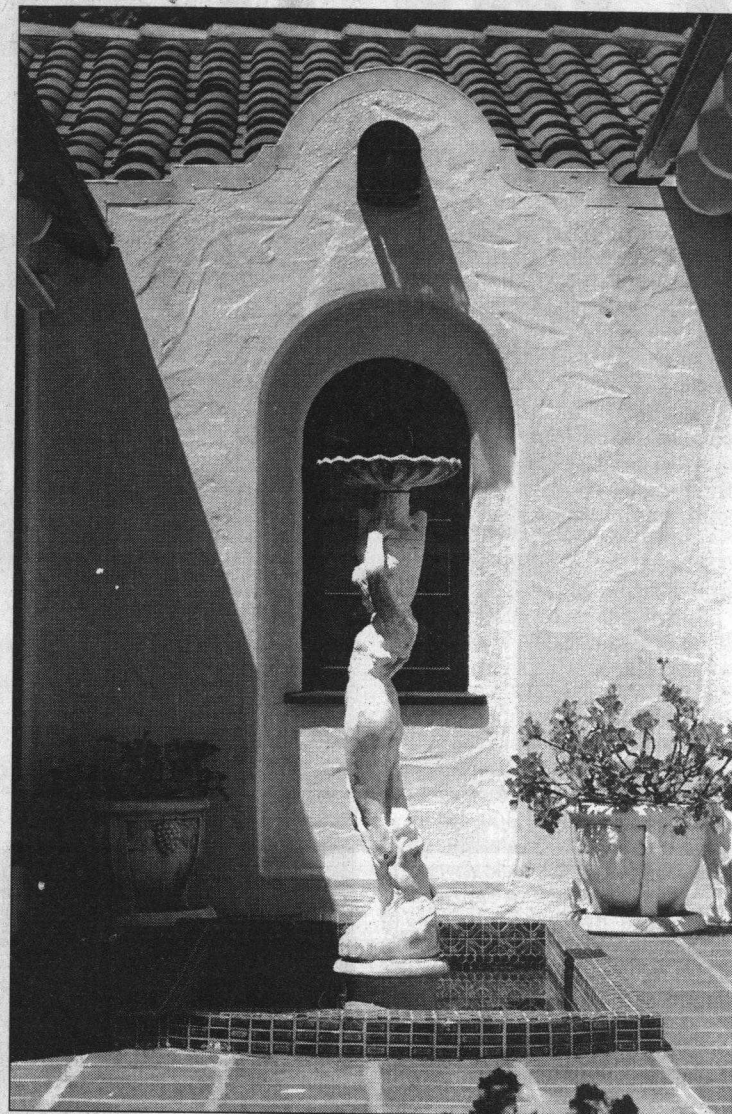
Starting in 1884, Bruce began buying up other parcels of land in the area, eventually owning 200 acres around his sunny home, calling the estate Heart O' the Mountain.

Ten years after he built his home in 1930, the Hitchcocks arrived. They bought the house in



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

This large marble tub with crystal chandelier is the centerpiece of the Brassfields' master bath.



Delights for the eye pop up throughout the Brassfield property. This small courtyard is off the solarium.



August 1940, after paying a visit to the parents of Joan Fontaine, who had starred in Hitchcock's Oscar-winning film, "Rebecca."

Hitchcock loved Northern California, especially cosmopolitan San Francisco, Carrubba says. "He felt really comfortable there."

When the Hitchcocks mentioned they were looking for a country home, the Fontaines, who lived in Los Gatos, suggested the Vine Hill area of Scotts Valley.

The \$40,000 price tag for the ranch included three cows, one horse, 30 chickens and a farmhouse with a caretaker, according to a history by Marion Pokriots.

But the Hitchcocks needed more than nine rooms and began renovating the house, adding a glassed-in "outdoor dining room" with a heated floor, a solarium and bedroom suites for the royalty and Hollywood stars who would eventually come to visit.

Their last time at the ranch was in 1972, before Alma suffered a stroke.

By the time the Brassfields came to the property, however, gardens were overgrown, the house was musty and furnished in a dark, 1940s style and the driveway needed to be repaved, they said.

They never planned to buy it. They were living in Switzerland, Bob says, where he worked for GNLD, a direct-marketing nutritional supplement company founded by his brother. His brother called and told him there was a house he should look at in Scotts Valley.

"He said, 'If you don't buy it, I will,'" says Bob, sitting in the dappled shade of one of the house's outdoor patios.

So he and Judy came over to take a look.

"I liked the quiet," Judy says. "It was the beauty that overwhelmed me."

In 1978, the Brassfields bought the now 155-acre property for \$800,000 and set to work restoring the home, which now measures about 10,000 square feet. It has five bedrooms — four of them suites with their own fireplaces — and six and a half baths.

There is a pool house, a solarium, a wine cellar and a tower room.

"Would you like to see it?" they ask.

"Of course," I say.

Peace-filled place

It's hard not to imagine Ingrid Bergman prowling through the house or Prince Rainier sitting in the living room as the Brassfields lead me into the house, which is cool in a summer heat that reaches almost 90 degrees.

The floor in the old adobe portion of the house is covered with a

The Brassfields replaced the Hitchcocks' stainless steel counter tops with tile. The view out the window is to a brick patio and redwoods.

smooth dark-red tile and Bob pulls back a window curtain to reveal the two-foot thick walls.

In Hitchcock's day, the small formal living room was dotted with paintings by famous 20th century artists and furniture by designer Paul Frankel, according to historian Ross Eric Gibson.

Judy has picked out furniture that is both formal and friendly. The plush couches make me want to plop down and read a good book, which is what Hitchcock like to do, Carrubba says. He also loved classical music and had an extensive record collection.

The house is calm. Restful. Judy heads into the solarium, an inviting, windowed room with views down to the Monterey Bay. Judy says it's her favorite room. It was Hitchcock's, too, according to Carrubba.

But on this day, it's hothouse hot, so Judy and Bob step through it into a room they turned into master bedroom, which opens onto a sun deck. The walls are sponge-painted a butter-yellow and cream — to keep the Mediterranean feel of the home, Judy says.

But off the other side of the solarium is the room I wanted to see.

It is large and dim, with a view of a courtyard studded with lemon and grapefruit trees. Bob steps inside, swinging the thick wood door closed behind him.

"Look here," he says and points out three large interior locks.

Most of the windows are covered with wrought-iron grills.

There was even an underground phone line that was once connected directly to the sheriff's department.

"We think this was the Hitchcocks' bedroom," Bob says.

Locks and bars

Much has been made of Hitchcock's fearful nature, but the bars and locks on his bedroom were apparently the product of a practical, not a paranoid, mind.

"They'd get a lot of curious people climbing through the hills to try to find the house," Carrubba says. They were thrill-seekers who treated the Hitchcock home like a ghost house, daring each other to go up there.

It would make her grandmother nervous when she would be up there alone, or with her grandchildren, which is why the locks and bars were installed.

"For them, it (the trespassers) became overwhelming" Carrubba says. "It was scary for them because they were so isolated."

I follow the Brassfields to the front door, which was said to be

made out of an old wine cask. Bob stops to show me a symbol that resembles a swastika embossed in the tile floor.

It's a Hindu sign meaning peace, or good luck, according to Bob.

Some people take it the wrong way, he says.

Judy and Bob point out the hand-hewn redwood beams in the house, which were covered with stucco until they sandblasted them clean. Then, some of the bathrooms where they have left the old, '40s-style seafoam green tile. The restoration was done carefully, keeping the old-world feel of the rooms.

The bedrooms are large, each with a fireplace and their own bath. Even as I walk through them, I wonder where Jimmy Stewart or Kim Novak might have slept when they visited here.

But one of my favorite rooms — besides the Brassfields' master bedroom and gorgeous marble bath — is Hitchcock's old tower room. It has a miniature fireplace, a ceiling as high and pointed as a clown's cap and an narrow outdoor stairway that looks like it came straight from a Greek fishing village.

The house is a maze of stairways, nooks and crannies, and little verandahs, each with a eye-catching views — a glimpse of sun, a stone bench, of citrus trees. The kind of snapshot-glimpses you might see in a movie to set a mood or tell a story.

For a moment, I can't figure which way leads downstairs.

Judy smiles.

When their youngest child was 3, he would sometimes run, confused, to Judy.

"Mom, mom," he would cry. "Where's the front door."

Stars are out

Judy and Bob are dressed in jeans. The Hitchcocks were much more formal.

Hitchcock wore a suit nearly all the time, says Carrubba. At the ranch, he would sometimes wear a short-sleeved shirt — but always buttoned to the top.

Actress Pat Hitchcock, the Hitchcocks' only child, remembers wonderful summers riding her horse on the ranch and driving to the Watsonville airport to pick up her father when he was in the middle of one of his films.

Carrubba spent some of her summers here, too: playing badminton, picking strawberries with her grandmother and sometimes driving into town with her for ice cream.

And Hitchcock was a wonderful

grandfather, she says, — funny, attentive, kind — even though he reportedly professed that one of his fears besides heights, was "small children."

One Christmas, says Carrubba, he donned a red robe and a fake beard and pretended to be Santa Claus.

"It was quite humorous," Carrubba said.

Bob and Judy shake their heads when I ask about parties here. They are more private and family oriented, they say. Entertaining was mostly school pool parties when their kids were young and now visits by their nine grandchildren.

Not the Hitchcocks.

One of Hitchcock's biographers described lush meals and fine wines at the home, noting that cocktail hour was usually 90 minutes long, with Hitchcock declaring that a martini was "simply two parts gin to one short glance at a bottle of vermouth."

Actor Hume Cronyn, who spent a weekend at the house, remembered how Hitchcock would take "a marvelous, malicious delight in seeing his guests fall apart with all those vintage wines and liquor he'd force," according to reports.

Both Hitchcock and his wife were wonderful cooks, often retreating to the kitchen with its stainless steel counters and industrial-size stainless steel sink to make meals — even though they had a cook, according to their daughter.

The Brassfields have replaced the kitchen's stainless steel countertops with cafe au lait-colored tiles and rich wood, but they kept the original stove: a big, propane-gas-powered O'Keefe and Merritt.

Out the window are gardens that now require two gardeners that come three days a week to keep up.

We head outside.

Great outdoors

The Hitchcocks surrounded their home with gardens designed in meticulous detail by the late Roy Rydell, an artist and landscape designer who had a hand in how Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz looked before the earthquake of 1989.

When the Brassfields came, there were a lot of overgrown and dying plants, they said. They hired their own designer who kept some of the oleander and pyracanthus, but added a Mediterranean style. A huge jasmine scents the entryway to the garden.

I ask about the famous rose garden where Hitchcock had a 12-foot mosaic of two peace doves done by

The formal dining room is saved for holidays and special occasions. The Brassfields lead an informal life.

George Braque, the father of Cubism, and Judy and Bob lead the way.

The spot where it once hung on a rock wall is a pale square. Hitchcock had white roses here, but the garden has been replanted dozens of times. Poor drainage and overhanging olive trees make the roses die, Judy says.

We head over to a beautiful walkway covered in ancient wisteria that leads to a sparkling pool and a long pool house that the Brassfields added.

I ask about the old mosaic of the Immaculate Conception on a wall on the shady side of the house. I've seen a photograph of the Hitchcocks sitting with Princess Grace and Prince Rainier right in this spot.

Bob and Judy sit on the shaded bench under the mosaic.

I can almost imagine Hitchcock sitting in a suit beside them.

Memories

There are lots of memories of Hitchcock at the house, but there are Brassfield memories, too — their kids growing up, the grandchildren swarming over the house for a visit, evening wine on the patio.

The son of a Dust Bowl immigrant who worked as a migrant laborer, Bob is retired, but says he still likes to work the land.

He has a 400-acre ranch in Quincy where he raises 200 head of Black Angus beef selling the meat under the Thompson Valley Natural Grass-Fed Beef Label.

And now he has his vineyard.

He replanted pinot grigio and pinot noir grapes on 3½ acres in 2002.

The soil is sand and shale — good for growing grapes, he says.

When Pierre Cornwall settled on the land, he planted grapes and made wine. His son, Bruce, did the same, producing a wine named Santa Sada, which he named after his second wife.

Hitchcock, who loved wine, grew grapes, too, according to his daughter.

Bob hopes some day to bottle his own wine — one son, Dustin, runs his own winery, High Valley Vineyards in Lake County — and he's already registered the name.

It's "Heart O' the Mountain," he says.

Just like it was in the old days.

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