

Pino Alto: County Home of the William T. Sesnon Family

By Josephine Clifford McCrackin

To hesitate, is to be lost. I wanted to claim that this beautiful home belonged to Santa Cruz; hesitated a moment, and then decided to tell the truth.

Pino Alto is only a short distance from Santa Cruz, and was built where Mrs. Sesnon had passed her childhood days, near Soquel, where every other building, and especially the library, is a memorial of the B. F. Porter family. So that Mrs. Sesnon, member of the great Porter family, really belongs to us, here, while Mr. Sesnon belongs to California. Now more than ever, since he has from the very beginning been connected with the Panama-International Exposition, and is its vice-president, having at the same time interests so large in Santa Cruz and many other places in California that, strictly speaking, he belongs to California.

And California exacts her tribute, gladly paid by this representative family, in whom and through whom some of the best traits of the "early Californian" still live. Hospitality, dispensed on the grand scale of the olden day, and also the love for grand surroundings that distinguished the Spanish Californian of long ago. The grandeur of surroundings has become artistic in its features; the love of entertaining on a grand scale has not grown less. The very house expresses it. A great, large, wide-spreading mansion, unique in architecture, built of concrete, the walls, where they are visible, a light cream color, the finishing in seal brown. A structure built to enjoy life in, though its balconies, porches, colonnades, verandas, are a constant temptation to enjoy life outside. A house harking back to aristocratic old Spain, in its balconies above the front entrance, where the wide glass doors are covered with the grille in metal, as seen in pictures of Spanish cloisters, and where a row of columns guards the vestibule.



One of the approaches to the main entrance. Photograph by W.H. Sherer.

This is the first impression as you enter the gateway and linger a moment beneath the mighty branches of the towering pine that lends name and majesty to this most magnificent country home. Trees of more select lineage, but of more recent growth, surround this mighty monarch who disdains to claim a Latin name, and pretends to be only a pine, of such great size and height that the Spanish Californians called it Pino Alto, the high pine.

Even as you pass between the massive gate columns, entering from the highway, your eyes are dazzled by great masses, and clumps, and groups of flowers; an array of color that is bewildering, for it takes possession of your senses at once, and you do not realize at first sight the grace and originality with which these brilliant children of Flora are disposed on lawns, and massed at points where paths diverge, the spikes and clusters of the blue delphinium formosum of the gold and scarlet gladiola, the white and purple of the aster, lure one into branching walks across the grounds, every walk

leading to some new surprise, some vista that grandly unfolds before you. For you do not dream, while still in the shadow of the tall pine and the surrounding trees, under which lilies of the valley and dark blue violets are sheltered, that when your lingering steps have carried you around the west front of the house where massive columns supporting a deep, cool veranda make this a Southern home, you will see the ocean glinting in the sunlight, the Bay of Monterey, rather, and across in the distance see the mountains, Gabilan Peak, where Fremont once was camped, and the Santa Lucia chain farther south.

You are standing on the lawn now, the lawn that stretches down from this front, which is the lanai porch, a rotunda, the roof of which is a grand observatory. If this porch gives a touch of sunny, slumbrous, far-off Hawaii to the place, the colonnade stretching away from here, has Italian atmosphere, while across from here, where the pergola ends, a great deep bay window, belonging to a conservatory which is also breakfast room, is most decidedly English. And yet the house in spite of its contradictions of tiled roof and balconies, of Southern veranda and lanai porch, is Californian, pure and simple, by this one token: the vines that climb up every pillar and cling to every column; the flowers that droop from balcony and roof, fiery in color as was the blood of the old Spaniards, and, most convincingly, the masses of hydrangea, of the rose-pink so seldom seen in this flower, so rare in the Eastern States and so dearly loved in California. There are hundreds of them here; on every porch, in every veranda, with clusters that would challenge the admiration of the most blasé Easterner.

But there are more surprises in store for us; from the entrance on the west, the veranda with the Southern air, we look down on a chain of lakes, a graceful, pretty bridge thrown across, the ground terraced all around and planted to shrubs and flowers. From the lanai porch we look upon a forest of Monterey pines, a flower-covered trellis fence enclosing it. This is the grill, famous as all and every part of this estate. Last year the representatives of sixteen chambers of commerce from Southern and Eastern States were entertained here, and many distinguished guests have been here since. The grill is a brick oven, and on the coals are roasted whole lambs and fresh-caught ocean fish; and Spanish beans are baked and enchiladas served, and everything that culinary heart could wish for here prepared set before the guests on great, long tables spread under the umbrageous trees, and surrounded by comfortable seats.

And now, if we can leave these flowers and vines, we would be permitted to look within the walls of this most wonderful house. But look at these vines! The scarlet of the clematis and the orange of the begonia, and the wealth of foliage almost hide these columns on the south, while the more delicate tracery of the ampelopsis marks other pillars. Clematis, with great white stars for blossoms, and again the clusters of soft blue plumbago capensis. Passion vines and sollya, and wistarias and bougainvillea, and never a full look at any of them because there are such distracting flowers growing near by. Dahlias that might rob the robe of its queen-title for brilliancy of color, bordering on the extravagant; gladiola of a deep, rich purple never seen before; the scarlet of the Alaska daisy, vying with the crimson and silver of the fuchsia; and the shrubbery you pass through on the way to the lakes, dentzias, weigelia, broom and heather, holly and myrtle, sometimes surprises you by casting up great blue eyes, for the Japanese morning glory is apt to stray away from its keeper and seek fresh fields and pastures new, a coquettish thing with never admiration enough.

But the morning is slipping away, and we enter the main hall of the mansion through the doors with the metal grille over the glass, in the Spanish front of the house, and at once we are in Old England; a manor house, this, of perhaps the Elizabethan period, the broad, dark staircase rising in majestic leisure to the upper story. Here it lands in a wide gallery, the balustrade of the same dark wood, and when you open one of the dark doors, you look into a bright, light, sunny English bedroom, every bit of the furnishing and finishing in white, only the walls are covered with roses, fresh pink, English roses, and a garland of them running along under the plafond.

It is not right to ascend these stairs first, but they looked so stately and inviting, and English. But here, to the foot of the stairs, ends the English domain. This is the Orient we are entering now, India, China and Japan. Whence came this huge gong-bell at the entrance door, priceless and unique; you might search throughout the China of to-day and never find its duplicate. And when you have seen and admired the treasures wrought in bronze, in brass, in gold and in copper, that furnish and adorn the state dining hall in this home of oriental treasures, you will say with me that the productions of

modern art would lose in dignity when compared with these bits rescued from wreck and decadence of Oriental civilization. These things were not bought up wholesale and smuggled across the ocean; each of those heavy hanging-lanterns, bronze and with gold finish, above the teak-wood dining table, has its history, and wherever you see suspended one of the smaller metal and bronze-wrought lanterns, you may be sure that "thereby hangs a tale."

All the furniture in this Oriental dining hall is made of teak-wood; chairs, tables, altar-tables, ancient as they are priceless; yet every piece as subduedly glowing as it was in its earliest period of existence, brasses, embroideries and sculptures, or rather carvings. Some of the rugs are of later origin, strictly copied after ancient patterns, which are not in the thousand colors which the salesman will assure you are the true Oriental colors. Here are the blue Chinese dragons bordering a large square of dull yellow; and the weavings throughout are in subdued colors. In short, the patience with which the possessors of these treasures have hunted them up piece-meal, and have had them restored in the true spirit to their original form, is as marvelous as was the art and the skill that produced the works.

One of the charms of the Pino Alto mansion consists of its being a home; and no matter how large the household gathered there on occasion may be, whether only family members or distinguished friends, let it be five or fifty, it is always home, from the grand music room with the beautiful stage attached to the "den" which is both fumoir and lounging room. The long flight of rooms on the lanai side of the hall, open into each other, making a vista of rare beauty, and another contrast in this house of contradictions in harmony; for while the gloxinias from the conservatory send out their glow of color, the painting above the mantle of the generous fireplace in the music room shows the wind tearing at the storm-beaten pines of Monterey coast, bleak and cold. The work of an artist of wider renown than of this coast, and a wide, deep, well cushioned lounge ever holds a number of admirers, especially when in the cooler months a wood fire throws its cheerful rays clear over to where, around the piano, are gathered amateur performers on all the instruments that make up an orchestra. Ofttimes they are not amateur performers who "only play for fun;" histrionic celebrities have considered it a distinction to appear on this well-appointed stage, and musicians of high rank have sent vocal and instrumental notes aloft to the beamed ceiling of the music room in the grand Pino Alto mansion.

Sources

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