

Ca' di Sopra

"House Above the Clouds"

History

"Another resident who divided his time between Montecito and Lake Forest was Robert G. McGann. Born in Pennsylvania in 1867, he worked for a manufacturer of heavy machinery in Chicago in 1898 but soon established his own plant in York, Pennsylvania. The venture was successful and McGann retired shortly after World War I. His wife, Grace, was the sister of Rose Chatfield-Taylor; undoubtedly one family influenced the other to come to California.

The McGanns leased The Peppers during the winter of 1916 and then returned to their Lake Forest home in the summer. In September of that year, with the closing of escrow, C.F. Eaton transferred six acres at the end of Palm Avenue (Cold Springs Road) to Robert McGann. As before, the McGanns occupied The Peppers during the early months of 1917, and on March 9th, they hosted an elaborate costume ball for Queen Mary's Guild to raise funds for soldiers' hospitals in Europe. The highlight of the party was an exhibition dance given by Martha Graham, a student of Ruth St. Dennis.

Around the time of the party, McGann let a contract to Snook and Kenyon to construct his house following the plans prepared by Guy Lowell, a famous Boston architect. Lowell designed many impressive civic buildings, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and courthouses in New York and Portland, Maine. His plans for the residences numbered scarcely more than a handful and were all located close to the ocean; the McGann house was the only example of his work on the Pacific Coast. Guy Lowell spent many winters in Italy and his designs reflected his strong interest in the architecture of the country. The McGann house was called Ca' di Sopra, in marked contrast with Fairlawn, the name of their home in Lake Forest which was rebuilt in 1920 after a destructive fire the previous summer.

The McGanns lived quietly in Montecito. Grace McGann died in March of 1949 and Robert died four years later. The estate was sold to H.J. Chisholm in January 1955 for \$31,500 who in turn sold the property to Philip de Beixedon in September 1956. The new owner installed an interior swimming pool under part of the house which necessitated jackhammers carving hole in solid rocks.

The six acres were divided between the land underlying the main house, guest house and garage by the road and the shelf of land down below along Cold Springs Creek.

The two sections were separated by a steep hillside and the de Beixedons' gardeners built a trail down to the shelf and cleared the extensive growth of poison oak on the flat. The de Beixedons also envisioned installing a funicular between the main house to the flat below, but their attention became concentrated on the Surprise, their new yacht, and the cable car was forgotten.

History (cont.)

After being on the market for some time, Ca' di Sopra was sold to George Harold and Leila Y. Mathers in the summer of 1964. For a number of years, they had been in the retail shoe trade in Pasadena until good fortune made them immensely wealthy, although their modest conduct belied this fact. Mrs. Mathers' aunt had been Charles W. Post's nurse and later his wife.

C.W. Post, the cereal manufacturer, came to Santa Barbara for the winters from 1912 until 1914 in an effort to improve his health. During his first year, there was almost no rain in Santa Barbara, so he offered to donate 3,000 pounds of dynamite for blasting to bring rain. However, before arrangements could be made, heavy rains commenced, and after five inches were recorded in the first 10 days in March, people wanted to "call off the rain gods." But it kept on raining and over nine inches were recorded that month.

That fall there was little rain, and it was feared that 1913 would be another dry year. But, just as Post arrived in Santa Barbara, the beautiful rains commenced and continued into February. The year 1914 began with storms and floods. Post died that year in his Santa Barbara home on Bath Street.

His estate included an interest in his company, other securities and some barren land in the Texas Panhandle; later that worthless land became a bonanza with the discovery of oil!

When the Mathers' became rich, they found people constantly on their doorstep with outstretched hands, so they chose to move to Montecito for a more peaceful life. Harold Mathers' main interests were croquet and vintage automobiles; he drove his 1934 Rolls Royce around Montecito. They did indulge themselves by installing a funicular linking the porch of the main house with the lower ground area which was used for picnics. The electric-powered cable incline is almost 300 feet long, and the sole passenger car bears the number "7," said to be adopted from a similarly numbered car in Naples.

Harold died in 1976, and his wife died four years later having been bedridden most of the intervening years. As they had no children, they quietly established their own foundation which has assets approaching \$80 Million of which \$6.5 Million went to St. Francis Hospital for a surgical wing. Another \$100,000 rehabilitated the little train at the zoo at the Child's Estate. Even during their interregnum years, the St. Francis Hospital staff was pleasantly surprised to receive unannounced checks from the Mathers' for as much as \$100,000.

The Mathers' property was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Rovsek in 1983/1984. The Rovseks lived there until 1995 when a subsequent buyer, Mr. Robert Woolf, purchased the property. The current owners of Ca' di Sopra bought the property in 2002 and completed their restoration in 2006."

Source: Montecito and Santa Barbara Volume II: The Days of the Great Estates, pages: 439-441

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