

The Hidden Oaks Story Formerly “El Rancho Grande”

By Don Clucas and Ron Graff

History of the Property

Like the rest of Southern California, the land was first populated by local Indians. During the period of Spanish colonization, missions and ranchos were built. Once Mexico gained independence from Spain large portions of land were granted to privileged individuals. Rancho Cucamonga was one of these land grants.

After California became one of the states of the United States in 1850, the rancho era came to a close, and people were allowed to buy smaller portions of lands. They tended to group together in colonies. In 1887 portions of two of these, called the Hermosa tract and the Iowa tract were combined to form the community of Ioamosa.

When the Pacific Electric Railway reached the area in 1913 the town became known as Alta Loma (“High Hill”).

By this time citrus orchards were very prevalent in the area. The Citrus growers represented a unique agricultural society that was neither rural nor urban. These growers were very influential in the development of the area.

Ernest Goerlitz, the manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York, moved to this area, and in 1910 he bought a home on Hellman Avenue, now known as the Goerlitz House. Mr. Goerlitz served on the committee which brought the Pacific Electric Railroad to the area. He was also secretary of the Citizen’s League. He died in 1916.

By 1914 the community was known as Alta Loma. The name of the person who proposed “Alta Loma” seems to have been lost to history.

In 1926 Goerlitz’ son, Herbert, purchased the 10 acre citrus grove at the top of Ramona Ave., not far from the heart of the town. With the help of Charles Stoebe and his sons, enough river rock was brought onto the property to build the house with concrete and rock walls that were more than a foot thick. The building’s rare architectural style is known as “Mission Revival Style.” (Some call it “Spanish Colonial Revival,” “Cobblestone Craftsman Mission” or “Craftsman/California Rancho” architecture). There was a small reservoir on the property that was emptied periodically to water the citrus trees.

In 1934 the house was sold to Ellen C. Van Every (Edwin and Ellen Loeb family). They expanded the size of the house, skillfully matching materials and craftsmanship.

In the 1950's Don and Myrta (Olmsted) Crilly bought the house. Previously, in 1932, Myrta had been crowned queen of the Rose Parade. The Crillys planted rose bushes and made other improvements. They converted the reservoir to a swimming pool. In those days the property was called "Rancho del Paseo."

In the 1970's Richard and Freida Wilkins acquired the property. They used it as a wedding facility. They called it "El Rancho Grande." Hundreds of couples were married there during the next two decades.

As the 210 Freeway was nearing construction, the last portion to be developed was directly behind this property, and, of course, behind Solid Ground Brethren In Christ Church where the Alta Loma Channel was buried 40 feet below ground!

The Goerlitz site was one of the properties identified in 1996 by the State Historical Preservation Office (SHIPO), to receive protection during the building of the 210 Freeway. A preservation plan was devised that would place a road through the church's property. Over the course of the next several years, negotiations were carried on, resulting in the acquisition of the property by the church.

On August 20th, 2003, The City of Rancho Cucamonga declared the land and buildings to be an historical site. Later they also approved our new master plan which allows for future expansion of the facilities.

Years before this time, Charles and Kathryn Engle, who had been missionaries to India, and were charter members of the church, left a financial gift for the purpose of helping to build a multi-purpose building. Their family decided that the restoration of the building was a worthy project in keeping with their parents' wishes. In that way, the Lord had not only given us the property, but had also arranged for it to be repaired and put into His service!

Reconstruction of the Building

During the years of negotiations with Cal Trans, Sanbag and the City of Rancho Cucamonga, Gary Ramseyer, Chairman of our Building Committee, had developed accurate estimates of what it would cost to make the building usable again. Professional estimates for a complete restoration were more than double the amount that was available to us, but the Church Board agreed that we could at least develop the first phase of the retreat center, so permission was granted to go ahead.

By careful use of the funds, and with the help of many willing volunteers, the church was able to do much more with the property than they had originally planned, including seismic retrofitting, a massive and labor-intensive process. They decided to demolish one unusable restroom and build two in its place. The entire roof was removed, all necessary

wood was replaced, and new roof tile was installed. There were also upgrades to the original plan by covering the entire floor with ceramic tile. Upgrades to the kitchen were adopted. A portion of the southerly wall was removed to allow for the growth of a giant oak tree, and to restore some of the original south patio. Every wire and pipe in the building was replaced. The original sconces were rebuilt. ADA restroom, ramps and rails were installed. All the doors were replaced with elegant replicas of the time period. Everything was sandblasted, painted, and improved. New lights were installed. In essence, everything they would have wanted in a full restoration was accomplished, and more!

The Charles and Kathryn Engle Story

Charles and Kathryn Engle had illustrious careers as missionaries to difficult parts of India and Nepal. Kathryn had also served in Africa before Charles and she were married. They learned the language, and lived like the people they came to serve. Charles' limited training in medicine allowed him to serve in the U.S. Army during the First World War as a non-combatant in the base hospital at Fort Riley, Kansas. He later used that experience to provide the only medical assistance to a great number of very needy Indian people. Together they won the hearts of the people and shared the Gospel with a great number of people.

Upon mandatory retirement, the Engles moved back to Upland where they had a very small house. They lived there for decades, and Charles found a job selling patio covers. The owners were reluctant to hire him, but he worked the first month for free, and then became their star salesman for the next 20 years! They continued to live a very simple lifestyle, and saved all of their money so that it could be used to build projects in India.

They were charter members of the new church plant, Alta Loma Brethren In Christ Church (now known as Solid Ground Brethren In Christ Church), and were tireless in their efforts to make new friends and support the church in every way. They left a gift to the Church when they went to be with the Lord (Charles was almost 102 years old, and Kathryn, who was about 10 years younger lived a few more years.) It was this fund that made it possible to restore the building. It was dedicated to their memory and is now known as "Engle Hall."

Plans for Hidden Oaks

Solid Ground Church has had a ministry plan for the property for many years. We believe the Lord has given us this incredible gift to be a spiritual retreat center. As such, it will serve our church needs for planning conferences and special social events. Various ministries of the church will be encouraged to use the facility for "something special" from time to time.

It will be a place for spiritual growth: a center of focus on discipleship, missions, and prayer.

It provides the meeting place for spiritual retreats, and Christian conferences, serving the needs of the whole Christian community.

It is an ideal setting for Christian weddings, receptions, and special banquets.

Eventually we plan to develop the whole area into a Biblical Botanical Garden. We have the same climate as the Holy Land, so this is a natural possibility.

We will also make the facilities available to the community and civic organizations on occasion, thus strengthening our bonds with our neighbors.

References:

Special report by Donald L. Clucas on “El Rancho Grande.”, 2003

Report from the Historic American Buildings Survey about the Herbert and Evelyn Goerlitz House, Approx. 1997.

History of Rancho Cucamonga

<http://www.ci.rancho-cucamonga.ca.us/history.htm>

Report from the Historic American Buildings Survey about the Herbert and Evelyn Goerlitz House, Approx. 1997.