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March, 1987

THE EARLY HISTORY OF 1116 CARMELINA AVENUE
IN BRENTWOOD HEIGHTS

Introduction

Early in 1912 my parents, Walter L. Armacost and Anna Shirey Armacost, together with me and my sister Elizabeth, ages three and two, moved into a new home in Sawtelle (now West Los Angeles). The newly built two-bedroom, one-bathroom California bungalow was at the southwest corner of what is now Armacost Avenue and La Grange and adjoined the new flower nursery, then called Walter Armacost and Co., and which later, in 1923, was incorporated under the name of Armacost and Royston. My sisters Helen and Marietta were born in this house in 1912 and 1919. Our mother died in the home in 1925.

In spite of several additions, the home was too crowded for our household: my father, four children and a housekeeper and her husband. We dreamed of a modern home which would give us more room.

Early Plans

My diary entry for May 1, 1927 reads: "Dad is thinking of buying 5 lots making an acre, near Wellesley, north of Wilshire, for a new home!"

Four years later we moved into our dream house - July 3, 1931.

The Setting

The center of the property was the lower part of Kenter Canyon, which carries flood water down from the Santa Monica Mountains after flowing under the Brentwood golf course. This natural gully carries water into a storm drain which runs below Wilshire Boulevard and eventually to the ocean.

This ^{stream} gully (or arroyo) south of the golf course was (and still is) lined with large western sycamores. Before we built on the property the canyon bottom was covered with a thick growth of such European weeds as wild mustard, wild radish, wild oats and goosefoot.

In 1927 Carmelina Avenue had not yet been built. Centinela Avenue to the west had very few houses and there were very few houses on the water-tower-topped hill on Berkeley. This hill was originally known as Mount Olivette and later Brentwood Knoll. We usually called it the Berkeley hill or the Water tower hill.

The first house built on the hill was at 927 Berkeley, as a home for Bert Hunnicutt of the Butterbaugh-Hunnicutt Land Co., which once owned all the land between 26th Street in Santa Monica and Bundy Drive, from Wilshire to Montana.

A feature of this sparsely settled area was a peculiar bird, the roadrunner (paisano to the Mexicans), which I often saw glide down from our homesite into the lower canyon.

Problems

Several problems faced us in building the new home: (1) Need to buy more land to complete the property, (2) getting Carmelina paved, (3) getting utilities: water, gas, electricity, sewer, (4) grading the property, (5) establishing trees and shrubs in spite of innumerable gophers, (6) interruptions due to my father's need to take extensive selling trips to the East coast, (7) arranging financing in the early days of the "Great Depression".

The Architect

My father wanted the home to be built in a simple "Mexican farmhouse style". He chose John Byers, the well known Santa Monica architect, who both drew the plans and supervised construction. (Accompanying this history are special notes on John Byers.)

In the early 1940's my father engaged Ralph D. Cornell, the dean of Southern California Landscape architects, to design the brick wall on Carmelina and the brick construction on the east side of the house, down slope from the garage, where we formerly had a chicken yard. Mr. Cornell, who died in 1972, was the prime landscape architect for both the UCLA and Pomona College campuses.

Names for 1116

In the early days we called the homesite either "The Farm" or "The Lots". When we moved in and since then we have called it "Carmelina". But in the early 1930's my father proposed calling it Los Alisos, the Spanish for "The Sycamores". In the letters he sent me from his Eastern trips he often referred to our home as "My Insanity", because of the extreme delight he took in its development and in the ever-changing challenges of the landscape plan.

Landscape Plans

Planting was done at least two years before house construction, so that we could move in with already established trees, shrubs and colorful smaller plants. Additional sycamores were brought in for the canyon area and for the rear of the house. Near the house the olive, the Canary Island Pine and the Blue Atlas Cedar were featured trees. Toward Wilshire, near Carmelina Avenue, we put in Italian Stone Pines and Aleppo Pines. On the steep banks on both sides of the arroyo we put in California native shrubs such as holly, lemonade berry (a sumac), laurel sumac, sugar bush (a sumac), and wild lilac, also such Mediterranean plants as cork oak and holly oak, also a few acacias and red-flowered eucalyptus.

The rarest tree on the property was a Lace-Bark Pine (Pinus bungeana). I had seen this white-barked pine in Peking, China in 1930. I sent to Denmark for seed. These were grown at the nursery, and one of these trees was planted downslope from the southeast corner of the house.

My father wanted to attract birds, and so he planned what he called "a bird tangle" to give protection to small birds from cats. One important spring shrub used was Nevin's barberry - *endanger* a rare native - also, as I recall, there were pyracanthas, which are very spiny. We had a problem with cats coming in to stalk and eat birds. We took some cats out of circulation by catching them in box traps and taking them to the humane department.

The bank below the house was planted thickly with South African daisies and such bulbs as narcissus, iris, freesias, muscari. The bulbs were planted in masses or drifts. My father's technique was to roll the bulbs down the slope and then plant them wherever they lodged along the way down. This gave an informal distribution of radiant color. Several California live oak trees were planted near the flat "meadow" below.

I personally planted at least one half of all the trees and shrubs on the property and in my spare time would water them and trap gophers. I remember making a list of all the kinds of plants in the garden, and, as I recall, the list included about 200 species.

Questions

I wish that I knew the answers to the following questions:

(1) From whom did my father buy the property? And at what price? (\$6,800 + ?)

(2) What was the cost of the construction of the house, of the grading and sprinkling system in the garden, of the Carmelina Avenue paving, and of the installation of utilities - and of the architect's fees?

(3) I know that my father sold the property to Mr. Austin Barnard - was it in early 1946? I wonder how much Mr. Barnard paid for it. My wife recalls that for a while it was advertised for \$25,000. A March 15, 1948 ad in the paper lists it at \$65,000 and describes it as a British Farm House! (which surprises me).

(4) I lived at Carmelina until I got married in 1937. At that time the postal address was Brentwood Heights. When was the address changed to Los Angeles?

Detailed Chronology

In the following pages I give excerpts either from my diary or from letters written to me by my father while he was on eastern trips or from West Los Angeles to me while I was away at college.

June 16, 1927. Dad has definitely decided to buy "our farm" near Wellesly. 4 lots. \$6,800.

June 30, 1927. Up at 6:40. Dad & I went up to "the farm" to cut weeds under the big lower sycamore tree. [He was 49 years old. I was 19 and in Pomona College.]

July 11, 1927. To "farm" to cut weeds under sycamore.

July 9, 1927. Up at 5 A.M. Went to "farm" with Dad & drove stakes to mark places for trees.

July 4, 1928. Dad & I worked on the lots this morning.

August 29, 1928. I worked in the cyclamen house at the nursery all day. I watered at the lots in full moonlight.

October 18, 1928. [Letter] I have a Mexican leveling the manure up at the lots. Some little job! They are surveying the storm drain. It will take out some of the recently planted trees.

November 5, 1928. [Letter] I have just engaged a Mexican to plow the lots. It is clear that we can't do much with the streambed until there is a drain in the bottom. This last rain carried away the planks which spanned the creek. - and cut into some of the banks. The gopher killed the cork oak on top of the slope. There seem to be a lot of them. That will be a good pastime for you during Christmas vacation.

November 26, 1928. [Letter] We caught the gopher at the foot of the oak - not a big one, but pretty wise. Alfonso caught 2 this morning but I think there are literally dozens of them on top of the hill. - probably come in from the neighborhood to take

advantage of easy digging. Got my bill for surveying this morning. \$35, part of the high cost of finding out where our lines & boundaries are.

August 30, 1929. [From Albany, N. Y.] Hope you get some time to run up our water bill at the lots - and to slay the festive gopher. They are plenty bad critters.

September 30, 1929. [Letter] It's going to cost a lot to landscape that place like I would like to do it, but it need not all be done at once.

November 8, 1929. [Letter] The gophers got the cork oak along the sidewalk on the McClellan side. Also one of our biggest redwoods, which is a worse loss. A couple of Cedrus deodaras also seem to have their tap roots cut. Hope it soon rains. Catching gophers will be easier then. The proceedings for paving Carmelina seem to be stepping up. And we ought to see work in progress by the first of the year. Allowing for rainy spells, 60 days ought to be sufficient to complete the job. I figure that our bill for paving Carmelina will be \$1,500, maybe even more.

Late November (11/29) 1929. [Letter] After Thanksgiving dinner we visited the lots. All growing well, especially pines. Alfonso Parga has been watering once a week. The gophers killed our best eucalyptus in spite of the fact that Alfonso killed 6 last week. I have a dozen new traps & I will have them set Monday. [We used "box traps".]

December 24, 1929. [Letter] The contract will soon be let for street work. Once the grading is done I can get some mechanical watering and so save time and do a better job. Building materials prices are down now and this would be good time to build if our street work were only through.

Early January, 1930. [Letter] Street contract is let and the steam shovel is on the ground. Contractor expects to finish in about 6 weeks. Mr. Byers is now drawing detailed plans and specifications for the house.

January 26, 1930. [Letter] We finally caught the gopher which worked so much havoc among the trees. He was a big one. We finally discovered what killed the trees in the East corner of the property on McClellan. - a break in a gas main. I guess I will make the gas co. replace the trees. The steam shovel chugs away & the fill is progressing rapidly. I hope to get going on building in spring or early summer, but, of course, business conditions will have a bearing on the situation.

February 3, 1930. [Letter] I have had a 3 foot corrugated drain pipe put in as far as the upper sycamore and this will take care of a major part of the water. As it was, the water was cutting away some of our best oaks. We have caught every gopher - but more will come in, of course.

April, 1930. [Letter] I planted a lot more sycamores. Shall we call the place Alisos or something like that? The gophers continue to bow to the skill of Jiménez who cuts weeds, waters, & traps.

The grading of Carmelina is finished. The sewer, gas & water lines are to go in in advance of the paving.

May 2, 1930. [Letter] If the street work is finished next week I will plant on the big fill [= steep bank on Carmelina side by big sycamore]. I'm thinking it will all be sumac, wild cherry, wild lilac, holly - and such subjects with an oak or two and a few sycamores on the shelf.

The house plans are in shape & I'm working on financial plans.

May, 1930. [Letter] I've been up against one or two things lately - on the house building.
1st No gas main was laid in the street before it was paved. It will cost \$1,250 to lay them as far as the homesite, as the pavement must be dug up. The alternate plan would be to run across the lots from McClellan, which would cost plenty.

*2nd A restriction on the property (contained in an old deed) provides a 40 foot set-back from the street. Furthermore, all houses must face the street. This will call for some modifications of plans - and more expense, as it will call for more walls. I don't plan to build until the Fall.

Plants are doing well and I'm sure that we will have a unique and beautiful place, especially if we can get the additional bluff property [on the McClellan side - northeast corner]. Guess we can buy it but it will cost three times what it is worth. Still, if one wants a thing he has to pay the price or leave it. 5th Lot

May 31, 1930. [Letter] I worked all day at the lots. I put in 2 Sequoia gigantea, 1 Japanese Cedar, 1 Incense Cedar, 1 Matilija poppy, 3 wild lilacs and about 4 doz. barberries for our "bird tangle". We lost a few plants from one gallon cans this spring - mostly greasewood & such things. One Madroño died, but the others seem to be growing. I thought I was going to lose all the manzanitas but all will live. protected

We will have a tree surgeon work on the old sycamores. They are not thriving as they should, and heroic measures will be necessary. The old trunks get full of borers & fungus - and after they are cleared out they take on a new lease on life.

June 26, 1930. [Letter] Doing quite a bit of work, tree doctoring, tree planting, grading, etc.

August 23, 1930. [Letter] We now have the rear end of the lots we want [to add to the property]. We lost 3 or 4 flowering eucalyptus as they are on blue gum stock which is too fast for Eucalyptus ficifolia.

October 14, 1930. [Letter from Philadelphia] Of things Californian I am missing "my insanity" the most.

May 12, 1931. [Letter] [About the new house] Shutters are to be green with quite a bit of yellow in the green to give it the tone of the sycamore leaf. Roof is to be treated with bleaching oil which will bring out the color of the sycamore trunks. ---- I want the whole thing to melt into the landscape.

References

Accompanying this account are some clippings which refer to Carmelina and to John Byers, the architect.

I recommend the 1983 booklet by James W. Lunsford, entitled Looking at Santa Monica. Pages 66 and 67 deal with the nearby Franklin Hill area. The index references to homes and other buildings built by John Byers is incomplete. A complete list should include pages 5, 8, 58, 60, 62, 70, 72, 73, 78.

The Leslie Storrs column on John Byers mentions Elliott Welsh.

Mr. Welsh lives at 818 26th Street, Santa Monica - Phone 828-2019. He told me some time ago that he used to work as a draughtsman for Edla Muir, who was an associate of John Byers. Elliott Welsh has photographs of most of the John Byers houses and has gathered a great deal of information about them.

Additional note: The storm drain which my father installed before we completed the house was far too small. The present "Kenter Canyon" storm drain which is buried underneath the arroyo was built by the City or County - but I don't know what the date was for its construction.

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Pico

Kenter drain

3' corrugated under property

Byers

storm drain 1169 McCallan

high water divert