Malibu 90265

Chapter 3: The Visionary Rindges

by Taylor Coffman

FREDERICK HASTINGS RINDGE, born in 1857, was an heir to eastern family wealth, a man who made as effective use of his fortune out west as anyone could have in his day. He wasn't quite thirty-five when he acquired Rancho Malibu in 1892 from Matthew Keller's son, a providential windfall if ever there was one. Talk about embracing the California dream—with open arms! Rindge's wife was in her late twenties then. This early start behooved the couple, for both were destined to be highly productive movers and shakers in most unusual ways.

Alas, Mr. Rindge died young. He was only forty-seven at the time, in 1905. Yet he'd already done much through philanthropy in his hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he'd gone to Harvard, and through his California business interests, based in downtown Los Angeles. His foremost legacy, at least as regards Malibu, is the book he privately published in 1898; it was almost festively entitled *Happy Days in Southern California*. Rindge could indeed be a happy man, as the book shows, and as the sublime Malibu he knew would have made others feel had they, too, been imbued with the place's rare charms. But Rindge was also a serious man, in fact a deeply devout man, even a godly one as some have said; and that side of him likewise pervades the book, as though it were a hymnal.

The biographical details found amid Rindge's ponderings and rhapsodizing are the lasting strength of *Happy Days* all these years later, as in this passage:

> When first I sought a country home I told a friend I wished to find a farm near the ocean, and under the lee of the mountains; with a trout brook, wild trees, a lake, good soil, and excellent climate, one not too hot in summer. To this hope my good wife demurred, saying, "You ask too much." Such, however, was the picture of an ideal farm which came to my mind. But my friend said, "I know such a place, I think, but I would like to refresh an old memory and see it again." So he went, and came back to me, reporting it just as he had thought, and that it was for sale. Well, we went to see it; sure enough, there was the hope realized, the mental picture portrayed in reality. So we [Rindge and his wife] bought it. God, in his goodness, had brought me to just my ideal farm.

Rindge's next line needs no explanation, no qualification for anyone who's seen Malibu on a fine day and who recalls its magical effect: "I have grown to love this land." Parallels can be drawn between him and a man close to his age, William Randolph Hearst, another Harvard alum who in his case became a newspaper titan. The Hearst family's ranch holdings, three counties up the coast in the San Simeon area toward Big Sur, inspired equally impassioned words from W. R., as Hearst was becoming known. They've been quoted several times, as originally directed at his mother, the philanthropist and culture maven Phoebe Apperson Hearst.

Another passage of Mr. Rindge's was quoted by W. W. Robinson; this appeared in the classic book he co-authored with Larry Powell in 1958, *The Malibu:*

> This coast offers inducements for the building of a road well-nigh equal to Italy's famous Cornice Road. If Ocean Avenue were extended from Santa Monica to Hueneme, the days of coaching would come back.

Ridge knew about Ocean Avenue because of his home at the north end of that Santa Monica street, overlooking the very spot where W. R. Hearst would start building his grandiose Beach House in 1926. The Rindges' home was older, dating from the 1890s. It provided a commodious place "in town," closer to the family's Los Angeles lifeline.

As for the coaching Rindge envisioned for the Malibu shoreline, it would eventually come to pass, of course, though not in such genteel fashion.

Before the Roosevelt Highway opened in 1929, the County of Los Angeles built a dirt road, extending well into the western reaches of Malibu. This was in 1921. Visible in old photographs, the road steered clear of the ocean and, instead, snaked through the foothills and canyons well behind the water's edge. Two of Malibu's foremost historians, the late Thomas Doyle and the younger Ronald Rindge, have newly documented the county road of that period, better than ever before. Their book is *Malibu Rails and Roads: A Photographic Journey Across Rancho Topanga-Malibu-Sequit* (2012). But there'd been an even older road, privately built a good while before the county one following on the heels of World War I.

AND THUS BACK to the earlier part of the matchless Rindge era. The book by Robinson and Powell includes a chapter headed "A New Englander Becomes a Ranchero." The man in question, of course, was the Harvard-educated Frederick Hastings Rindge. Will Robinson (who wrote the first half of *The Malibu*) was steeped in regional history and was always graceful with the pen. Given the scarcity today of his and Powell's book, some further excerpts are called for here lest they be lost or forgotten; Robinson excelled at these:

> Of the valley of the Malibu Canyon where he built the ranch house, he said it appeared 'as if the mountains had stepped back to give us space for our home.' To enter this valley or any part of the rancho by wagon or buggy he had first to build a road from Santa Monica. It was a patchwork job for use only at low tide and with due observance of tide tables. A day was required for the trip from Santa Monica by wagon. In the canyon itself and two thirds of the way up the canyon road there was a sharp turn. Suddenly, as he wrote years later [in *Happy Days*], 'away

> down beneath you were the buildings, and orchards, and children, and chickens.'

In other words, Mr. Rindge had found the perfect spot for his family's Malibu home. Unfortunately, it burned down as soon as 1903, destroyed by one of the catastrophic fires that will always haunt the pages of Malibu history. The Rindges had led an idyllic life until the fire of '03, whereby Will Robinson had more to say in his "New Englander" chapter:

> The Rindges plowed the fertile valley land and saw [sowed] their own waving fields of glistening grain. They extended their cattle interests and, in Zuma Canyon, added to the corrals and buildings which the Kellers had put up [shortly before the Rindge era]. In fact there were two ranch headquarters, one in the Malibu Canyon and one in Zuma Canyon. More roads were laid out—and the narrow beach road from Santa Monica to the rancho's edge at Las Flores Canyon was continually being improved. Dams were constructed. The lemon grove was productive and its fruit was hauled to the Colegrove station (now in Hollywood) for shipment. The Rindges became self-sufficing and when they sat down in the ranch home to a well-supplied table they could realize that all on the board came from their own 'farm.'

Robinson also wrote about an important part of Malibu life, a component of local culture that goes back to the Rindges and, no less so, all the way back to the Tapias:

> There were rodeos on the Malibu during the Rindge ownership. Fifteen mounted men—vaqueros, part of them *Californios* [native Hispanics]—would meet at the ranch on the designated morning, would go forth over the slopes and valleys of a 20-mile area, hunting for cattle. 'When the sun has well warmed the hills, the cattle can be seen from every direction [recounted Mr. Rindge in *Happy Days*]. They are all driven together in a great band and halted on a level plain. Then the men ride in and cut out the cows that have the calves"—to brand and earmark them.

Routine stuff, the roundup details themselves. They could have been written about many a grazing tract in rural California, not just of old Rancho Malibu. It's the part about rodeos that still resonates today with many residents of the greater area, on both sides of the Santa Monicas. Percy Meek, for example, better known as Perc (like "perk"), was a member of the extended Decker family. He was long the most renowned of all Malibu horsemen, headquartered at Circle X Ranch near Old Boney. Perc died in 1971.

Will Robinson had still more history to tell in his never-tiring way. But the world should be left to savor his words firsthand, not only in these "New Englander" pages about the Rindges but in six other chapters as well from back in 1958. His and Powell's book begs to be reprinted for a later audience, that is, more than half a century after its debut in that idyllic year.

FREDERICK RINDGE'S WIFE, May, had grown to love Malibu as much as he had. Hers was a long but very active widowhood, lasting nearly forty years (she died at seventy-six in 1941). In fact, her accomplishments and, surely, her conflicts and controversies have enshrined her more vividly than Mr. Rindge in local annals. First there was the Hueneme, Malibu and Port Los Angeles Railway (not Railroad, as it's sometimes spelled). Hueneme, an old Chumash name, bespoke a small coastal landing near Oxnard, the same place her husband mentioned; Los Angeles alluded not to the city but to the full-fledged Port of Los Angeles, near San Pedro. Originally this shrewd, ambitious railroad scheme was a brainchild of Frederick Rindge, aimed at Malibu's sanctity, at its bucolic destiny, a venture that his widow launched and then carried out from 1905 through 1908.

It was a railroad that "starts nowhere and ends nowhere," carped a Ventura newspaper of the period. Yet it was a project that managed

to produce fifteen miles of track from Las Flores Canyon, past Malibu Lagoon and the troublesome Ramirez Canyon (whose outfall became Paradise Cove), and on past Zuma and Trancas to present-day Broad Beach. There the work ended. The rails were full-size, standard gauge at that, not the more typical narrow-gauge answer to localized or rural efforts. With enough marine-terrace ground at her disposal, Mrs. Rindge could have kept going as far west as Arroyo Sequit or even Little Sycamore Canyon before she stopped. Broad Beach, however, remained the railroad's terminus.

Few traces exist today of her unusual creation. But the rails served their purpose: that of guarding Malibu from the intrusive designs of the hardboiled giant called the Southern Pacific, which cast its evil eyes on Malibu as early as 1904. If the SP could lay tracks along the virgin coast in the Point Conception district of Santa Barbara County (over a Mexican land grant and its adjoining Spanish land concession), it could surely do the same in Malibu. Even the impassibility of the six long miles from Little Sycamore, Bass Rock, and Big Sycamore up to Point Mugu wouldn't stop the Southern Pacific. Nor would the steep, darkly imposing cliffs near Latigo Canyon. Some extra dynamite and daredevil laborers were all the infamous "Octopus" would need. What the Rindges had to do was to pre-empt that ravenous power. In other words, their venture had to be first in line, had to get a decisive jump on the competition, making it the exclusive railroad in Malibu by the State of California's reckoning, thus barring anyone else from invading the field. And so it came to pass. In the course of these maneuvers, trespassing of any kind, for any reason, became a vile word in the Rindge lexicon. Guns were known to blaze, antique style.

May Rindge dug in for a more concerted effort and a longer fight, again for Malibu's sanctity yet waged over a different road: the common paved variety that would bring the masses streaming in,

should the State prevail (which it did). She spent her first of countless dollars in attorneys' fees while the Hueneme, Malibu and Port Los Angeles tracks were still being laid. From that moment in 1907 until 1929, when "Portland Cement Concrete" was finally poured for the outlying miles of highway as far west as Point Mugu (instead of lowly asphalt), the hearings, injunctions, court orders, and other actions, both legal and home brewed, became so involved that no one but Mrs. Rindge herself could grasp them all. Unbending will, she was credited with having. That and the most steadfast courage, always for the sake of Rancho Malibu and her dear husband's memory. And above all, sheer *determination*.

Mrs. Rindge's greatest monument to herself wasn't the improbable railroad that pushed westward. Nor was it the Malibu Potteries, established east of the Malibu Pier but mostly destroyed by fire in 1931. And neither was it her part in the Adamson House on Vaquero Hill at Malibu Point, built by one of her daughters and a son-in-law, carefully preserved now by the California State Parks. No, Laudamus Hill, May Rindge's mansion that would later become the Serra Retreat in the very heart of Malibu, was the closest she came to sainthood. "Laudamus" is Latin, fittingly enough, as in *Te Deum laudamus:* "Thee, O God, we praise." The mansion has been likened to Hearst Castle, San Simeon. In reality, Mrs. Rindge's efforts were a far cry from those of W. R. Hearst, who was one year older. She had glazed tiles aplenty, yes, but not much else; her legal fees alone were enough to make her a minor presence in the world of collecting and the stately architecture to match. Whereas Hearst made merry for years with the art market in Manhattan (his longtime home), and whereas he also followed the international shopping contests with as much vengeance as May Rindge trained on Malibu gate crashers, she figured quietly in the high-stakes game that her San Simeon counterpart loved to play. The comparison remains tempting all the same: the peaceful

shrine on the hill, with its entrancing views seaward and back toward the mountains—a mini-Hearst Castle, it can justly be called.

WHEREIN, THEN, the rightful legacy of the "Queen of Malibu"? What epitomizes her lasting importance and that of her husband, who departed so early? It's the simple fact of time, relentless time: time and its erosion of life, as though we mortals were but rocks being washed down Malibu Creek, reduced to sand in the process. Which is to say the Rindges stopped the clock cold, especially May Rindge herself. Had it not been for her and Mr. Rindge, Malibu would have entered the twentieth century like virtually every other part of coastal California, ripe for as much exploitation as the presence of water and other basic resources would permit. It wouldn't have been pretty. Rather than there being one elongated town, today's greater Malibu of 90265, there would almost certainly be four or five towns, maybe more, all with their own names—and probably with their own ZIP codes (not to mention political agendas). Some would no doubt be incorporated, others not. Reeves Templeman, the longtime editor-publisher of *The Malibu Times*, mined this vein in 1972 by writing about "segmented interests." Segmented to say the least. Discordant, balkanized, and even fractious might be more like it.

The scenic unity of the area would still exist, yet that might be the limit. The lay of things from Santa Monica out through Pacific Palisades to Castellammare and Sunset Mesa, as described in the introduction, would be the norm, not the rare departure. Over those six or seven miles alone, at least four ZIP codes apply today.

There'd be one town at the mouth of Topanga Canyon, another by Las Flores, certainly one in the "Malibu, Malibu" heartland. And so on up the coast, clear through Zuma-Trancas and out past Broad Beach to the wild and woolly far west, ultimately as far removed as Point Mugu

and whatever settlements had managed to take hold nearby. Disunity would have been the nature of such development, if that's the right term—not the uncommon cohesion that makes the land of 90265 what it remains, a place still resistant to the intrusions of the twenty-first century. But by no means an oblivious place. No, Malibu has long been challenged and its populace very well knows it. The enormous city of Los Angeles is practically next door, as everyone can see, always keeping envious watch.

More than any other person, any other entity, May Rindge was an emphatic force of nature, one almost divinely empowered to bequeath Malibu to posterity. But as for money or other material assets, she hadn't much to her queenly name by 1941. She'd already spent millions in her ceaseless efforts to keep Malibu pure and intact. What she left behind instead was miles of coastline and hinterland that, even when her life ended, had historically been held in defiant trust, suspended in the rarest of time warps. Without the Rindges, it would all have been so very different, so predictable, so commonplace—nothing but remnants of the California dream in all its bygone glory.