Malibu 90265

Chapter 5: The Nineteen Twenties

by Taylor Coffman

THE TWENTIES DECADE was Malibu's belated coming of age. Extreme isolation gave way to new activity along with public influx on a discreet but formerly unimagined level. This came about mostly in the late 1920s. At the outset of that postwar decade, May Rindge's domination of coastal Malibu seemed likely to endure. Lasting change became foreseeable as soon as 1923, however, when midway through the year the U.S. Supreme Court, no less, decreed California's right to eminent domain in the coast highway case. This key ruling was bolstered in 1925 by the State Superior Court, again in Mrs. Rindge's disfavor. Now it was only a matter of time, less and less of which the long-widowed Queen could buy, before Rancho Malibu would be catapulted into the twentieth century.

Across the mountains, on the Calabasas and Cornell side of the Santa Monicas, 1923 was likewise a red-letter date for members of the original Malibou Lake Club. The main subject of the unusual *Malibou* spelling, created by the damming of Malibu Creek (where Triunfo and Medea creeks form that better-known stream), goes back to this early part of the decade. A vintage photograph in Fred E. Basten's classic book of 1974, *Santa Monica Bay: The First 100 Years*, shows an old touring car. Supposedly taken at Malibou Lake (the tall pines belie that dry landscape), its caption nonetheless says, "In 1924, it took some doing to reach Malibu Lake—but the drive was worth it." What Basten didn't note was that the best way, really the only dependable way back then to get from Santa Monica to such a secluded place (short of using narrow Topanga Canyon), was by circling far around: through Cahuenga Pass near Hollywood, west through the still-rural San Fernando

Valley out to Calabasas, and over the long grade to Brent's Junction before turning south. There was no means of getting to the new lake from the main part of Malibu itself, nor would there be a direct route for many more years.

During this same period the east end of coastal Malibu was served by the Topanga and Las Flores Stages. A cheerful booster named Francis Brunner had been running that business since 1922. *Southern California's Prettiest Drive* was his company's time-table booklet for the summer of 1925. One of the "Special Tours" Brunner offered was "To The Malibu":

> The Las Flores Stage makes a Special Tour 3-1/2 miles beyond Las Flores Canyon [as far as the prospective Malibu Colony] and onto the famous Malibu Ranch grant, leaving Santa Monica opposite the Pacific Electric Railway Station at 9:15 A.M. every Sunday. The round trip fare is $1.50 [about $18 or $19 nowadays].
>
> The Malibu Ranch for decades has been the scene of litigation over roads and rights of way. A new state highway, soon to be completed through this comparatively untrammeled area, will open a series of scenic vistas of undreamed [of] beauty, examples of which are revealed in the Las Flores Stage Special Tour to the Malibu on Sunday mornings.
>
> "What lies over the hill beyond the end of the paved road?" an oft-repeated question, is answered by this tremendously interesting special trip.

Some development had already occurred on the Santa Monica side of the Rindge property—that is, on the public side, east-southeast of Las Flores Canyon. Within that accessible part of coastal Malibu, travelers could stop at Tuna Canyon Inn as well as at Big Rock Tavern (so-named despite Prohibition, in force nationwide since the decade began). The Tavern stood near the shoreline outcrop called Piedra Gorda, or simply Big Rock, as it's still known. A photo in Brunner's booklet showed several beach houses immediately east of Las Flores. "Summer cottages" they were, "with a portion of the famous Colored Cliffs on the right." The buildings had obviously been there for a while, since at least the 1910s, maybe longer. Las Flores Inn, for instance, was built in 1915. Situated close to the beach (again,

on the public side of the Rindges), the Inn described itself as “an ideal place to eat and drink.” Also called “The Sandwich House,” Las Flores boasted “tables commanding an ocean view,” along with “ice cream and cool refreshments.” Today this is where Duke’s Malibu stands. For years before that, the Sea Lion Restaurant (plus its noisy seal tank) had replaced the original Inn.

With Mrs. Rindge letting the Brunner stages go as far west as the Colony-to-be, her hold on Malibu was starting to unravel. Francis Brunner also noted that “Santa Monica Bay offers excellent deep sea fishing, and often entire fleets from San Pedro anchor off Las Flores and The Malibu to net big catches.” Was the Rindges’ heartland no longer sacred, no longer pristine and inviolate? Evidently not. The outside world, with its incessant, prying ways, was knocking louder and louder now, more than ever before. World War I had ended, and the rigid old ways were overdue for change.

Brunner’s *Southern California’s Prettiest Drive* included a full-page ad headed “Mountain Estates.” It promoted a young realtor named Louis T. Busch, based in Santa Monica. Busch was the father of Louis, Jr.—the “Lou Bu” mentioned earlier:

> We are in a position to offer you now the most desirable acreage to be had in the Santa Monica Mountains. Our efforts are concentrated on parcels ranging from 20 to 160 acres. Our listings include choice properties in Topanga Canyon, the Malibu Region and near the new Coast Highway, which soon will connect Santa Monica and Santa Barbara.

Another of the elder Busch’s ads, dated 1926, featured “Santa Monica Mountain Acreage”; it appears in Fred Basten’s *First 100 Years* book. The newer ad urged people to “Buy Now Before its to Late” (we can pardon the misspellings). The Busch Co. signed off as it had in the Brunner booklet: “We Know the Mountains.” Yes, Louis Busch and his staff certainly did. Their motto would soon endear them to May Rindge in the heart of Malibu. In the meantime, Busch’s “Malibu Region” fell outside the elongated Rindge boundaries, as did the other parcels the realtor mentioned. Much of what

Busch was offering in 1925 and ’26 was old homestead acreage or “sobrante” lands in the public domain, sandwiched between Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit and the two former Mexican grants east of there, Boca de Santa Monica and San Vicente y Santa Monica—both partly overridden today by Pacific Palisades.

Matters of coastal travel aside (Brunner pitched the Topanga route as a “smooth, winding road” that was “fully as enjoyable in February as in July or August”), Hollywood movie-makers soon followed the Malibou Lake stalwarts to the Cornell district, searching for good locations. The industry sought Western backdrops especially, a quest led in 1927 by one of the “majors,” as Paramount Studios certainly ranked. That film company carved 2,700 acres out of old Rancho Las Virgenes, its new holdings being the forerunner of today’s Paramount Ranch Park. In the first year alone, 1927, Paramount made nearly a dozen pictures in that distant locale, with Gary Cooper, W. C. Fields, and the “It Girl” herself, Clara Bow, shining among the stars. Cooper, most notably, appeared in several more pictures at the ranch, among them *The Virginian* in 1929. By then sound was taking hold everywhere; a modern era in the entertainment world was quickly dawning. Decades later, after countless filmings at the Paramount Ranch, Jane Seymour would star there in the TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.*

Back in the twenties, meanwhile, coastal Malibu lay a world apart from Cornell. Malibu Gorge remained all but impassable—though not enough to keep the resourceful Mrs. Rindge from building a dam of her own, deep within it, soon after Malibou Lake was formed farther up the same creek. Erected in 1924, half a mile southeast of the future tunnel on Malibu Canyon Road and hundreds of feet below it, Rindge Dam required herculean work. Somehow the job was done in a wild, rock-strewn setting of sheer remoteness. Latter-day advocates for removing that little-known monument will have their hands full if they ever get to proceed: the dam’s poured concrete is stoutly reinforced with surplus steel rails from the Rindges’ Hueneme, Malibu and Port Los Angeles Railway.

These parallels from the 1920s—the dams built on Malibu Creek and, with the founding of the Movie Colony at Malibu Beach, the Hollywood presence on each side of the mountains—may have gone largely unnoticed. Such events, however, were all of a piece. With regard to the distinct Hollywood tie-in, greater Malibu has drawn a make-believe, celebrity element to both sides of the Santa Monicas since the twenties. The new lay of things was epitomized by the Colony dwellers whose original members came from a film industry that, at first, was still making silent movies. The Swedish actress Anna Q. Nilsson, oft-mentioned as Colony leasee Number One in 1926, had been in pictures since 1911; most of her early work had been shorts. As of 1916, with *The Scarlet Road,* she began favoring longer fare. The glamourous blonde Constance Bennett was another farsighted leasee, as was the wacky comedienne Louise Fazenda. Among the gentlemen in the Hollywood crowd, the mustachioed heartthrob Warner Baxter was one of the first big stars to sign up in Malibu.

The leases on Rindge beach frontage near Carbon Canyon and in Malibu La Costa, east or downcoast of the Colony proper, went back earlier in 1926. These were the first instances of local real-estate activity, marking the initial easing of May Rindge's tenacious grip. That same year saw Mrs. Rindge embarking on another venture, the founding of Malibu Potteries along Carbon Beach, in the lee of Malibu Pier. The Adamson House at Malibu Point is the area's foremost tribute to the six years in which that factory produced glazed tiles of the highest order, mainly for architectural use. The poor business climate of the early Depression years plus a fire in 1931 brought Malibu Potteries to an end soon thereafter, despite the excellence of its output. One of Mrs. Rindge's grandsons, Ron Rindge—the same man who's a leading expert on Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo—immersed himself in the history of Malibu Potteries. His first book, co-authored with another specialist on Malibu's past, Tom Doyle, came out in 1988. *Ceramic Art of the Malibu Potteries, 1926-1932* was joined by *More About Malibu Potteries* in 1997, the work of Ron, Tom, and several others (including Ron's older brother, John

Rindge) likewise focused on the eventful years ending in 1932. Both books bear the imprint of the Malibu Lagoon Museum, housed within the Adamson House on Vaquero Hill, close to the pier.

In the same year the tile factory began production, 1926, Malibu Point was surfed for the first time by some virile young men. They lugged their giant redwood boards more than two miles past the Las Flores gate, fifteen years after the Englishman J. Smeaton Chase had ridden through on horseback, en route to Oregon. The pioneering distinction among the early surfers goes to the famous Santa Monica waterman Tom Blake (although some say Pete Peterson led the way). Word began spreading of the point's wonders as a paradise of graceful waves, a place known simply as *Malibu* ever since the twenties to surfers around the world (the unpoetic "Surfrider Beach" is of lesser age and rank). But for Malibu's stature as the gold standard of surfing to take lasting hold would require the coming and going of World War II. And to think of all the aquamarine swells, spawned thousands of miles away in the Southern Hemisphere, that have reached the shores of old Keller's Shelter—with no one to see them, much less to ride them. Surfers will never stop fantasizing what heaven was truly like at Malibu in times gone by.

Context is crucial here. "Malibu" obviously means more than just the marvelous surf spot. The name, as already used in these pages, has multiple meanings—hence the idea of "Malibu, Malibu" for the core, the center, the innermost part of the greater area, inclusive of Malibu Point and other key places nearby. Up the coast by three counties, "San Simeon" is the same. That name denotes a creek, a bay and its pier, a nostalgic town, the Hearst mansion on The Enchanted Hill, even a Mexican land grant of yore. To say or write either name, Malibu or San Simeon, without qualification usually works well enough: the meaning is normally clear, depending on what's being conveyed at the moment. Idiom and nuance do their jobs more often than not.

As the 1920s ended, May Rindge began building her answer to Hearst Castle (speaking of such things). She did so on the rocky knoll on which her

family's first home had been before a fire claimed it in 1903; the site overlooks the lower reaches of Malibu Creek, where Serra Retreat now stands. Mrs. Rindge's daughter, Rhoda Adamson, concurrently began building a house on Vaquero Hill, the little knoll adjoining the newly discovered surf spot in the cusp of Malibu Point. Both houses, designed by Stiles O. Clements of the Los Angeles firm Morgan, Walls & Clements, became museums of the best in Spanish Colonial Revival tile, as produced by the Malibu Potteries at that maker's height.

Some have associated Clements with W. R. Hearst and his kingly efforts at San Simeon, begun right after World War I. Not so, though. Julia Morgan of San Francisco (her name recalls the Clements partner Octavius Morgan, to whom she was unrelated) was Hearst's main designer all through the 1920s and most of the '30s as well, not only at San Simeon but also on other big projects in California. One of these was the enormous Beach House, so-called, in Santa Monica, a dozen miles from the heart of Malibu (a site marked by today's Annenberg Community Beach House). Earlier, she designed Hearst's Examiner Building in downtown Los Angeles.

Stiles Clements, for his part, figured in a radio station built for Hearst in the 1930s on Vermont Avenue, an Art Deco gesture in the East Hollywood district but one that's now gone. And yet Clements had no bearing on the work at San Simeon, all latter-day assumptions aside.

That architect's masterpiece for Rhoda and Merritt Adamson on Malibu Point is still intact, thanks to heroic preservation efforts. However, the Rindge castle on Laudamus Hill (a project never finished, as remains true of San Simeon) became Serra Retreat in 1941 and was mostly ruined by fire in 1970, not quite thirty years after Mrs. Rindge died, likewise in 1941. Only the Memorial Wing made it through the holocaust of 1970, surely one of Malibu's worst. A revitalized Serra Retreat opened in 1974.

Greater Malibu has another Spanish Colonial Revival masterwork (a Calabasas ZIP code applies in this case). The building in question also hails

from the golden era before the dismal 1930s—namely, the country home near Mulholland Highway designed by the esteemed architect Wallace Neff for King Gillette, the razor-blade titan. Soon after Gillette died in 1932, a Hollywood director named Clarence Brown bought the sprawling estate; despite the Depression, he added several features, among them an airstrip. Brown worked with stars like Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo (whom the Swede greatly adored). He was part of the social group orbiting around W. R. Hearst and the publishing czar's much younger paramour, Marion Davies. The Gillette-Brown compound, nearly 600 acres strong, has recently been acquired for public use through the California State Parks system and other agencies active in local preservation. It's now called the King Gillette Ranch.

What of the western part of greater Malibu, of which nothing has been said thus far in a 1920s vein? None of the leasing, for example, that was newly taking hold in the Malibu Colony or down in the La Costa area was yet duplicated in the Zuma-Trancas area or elsewhere right beyond Malibu, Malibu—in places such as Latigo, Escondido Beach, or Point Dume. The building of the new coast highway, called the Roosevelt Highway in honor of ex-President Theodore Roosevelt (a Harvard classmate of Frederick Rindge's), was the foremost venture as of the mid-twenties. So forbidding were the six miles from Little Sycamore Canyon to Point Mugu, as noted before, that some workmen had to be lowered by ropes from summits near Big Sycamore Cove and the Great Sand Dune, strategic access points reached from lonely outposts southwest of Boney Ridge. In short, the highway job was a heroic effort. A widely published photograph from June 1929 shows a virtual traffic jam at Big Sycamore, where the opening ceremony took place. Eight years later to the very month, in June 1937—four counties farther up the coast—a similar ceremony would be held in Big Sur, where challenges on an even bolder scale had at last been met.

The conquering of greater Malibu by the road gangs hadn't been quite as stupendous. But it was dramatic enough. Within a decade of the Roosevelt's opening, Point Mugu swallowed most of the new highway, quaintly built of

bleached white “PCC” (Portland Cement Concrete). Some of the PCC fragments can still be seen today, clinging to the cliffs or scattered toy-like below in the jagged rocks and tidepools. The great headland of Mugu itself had to be blasted open for an enlarged highway to pass through it, safely removed from the relentless surf. The present two-lane, improved version dates from 1940 and manages to hold its own all these decades later.

The ceremony at Big Sycamore in the summer of 1929 stands at the tail end of the High Twenties, as the final years of that vivid era have rightly been called. Four months later it all came crashing down. “Wall Street Lays An Egg,” chortled a famous headline in the show-business magazine *Variety*.

Things would never be quite the same again—not in Malibu or anywhere else in California and the nation at large.