

**ROHR MANOR
AND
THE OLD ADOBE**

Presented by

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**The History of
Rohr Manor
and the Olde Adobe**



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ROHR MANOR AND THE OLD ADOBE

In the center of Chula Vista's Rohr Park, and named for the same benefactor, sits a house that has been, and remains, an enduring symbol of the City of Chula Vista's Parks and Recreation Department. Located in a city with a rich geographic history, Rohr Manor enjoys it's own interesting, albeit clouded history that goes back to the 1930's, before Fred Rohr bought the land it sits on, and which he would later sell to the City of Chula Vista for the bargain price of \$60,000.



Rohr Manor As It Stands To Date

Although it's form and function have been altered over time, Rohr Manor still looks much the same as it did when it was built in 1938 by Chula Vista contractor Howard Sebastian. Ruben Harrison, a well-known real estate developer, commissioned Sebastian, his nephew, to build the two-story wood and brick house at a cost of \$50,000- a hefty price at the time. He could afford such an elaborate house because of the money he had made in the oil industry; the result of an extremely lucky break.



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North End of Rohr Manor

Harrison and his partner, Charlie Forward, had found a deserted Union Oil well in Maricopa County and bought the lease for \$5,000. With a little work the well turned out to be incredibly profitable, bringing in \$17,500 per month, and "Rube", as Harrison was known, prospered greatly from his investment in the late 1930's. After quickly making very exorbitant amounts of money, Harrison and his partner sold the well to Standard Oil, owned by the famous tycoon John D. Rockefeller.

According to Sebastian, who visited the house in April of 1970, Harrison took his earnings and told his nephew to, "Build me a house." Obviously, money was no object. On top of the hefty cost of building the house, the Harrisons spent around \$23,000 just for furnishings and fixtures. Some of the luxuries which ran the bill up to such a large amount include Italian glass in the large bathroom, along with a black onyx sink and bathtub, (which have since disappeared).



After spending such a large amount of money on such a beautiful house, it is unfortunate that Rube did not get to live in it for very long: he passed away in 1941, just three years after it was built. After Harrison passed away, his wife Charlotte, whom he called "Babe" sold the house and 45 acres to the Campbell family of Campbell Industries. After Babe sold the house to the Campbells the line of ownership became hazy. It is unclear how many times the house changed hands and who owned it, until 1955.

Rohr Aircraft Corporation was a very large part of the City of Chula Vista, at one point employing as many as 9,000 people. It's owner, Fred Rohr, cared about the health and well being of his employees so much, that he used company money to provide recreation facilities. During the 1940's and early '50's, he accomplished this by leasing the San Diego Country Club for use by his employees, who also had to share the grounds with regular club members.

In 1955, however, Rohr provided his employees with a place that would be solely theirs. When he purchased the land that to this day bears his name, the house owned by the Harrisons became his as well, and he used it as a recreation center for his employees.



To date, the ownership of the house and property would change hands only once more--to the City of Chula Vista. In 1966, citizens of the city voted their approval of a plan to purchase the 138 acre golf course from the Bonita Valley Country Club, now known as the Chula Vista Municipal Golf Course. At the same time Rohr decided to sell the land (23 acres in all) along with the now famous house to the city for the low, low price of \$60,000. The land was basically a gift to the city considering what the house alone had cost to build just under thirty years earlier.

THE ROHR OLD ADOBE

Aside from the mansion known as Rohr Manor, the park has another building on it's premises that enjoys a rich history of it's own. The old adobe building that sits directly to the south of the manor has been a fixture on this land since the same year that the big house was built. For many years, the origins of the adobe were unknown and were the subject of much debate. Some believed it had been built there sometime in the mid-1800's, others believed it may have been the home of Juan Forster. However, the fact that the building lies in the middle of the Sweetwater River flood-basin seems to suggest that the building can not be as old as many people believe.



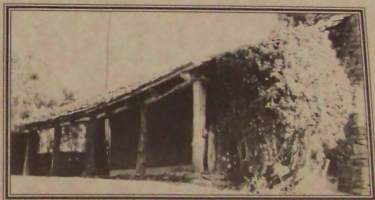
Northeast Corner of the Old Adobe

The Old Adobe is under going restoration which will consist of an authentic wood shingled roof

Wet winters of 1914-15 and 1915-16, compounded by two weeks of torrential rain from January 14th to the 28th of 1916, caused the north and south abutments of the Sweetwater Reservoir Dam to burst, consequently flooding the entire area that is now Rohr Park and the Chula Vista Municipal Golf Course. This flood, along with others of less magnitude earlier in the century (along with the dam bursting in 1916, there have been several instances of overflow), seem to suggest that the adobe could not have been here before that time, as it would have been destroyed



How could the adobe be as old as it appears? It is authentic and typical of the type built by the Native Indians of this region. Yet, how could it have survived the devastating floods it would have had to withstand? The answers to these questions remained a mystery until April of 1975. When Howard Sebastian, the contractor who built Rohr Manor, came back to reminisce about the house, he was able to shed some light on the origin of the adobe building.



Southwest Corner of the Old Adobe

According to Sebastian, Ruben Harrison, his uncle whom he built the house for, was "...a real collector..." who was "...interested in Indian stuff." Unfortunately, his wife would not let him keep his Indian artifacts in the main house. So, to house his collection, he took several Mexican workers, skilled in working with adobe, up to the Cuyamaca Mountains to an adobe dwelling that had been there since sometime in the 1800's. The abandoned adobe cabin was taken apart, brick by brick, brought to the spot it now stands on, and reconstructed. While we may never know the exact origin of the adobe or it's exact age, thanks to Mr. Sebastian, we do know that it is an authentic adobe house and that it is considerably older than the amount of time it has stood in its present location.

1. *The History of the Sweetwater Valley*. Eugene Victor Coleman. San Diego State University. 1973
2. *Chula Vista Heritage: 1911-1986*. City of Chula Vista.
3. *The Star News*. Thursday, April 24, 1975

Recollections of Rohr Manor

by Jackie Main

Curiosity about the history of Rohr Manor, the big house in Rohr Park, led to contacting two sisters who used to live on the property from 1942 to 1946, when Chula Vista was a small town of maybe 12,000 people and Bonita was genuine country.

When the sisters, Georgia Campbell Olson and Eileen Campbell Brown, lived on the property, it consisted of the big house, a small adobe house called the "dog house," and other assorted smaller residences, barns and outbuildings associated with the type of ranch that accommodates horses, a few cows, some pigs, turkeys, chickens and children. Georgia lived with her sister Mary and parents in the main house and Eileen with her husband and two small sons in a small house on the property.

The property also accommodated the U.S. Army, much to the surprise and chagrin of the family.

"We didn't know they were coming until we saw them pull onto the property," said Brown. "They moved in without any consultation, no request to do so, and confiscated the property for their use. It was very upsetting."

The army made itself at home on the knoll to the east as you enter the existing park — between the Optimist building ("Captain Good's house then") and the entry drive in a eucalyptus grove.

"They sawed down huge eucalyptus trees, cleared the land. It was very shocking," continued Brown, saying

there was no recourse and that the family was never reimbursed.

However, their father, protective especially of his two teenage daughters (Georgia and Mary, who is now Mrs. Jay Vinson), made it clear that the family was not to fraternize with the soldiers, and built a fence separating the areas. Olson remembers the anti-aircraft guns and said that there were probably no more than 200 soldiers at any given time. The soldiers never bothered the family — well, a few whistles — and, as far as Eileen is concerned, problems would have been being run off the road by army trucks when she was riding her prize stallion.

"The house at that time was so lovely," reminisced Brown, now a resident of Bonita Estates. "When I see the state it is in now, it breaks my heart we had to leave it.

"There were two-and-a-half acres of lawn to mow, and mother used to help to mow the lawn or milk the cows," said Olson.

The garden area consisted of six acres of lawn and formal gardens, a lovely swimming pool in the back, a cabana behind that, and a huge pepper tree covering the whole thing, she said. It kept two full-time gardeners busy, and when the Campbells were unable to get enough hired help, a frequent occurrence during the war years, Brown said she and her husband would do what they could to help, including taking care of all the animals.

Their parents, George and Lydia



Campbell — he was co-owner with his brother David of Campbell Machine Co., which built tuna boats — bought the house from the widow of Rube Harrison, who the sisters say built the house, although they are unclear about the exact date but suspect it was in the mid-to-late thirties.

"There were stories about Harrison being good friends of Orson Welles, and that when he married Rita Hayworth they used to stay in the guest room detached from the house off the patio," recollected Olson, who now lives in Santee.

When Mrs. Campbell became too ill to manage the place, the property was sold to a Mr. and Mrs. Fessler who raised horses. The Fesslers used to own Lilac Ranch (off Lilac Road) north of Escondido, said Brown, who said their daughter was a Mrs. Purdy. From then



photo by Nelson Zee

Above: Rohr manor (also named "La Alameda Celeste," *The Heavenly Path*) in the early forties. Insert: the manor as it is today.

on the property was sold perhaps one other time before being sold to Fred Rohr, who developed it into a company recreation area, before turning it over to the City of Chula Vista. ■