

## An Icon of the Valley's Past Being Resurrected Appeared in Valley Scene Magazine 2012

by Ken Fermoye

I spent a recent Saturday traveling back through time, to the days when the San Fernando Valley was home to movie stars and horse ranches, when row on row of orange and lemon trees grew on land now occupied by row on row of tract houses. For more than an hour I was in the company of such bygone Hollywood icons as Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Taylor, Zeppo Marx and Jack Oakie.

My trip through a time warp began in 1937, when North ridge was largely undeveloped open space and Reseda Boulevard ended at the two-lane dirt road that was Devonshire Street in those days.

The occasion for my “Back to the Future” excursion was an introduction to a storied 1937 mansion and surrounding 9-1/2 acres destined to be a future jewel in the crown of our local park system: the Oakridge Estate, on Devonshire just east of Reseda Boulevard.

My conductor for the virtual tour back through the years was Pat LoPresti, chairwoman of the Outreach Committee of Oakridge Estate Park Advisory Board (PAB). She explained that the Department of Recreation and Parks considers preserving the estate to be important, “because the estate is a piece of Northridge’s past.”

The site was part of a 130-acre race horse breeding ranch owned jointly by Stanwyck and Marx. It was originally known as Marwyck Ranch, and was managed by Harry Hart, a famous trainer from Kentucky. The ranch included stables, paddocks, a separate house for Hart and his family, plus many acres on which all the food—from hay to grains—for the horses were grown.

It was reported at the time that Stanwyck’s and Marx’s initial investment in the project was \$200,000: “Reflective of the enormous wealth of the Hollywood elite and the growth in the thoroughbred racing industry. Santa Anita racetrack, about 35 miles to the east, was built in 1934.”

In late 1936, Hart purchased a group of Kentucky horses for shipment to Janss Ranch in Ventura while Marwyck was being completed. The first stud was purchased for \$13,000 along with four mares, three weanlings, 14 yearlings. Hart designed the four barns, paddocks, sheds, training track, and equipment that was cutting edge for the time, including even electric fly traps in the stable stalls.

Stanwyck's two-story, 6,500-square-foot Tudor-style house had eight bathrooms, five bedrooms and a three-car garage. Later known as the "Oakie House," it has been rescued as a piece of Los Angeles history. It can't actually be seen today from Devonshire because it is hidden behind an ancient wooden gate, a fence and a formidable hedge. It was designated a Los Angeles historic monument in 1990.

In 1939, Barbara Stanwyck married actor Robert Taylor. In 1940, she sold her home and just under 10 acres surrounding it.. Jack Oakie and his wife Victoria Horne Oakie bought it later and lived there for decades. At that same time, Stanwyck sold her share in Marwyck Ranch to Zeppo Marx who retained ownership of Marwyck until 1943.

During World War II, thoroughbred racing "went dark" and tracks closed. Santa Anita became an internment camp for Japanese Americans and Del Mar Fairgrounds was used first as a Marine Corp training facility, then as a factory for producing B-17 bombers.

Oakie's widow continued to live at Oakridge after Jack died in 1978. In 2000, Victoria Horne Oakie donated the property to USC. Developers wanted to build 28 homes on the eight acres surrounding the house and grounds, but went bankrupt when the economy crashed and real estate values plummeted.

A group headed by former councilman Greg Smith were able to secure \$3.8 million from a special fund paid into by developers to purchase and improve community parks and open space (no taxpayer money was used) so LA Parks & Recreation could buy the property. Currently, studies and planning are underway to how best to rehabilitate the mansion and use the site. For more details, visit <http://theoakridgeestate.com>.