



Industry Insight

by MARCIE HEACOX

Hidden atop a tree-covered knoll and sandwiched between an automobile dealership and housing tract in Northridge lies the last remnant of what was once a large slice of Thoroughbred and entertainment history.

The 10-acre Oakridge Estate at 18650 Devonshire Street is one of few remaining signs of the San Fernando Valley's popularity as a rural getaway during the golden age of Hollywood, but local leaders are intent on preserving the space for years to come.

In 1937, prolific actress Barbara Stanwyck, her agent, Zeppo Marx of the Marx Brothers, and Kentucky trainer Harry S. Hart purchased 130 acres of general crop land between Devonshire and Lassen Streets. They combined their names to call it Marwyck Ranch, a new Thoroughbred breeding and training venture.

Stanwyck and Marx each built a residence on the high ground along Devonshire. Stanwyck's two-story, 6,500-square-foot Tudor style house was designed by Paul R. Williams, who was known as "architect to the Hollywood stars." It was accompanied by a swimming pool and tennis court.

Hart designed and managed the Thoroughbred operations. Amenities included barns, paddocks, crop fields, employee residences and a six-furlong training track. There

was also a unique ocean water enclosure intended to alleviate foot and leg ailments.

A 1937 *Los Angeles Times* article called Marwyck "one of the most pretentious breeding projects ever undertaken in California," and boasted it could help the state "take a front

row with Kentucky and Virginia as a producer of not only champions but honest, sturdy racers of real worth."

Hart imported breeding stock from Kentucky, including the ranch's first stallion, multiple stakes winner The Nut. By 1941 the ranch had nine stallions, but it was soon converted to a boarding-only facility.

The ambitious endeavor was short-lived. Stanwyck married actor Robert Taylor in 1939, and one year later sold her house and adjoining 10 acres to another acting pair, Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie. Oakie gave the estate its current name, evoking not only his name, but also the numerous oak trees on the property. Marx gained full ownership of the ranch, but sold his home and 10 acres to Thomas and Mary Quince, who then turned it over to fashion designer Gilbert Adrian and wife, actress Janet

Gaynor. Hart took a job as trainer

at Louis B. Mayer Stock Farm in Perris.

In 1943, Marx sold the ranchland to real estate and music businessman John H. Ryan, who promptly renamed



Barbara Stanwyck



The Oakridge Estate grounds in 2013

it Northridge Farms. Ryan also bought Adrian and Gaynor's plot in 1952. Northridge Farms greatly expanded his Thoroughbred breeding operations at Ryana Ranch and Lindley Ridge. All three farms were within three miles of each other. Ryan, wife Annette Ryan and business partner Mary Strnad continued boarding and training services and restarted breeding operations, at one point housing 11 stallions.

Among the studs who stood at Marwyck/Northridge were five-time leading California sire Alibhai (GB), Australian champion Reading II (Aus), California-bred multiple stakes winners Apple Valley, Blue Reading and Pedigree, and multiple stakes winners Dogaway, Esprit de France (GB), King Saxon, Lucky Mel, Mafosta (Ire), Main Man, Roman Soldier, Saxon, War Glory and the aforementioned The Nut.

Notable horses foaled and/or raised on the farm were Apple Valley and Blue Reading, as well as 1954 Florida Derby and Wood Memorial Stakes winner Correlation and 1946 Santa Anita Handicap winner War Knight. The latter's accomplishment made him the all-time richest Cal-bred and the first to win a \$100,000 race.

Ryan continued farm operations until 1956, when health reasons compelled him to disperse his Thoroughbred holdings. He died four years later. By then, residential developers had already begun subdivision and construction.

The only remaining evidence of Marwyck/Northridge is the main estate Stanwyck sold to Oakie. He grew citrus fruit and bred Afghan Hounds there until his death in 1978. The house was designated the 484th Los Angeles historic-cultural monument in March of 1990. Horne Oakie resided there until 2000, when she donated it to the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. The school in turn sold it to real estate developers who wanted to build 28 single-family homes on the land.

When the economic recession halted their plans, former Los Angeles City Councilmember Greig Smith moved to purchase the estate with funds from the California State Quimby Act. The act requires residential developers to set aside parkland or pay a government fee allocated to local parks.

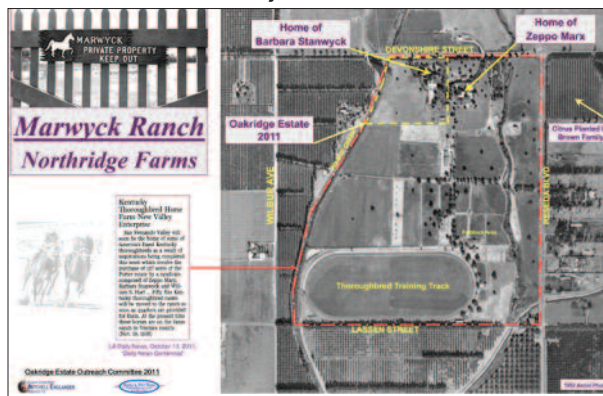
The house was secured in 2008, and the remaining land in 2009, for a reported price of \$3.35 million. The LA City Department of Recreation and Parks then appointed 11 community members to the Oakridge Estate Park Advisory Board (PAB), including Chairperson Dave Hasson, a Thoroughbred owner. Additionally, The Friends of Oakridge organization helps with outreach and fundraising. President Steve Harris lives in a housing tract where the farm used to be.

"(The estate) is a unique site, being 10 acres but surrounded by development," Harris said. "It would provide the San Fernando Valley and the people of Northridge a location to create a better sense of community."

Pat LoPresti, chair of the PAB's outreach committee, said everyone's learning more about the property as they go along. "Even people who did know why the house was here and when it was built had no idea that there was a Thoroughbred breeding



Barbara Stanwyck (left) and Marion Marx (right) at Marwyck Ranch in 1938



Aerial photo of Northridge Farms circa 1952



The Oakridge Estate house in 2013



Friends of Oakridge President Steve Harris (left) with Dave Hasson, chairperson of The Oakridge Estate Park Advisory Board, and Pat LoPresti, chair of the Park Advisory Board's outreach committee

Continued on next page



Industry Insight

facility attached to it,” she said. “That was a huge eye opener, and everybody’s interested in horses.”

The house is almost completely in its original condition aside from stolen doorknobs and chandeliers. It even survived a 6.7 magnitude earthquake in 1994, despite being two miles from the epicenter. The only noticeable damage was two fallen chimneys and a few short cracks in the tennis court. “It gives you an idea of the quality of construction,” Harris said.

In December, Councilman Mitchell Englander helped the PAB acquire \$1.3 million through Proposition K, a fund for LA parks. The money will become available in July. Hasson said the first step will be to make the house safe enough to host tours and hopefully inspire more support.

The next undertaking will be the outdoor areas of what will be called Oakridge Estate Park. It will be a “passive park,” as opposed to the type of park across the street with

baseball fields. The pool will be converted to a fountain and the tennis court will be used as an event space. Most of the current meadow will remain. Hasson said there’s a lot of support for using the location for weddings, business retreats, art shows and other group events.

The board also wants the property to have an educational purpose. The lot runs downhill from Devonshire, so they plan to build a watershed demonstration area at the bottom, southwest corner. They also hope to use some areas of the house for educational displays about the San Fernando Valley, Thoroughbred breeding and Hollywood. “I think it’d be a great place for the community to get a grasp of this history in a great setting,” Hasson said.

Oakridge Estate supporters will need years and many more dollars to achieve their goals, but they’re not turning back. “The piece of property was isolated for so many years, and that helped preserve it,” LoPresti said. “Now we have a responsibility to continue that preservation process for generations.”

To learn more about the development of The Oakridge Estate, go online to the www.theoakridgeestate.org web site. 🐾

