

ABSTRACT OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH REPORT

About the Taormina community

Completed by: SanBuenaventura Research Associates, Santa Paula, CA (May 2015)

Taormina represents a significant aspect of the religious and spiritual development of Ojai as it took place from the 1920s through the 1960s. Taormina was the only theosophical colony in the country built for retirees when it was incorporated in 1967. Ojai was chosen by Ruth Wilson as the natural location of the community because it had been the home of the Krotona Institute of Theosophy since 1924. This developmental theme was identified in the *Historic Context Statement City of Ojai* as "Religion and Spirituality" (1917-1945), and described in part: Because of its isolation, natural beauty and favorable climate, the Ojai Valley has attracted many non-mainstream religious and spiritual groups.

In 1924 Albert P. Warrington, head of the Krotona Institute of Theosophy in Hollywood (CA), moved his followers from the growing Hollywood community to the peaceful environment of the Ojai Valley. He had founded the Institute in Hollywood in 1912 with the guidance and direction of prominent early Theosophist Annie Besant. Warrington built the new Institute on a 115 acre hillside location at the western edge of the Ojai Valley. Between 1924 and 1928 an auditorium, library and eleven residences designed in the Spanish Revival style were built on the heavily landscaped grounds with a pond and breathtaking views of the Valley. Los Angeles architect Robert Stacey-Judd designed the library and auditorium building.

A promotional pamphlet from the 1930s proclaimed the Ojai Valley as one of the world's four great centers of Theosophy and introduced Krishnamurti as an international teacher, author and philosopher. He appeared for many years at Starland, the annual encampment under the oak trees in Meiners Oaks. Both Krishnamurti and the Theosophists drew many people to the Ojai Valley, some of whom settled there. (San Buenaventura Research Associates, 2009: 16-17)

Taormina is significant for its association with Ruth Wilson, its founder. In 1948 she became a member of the Theosophical Society in St. Louis and, shortly afterward, she had a vision that she was to build a retirement center for people with similar ideas based on the three objects of the Theosophical Society, with an emphasis on brotherhood and goodwill as its unifying foundation. She spent seven years fulfilling this vision, contacting Theosophists who wanted to join the community, and to locating and purchasing a site on which to establish the first and only self-sustaining retirement Theosophical community in the United States.

The Taormina neighborhood embodies characteristics of (then) a contemporary, scaled-down version of French Norman architecture which was modernized to meet the perceived requirements of retired Theosophists. This was achieved through the skill of Leslie Verne Lacy, a Cornell graduate of 1917 and a prominent architect from the firm of L. Verne Lacy and Thomas Atherton of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Lacy is not considered to be a master architect, and his work in Taormina did not appear to extend beyond the Taormina community and his own residence in Ojai outside the community.

All of the houses embody certain key features created in the original plans laid out by architect L. Vern Lacy. A major characteristic of each house is a roof featuring overhanging hipped gables intersected and covered with wood shakes or composition shingles. Roofs feature a bell-cast slope. The houses are covered with stucco siding and windows are aluminum sliders or fixed. Additional details on many of these houses include notched eaves, decorative horizontal wood vents under the eaves and shutters. Recessed carports are supported by wood posts with bracket and exposed rafters.

The houses were all built into the gently sloping hillside and therefore remain low to the ground surrounded by extensive plantings. Originally, each house featured a gas lantern on a post next to the street. Today many of the lanterns are converted to electric. The street has no sidewalks. Homeowner regulations (CC&Rs) do not allow front fences, and hedges were encouraged as separations of properties rather than fencing.

Original trees planted included over 600 Cyprus and other various varieties of evergreens (Deodar, Canary Island Pine, Aleppo Pine, Pepper Tree, and Bottlebrush), many directly referencing the names of the house plans. Over time residents planted many other varieties and species, but a great many of the original plantings remain.

Taormina is significant for its unique location as a district of residences arranged around an oval-shaped road with a similar design style, located on a sloping hillside surrounded by lush plantings which together contribute to it being an established visual feature of Ojai. The majority of residences have retained a majority of their integrity of location, design, materials and workmanship. Additions made to the residences were done using compatible design, materials and workmanship.

The Taormina community originated in 1967 as a retirement center for members of the Theosophical Society and as an adjunct community to the Krotona Institute of Theosophy. The community was given the name "Taormina" because that name has been famous since the days when Pythagoras formed the Grand Theater (known today as The Greek Theater) at Crotona in Sicily in 520 B.C. He made the beautiful resort island of Sicily a gathering place for the inhabitants of surrounding countries along the Mediterranean Sea. Crotona was also an occult center in the Southern part of nearby Italy, so it seemed fitting to call the new retirement community "Taormina" because of its closeness to Ojai's Krotona and so that both names could serve as a tribute to the great philosopher, Pythagoras whose ideas they followed. Additionally, Taormina was the place on Sicily where Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater, C. Jinarajadasa, George Arundale, Krishnamurti and his younger brother, Nityananda, spent weeks undergoing intensive spiritual training.

Envisioned by its founder, Ruth Wilson, as a Normandy village in which seniors could live and interact in the "spirit" of Theosophy, Taormina is a matrix linked to many of the great spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, philanthropic, and political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and has manifested a continuing connection to these movements and their idealistic leaders and crusades through the interests of its residents to this day. Within The Ojai Valley there remain visible artifacts of these endeavors: The Beatrice Woods Center for the Arts, Besant Hill School, Oak Grove School, The Krishnamurti Foundation of America, the former Krotona Braille Institute (located below Krotona Hill), Meditation Mount, The Monica Ros School, The Ojai Foundation, The Ojai Retreat, The Ojai Taj Mahal, Our Lady & All Angels Liberal Catholic Church, The Montessori School, The Ojai Retreat, The Ranch House, The World University, and the latest offshoot, Bookends in Meiners Oaks.

Taormina today, 45 years after its founding by Ruth Wilson, remains largely unchanged. The population is no longer only retirees and Theosophists but reflects to a greater extent the general valley population. There are more cars and more people, but the "look" and the "ambiance" of Ruth Wilson's original vision remain. The community is a living legacy of the Theosophical movement and related intellectual and philosophical endeavors, and their significance in our valley.

[The full report is available on the website: www.TaorminaHistoricDistrict.com]