

Murphy-Smith House  
278 Ocean Avenue  
Laguna Beach, CA 92651



# LAGUNA LIFE

The Laguna Beach Historical Society, Inc. Newsletter: Spring 2004

**Program presented by Roger Jones**

at the City Council Chambers: Monday, May 17th, 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

## The History of Villa Rockledge

Heritage Month will be celebrated with a special presentation on the Villa Rockledge, the only residence in Laguna Beach that is on the National Register of Historic Places. Come see and learn about one of the most important ocean front properties on the West Coast.

The Villa Rockledge is situated on the ocean front between Moss Point and Victoria Beach, covers approximately one acre, and consists of the main Villa, an annex building that housed additional guests, resplendent historic landscaping and terraces, and a historic salt water swimming pool in the surf zone.

Frank Miller (builder) and group on the rocks, looking at Eclipse in September, 1923



SEPTEMBER, 1923

## President's Message

by Gene Felder

Many thanks to Roger Jones who has agreed to present a program of the history of Villa Rockledge. Make sure to come to the Laguna Beach City Council Chambers, Monday, May 17<sup>th</sup> 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

Last year we had a number of interesting programs: on the history of the 1978 Bluebird Canyon slide thanks to Dale Ghery, saving Laguna Canyon thanks to Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield, and the 1993 Laguna wildfire.

We want to encourage you to come to our functions, and to encourage friends and neighbors to join you in being members of the Laguna Beach Historical Society.

At the General Meeting, your Board of Directors was elected. Continuing their service on the Board are Anne Frank, J. J. Gasparotti, Willa Gupta, Jane Janz, Eric Jessen, Ed Perry, Nelda Stone, Georgina Valdez, and myself.

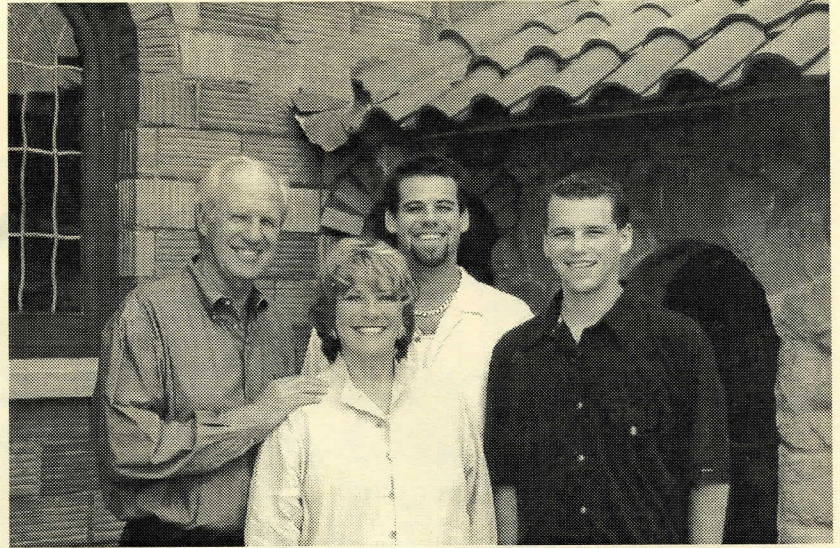
Newly elected to the Board are former Planning Commissioner Kimberly Stuart, former Laguna News-Post publisher Vern Spitaleri, John Hoover and Kevin Spencer.

Many thanks to long-time Laguna Beach resident Karolee Hampton who is not going away, but is leaving the Board.

The Board is most thankful to Wells Fargo Bank for leasing us the Murphy-Smith House. The top priority of the Board is to ensure that the house is open to be enjoyed and experienced by members and the public. Currently the Murphy-Smith House is opened to the public at no-charge Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Please come by and step back into 1920s Laguna.

We need more volunteers to staff the Murphy-Smith House; hopefully, we can have it open more frequently later this year. If you want to get involved, even a little bit, call me or email me at [gene@felders.net](mailto:gene@felders.net) or call at 939-7257. Financial support is also needed. Laguna Beach Historical Society membership is only \$15 per household.

Send your comments and checks to 278 Ocean Avenue, Laguna Beach CA 92651.



Roger Jones and Family at Villa Rockledge

## The Villa Rockledge Mission Inn Heritage

"Villa Rockledge, originally known as Mariona (in honor of Frank Miller's first wife), was built by Frank Miller, developer of the Mission Inn in Riverside and a leading figure in promoting Mission and Mediterranean influenced architecture in Southern California. Begun in 1918, the major portion of Villa Rockledge was designed by Architect Arthur Benton who worked closely with Miller on this building in much the same way as he had on the Mission Inn; a one unit addition on the northerly wing was designed by Laguna Beach architect Thomas Harper in 1929. Like the Mission Inn, Villa Rockledge incorporated Miller's keen interest in the art and architecture of the Mediterranean countries and personified Miller's fondness for melding various Spanish influenced elements in an eclectic and dynamic manner.



Frank Augustus Miller

Frank Miller, as the developer of the Mission Inn, became a leading regional influence in establishing a new architectural identity for Southern California rooted in the architecture of the early missions and Spanish settlers. Miller brought the same architect, crews and artistic ideas that he had used on the Mission Inn in Riverside to Laguna



AUG. 9, 1923

Isabella Hutchings Birthday on August 9, 1923. Frank Miller is visible on the left side of this picture.

Beach where he built his summer home in the then growing coastal resort and art colony. He spent the years from 1918 until his death in 1935 developing and evolving Villa Rockledge in much the same way that he had done with the Mission Inn." *Excerpt from the U.S. Department of Interior, National Register of Historic Places, Inventory Nomination Form.*

Speaking of Roger Jones's book "The History of Villa Rockledge", former Laguna Beach Mayor Neil Fitzpatrick said: "This book, like the preservation of Villa Rockledge itself, is truly a labor of love on the part of Roger Jones. He shares with us a glimpse of our history and the beauty of this special place. He challenges us to appreciate and protect our unique heritage."

From book's Preface by Thomas S. Jones, President, JMR Advertising

Rancho Palos Verdes, January 1987

"In a coign of a cliff  
Between lowland and highland  
At the sea down's edge between windward and lee..."  
There stands a place called Villa Rockledge

And this is its fabulous history.

Rarely do events of history so conspire to create a private place, privately owned, with a record that traces the life and times of a public place known and revered by countless thousands. Such a place is Villa Rockledge of Laguna Beach, California.

The dream of a far sighted builder, Frank Miller, and a gifted architect, Arthur Benton, Villa Rockledge is the sea-side cousin of that world-famous edifice - The Mission Inn of Riverside, California.

It was the same team of builder and artist responsible for the Mission Inn who conceived the magnificent private estate by the sea that was started in 1918 and completed in 1921 as a tribute to Miller's second wife, Marion. It was known then as "Mariona." Today, known as Villa Rockledge, this fabulous edifice mirrors the history of Laguna Beach.

It was there that such Hollywood luminaries as Clifton Webb, Robert Mitchum, Errol Flynn, and Bette Davis cavorted on the Villa Rockledge beach.

Down through the years six different owners

have possessed the property, and each has contributed uniquely to its structure and to its persona.

The current owner, Roger Jones, purchased the estate in February 1973 as a 33 year old bachelor, after living there in a rented apartment as a tenant for the previous five years.

After the property suffered a disastrous accident in June 1973 when a loaded cement truck severely damaged it, Mr. Jones completely restored the damaged property and made vast improvements to the grounds. The restoration was celebrated with a huge private party in September 1975 which I

attended along with many leaders of some of the nation's largest corporations and the national press. I can only say that never have I seen such unanimous agreement that Villa Rockledge is truly one of the great treasures of California.

More recently the representatives of the National Park Services, who investigated the estate for inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places, described Villa Rockledge as "a two story complex of Mediterranean influences, with rustic stone towers, large open porches on the ocean side, ornamental chimneys, and casement windows." They further stated: "The interior of Rockledge nearly defied verbal description...Miller's imagination



An early picture of the house and area surrounding.

produced an array of tasteful splendor."

To that I can only add my agreement and recommend to those who seek a taste of the beauty of early California - read on about this fabulous place - and maybe one day it will be your good fortune, as it has been mine, to stand at one of its many windows at twilight and watch the sunset from Villa Rockledge by the sea."

### May is Heritage Month

The City of Laguna Beach Heritage Committee was formed in 1990 to serve in an advisory role on matters concerning historic preservation. It makes recommendations on all structures related to the City's Historic Register.

The Heritage Committee is in charge of Laguna Beach Heritage Month. Activities include a gala opening event during the first Thursday's Art Walk, guided walking tours of downtown, a special backstage visit to the Pageant of the Masters, a program sponsored by the Laguna Beach Historical Society, and MORE.

For further information about Heritage Month contact Ann Larsen at the City Hall, 497-0320.