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CASA ADOBE de SAN RAFAEL - LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Registered Landmark #235

by

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CASA ADOBE de SAN RAFAEL

The small Mexican adobe ranch house known as the "Casa Adobe de San Rafael" located at 1340 Dorothy Drive in Glendale, Los Angeles County, California, is the last concrete link in the chain of memory connecting us with the first of the fabulous land grants given by the King of Spain to private individuals in California.[1] As one looks at this tiny house today and sees only the few acres of garden that surround this old hacienda it is difficult to conceive the vast acreage of which it was a part, and the romantic history that lies behind the story of that once kingly estate. The immense city of Los Angeles is all around filled with people; nearer, are the pleasant homes of Glendale where there is more room to move about than in the teeming metropolis. But this farmhouse on Dorothy Drive, was for many years one of three houses within an area of more than 36,000 acres!

The story of the "Casa," or house, is the story of the first land grant in California, that of Rancho San Rafael. This rancho was estimated by the United States Survey

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1. Phil Townsend Hanna, California through four centuries, 28.
Theodore H. Hittell, History of California, II, 746-748.
H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 661.
J. M. Guinn, "Romance of rancho realty," Historical Society of Southern California Publications, VIII:3, 238.

Commission in 1856 to contain over 36,000 acres.[2] Because this was the first of such grants its background deserves special attention; the form of other grants was taken from this one, and the size of the grants differed greatly from that intended by the Crown of Spain. Our present day title to a large part of the land in the central and southern coastal part of California is founded upon these old grants, and property owners have had cause for alarm when the old rancho claims or boundaries were disputed. That we may fully enjoy the romance of the "Casa de San Rafael," named after the Rancho de San Rafael, we must go far back in time and distance to the year 1511 when Ferdinand of Aragon founded the Council of the Indies to be the supreme authority dealing with Spanish colonization in America.

The earliest settlements in America were undertaken under these laws formulated by the Council and the many volumes are known as the Recapilacion de Leyes De Los Reinos De Las Indias, usually referred to as the Recapilacion. The laws recognized that the land in the new world belonged to the King, and the King in turn vested his rights in the rules of the Council. The underlying idea being that there was enough land for the Indians, the missions and the pueblos, or

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2. Rose H. Aviña, Spanish and Mexican land grants. M.A. thesis, University of California, 1934.

towns, and that eventually the land should be owned individually under the authority of Spain.

The theory did not work out in practice and, as complications arose, it was found necessary to supplement the laws so that land could be held privately. Therefore in 1773 the Viceroy Bucareli y Urusu issued specific instructions to Fernando Xavier Rivera y Moncada on his appointment as commandant of San Diego and Monterey. He was authorized to distribute common lands to Indians who wished to devote themselves to agriculture, also to other settlers according to their worth in the community. However, the recipients of these lands were to reside in the pueblo and not interfere with the rights of the Indians outside of the jurisdiction of the pueblo. Under this authority there is a record of a grant given to a Manuel Bruton, a soldier of Monterey who married an Indian girl of the San Carlos Mission. This grant was abandoned and reverted to the state.[3]

Late in 1784 José María Verdugo made the first known request for a grant of private land. He asked for a section near the San Gabriel Mission; this section was later to become the Rancho San Rafael, and is the land upon which so many of today's towns are built. In 1784 the Governor of California,

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3. Bancroft, History of California, I, 608.

Pedro Fages, was not sure to what extent he was allowed to give land so, until he could appeal to higher authority, he simply permitted the claimant José María Verdugo the right to pasture his cattle and temporarily to occupy the land. Specifically the Governor stated on October 20, 1784, that José María Verdugo could keep his horses and cattle on the Arroyo Hondo - now known as the Arroyo Seco - one and a half leagues from the San Gabriel Mission on the road to Monterey, on condition that "he does not prejudice the said Mission nor the inhabitants of the Reina de Los Angeles, and having some one in charge, without being exposed to the gentile Indians or in any manner injuring them."[4] Here the matter rested for a time.

José María Verdugo, who was to be given this princely estate, was typical of many soldier adventurers of his time who came to California. The name of José María Verdugo first appears on known records when he enlisted as a soldier at Loreto, Lower California. The exact date of his enlistment is not known; however, on December 15, 1776, a Sergeant Mariano de la Luz Verdugo enlisted at Loreto and this is believed by many to be his brother and the date of enlistment to apply to both. In a petition to the Governor for Rancho

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4. Fr. F. Palóu, Noticias de Nueva California,... Fages' report to Ugarte, November 20, 1784.

de San Rafael, José says that his brother is taking care of the land for him in his absence. A rancho, the Portezuela, adjacent to San Rafael was among the first five deeded. This was to Mariano de la Luz Verdugo.[5] These facts lead historians to believe the relationship and the probability of their enlistment on the same date.

Mariano de la Luz Verdugo marched north from Loreto with the "leather jackets" to San Diego under Captain Rivera y Moncada in 1769. Possibly José did likewise, but there is no record of him until 1772. The earliest mention of José María Verdugo in Alta California is on July 13, 1772, when he stood sponsor for an Indian baptized at Mission San Carlos de Monterey. The next church record comes in 1779 from archives of San Gabriel Mission: in this year he married María de la Encarnacion, the daughter of Ygnacio Lopez.

If 1769 is accepted as the year of Jose Verdugo's enlistment, he spent twenty-seven years as an active soldier in the Spanish army. He was a corporal of the San Diego Company and took part in many exploring expeditions, notably one with Felipe de Neve, the Governor of California, to the Colorado River in 1783. He is said to have been a member of Rivera y Moncada's first expedition to California

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5. C. A. Engelhardt, San Gabriel mission and the beginnings of Los Angeles, 66.

in 1769, also that he was commander of the guard at San Luis Obispo in 1773, and commandant at San Diego. He was major-domo of San Gabriel Mission and continued in this position even after his retirement in 1797. Bancroft refers to him as a retired corporal of the San Diego Company and the San Gabriel escolta.[6] After 1797 he was sometimes addressed as "retired corporal with the rank of sergeant."

In whatever character he served as a soldier it must have been meritorious or he would not have been thought worthy by the Governor to "privately acquire land." When the Governor gave José Verdugo the temporary use of the Arroyo Hondo in 1784, he wrote at the same time to the Comandante General of the Provincias Internas, General Ugate, in whose department this authority had been transferred, asking how he should deal with such applications. It was not until two years later, 1786, and after Ugate had conferred with Galindo Navarro, his legal advisor and whose office in New Spain was similar to that of our attorney general today, that the Governor received his instructions. He was authorized:[7]

> The granting of tracts not to exceed three leagues, always beyond the four-league limits of the existing pueblos, without injury to missions or rancherias, and on certain

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6. Bancroft, History of California, I, 661; Engelhardt, San Gabriel mission and the beginnings of Los Angeles, 66.
7. Bancroft, History of California, I, 608.

> other conditions including the building of a stone house on each rancho and the keeping of at least two thousand head of livestock.

The instructions also said that there should be an immediate assignment of clear landmarks of the four leagues belonging to the pueblos.

Land or landmarks were dealt with in a haphazard way by the early Californians and the judgment of Galindo Navarro was not accepted "in toto." The lands assigned to José Verdugo comprised about eight square leagues rather than three, and there is no evidence that the boundaries of the pueblo of Los Angeles were ever clearly marked out. Nor is there evidence that Governor Fages ever issued permanent titles of these lands to replace the temporary permit of October 20, 1784.[8]

It was not until January 12, 1798 that José Verdugo had the title to the Rancho de San Rafael confirmed.[9] Governor Borica was the representative of Spain in that year, and he seemed chiefly concerned in the development of the wool industry for he was most emphatic in his instructions to José Verdugo that he must enlarge his flock of sheep.[10] From the date of permission of pasturage on the rancho (1784) until

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8. Bancroft, History of California, I, 609.
9. Ibid., 612.
10. Engelhardt, San Gabriel mission and the beginnings of Los Angeles, 65.

the date of José Verdugo's retirement from the army in 1797, his brother remained at the rancho where he built a house of "sticks," planted a garden and vineyard and looked after the horses and cattle.

In searching the Spanish archives we find rather voluminous correspondence between Verdugo and the Governor. In 1788 a petition was registered by Verdugo; on the margin is a notation by the Governor: "In the Royal name of His Majesty I grant to the petitioner the use in right of ownership of the brand which he exhibits in order to mark his cattle."[11]

For several years previous to his retirement (1797) his letters to the Governor mention an increasing illness which he terms "dropsy." On December 4, 1797, Verdugo made up his mind to leave the army. He was weary, and had poor health and many responsibilities. There were 200 head of horned cattle on the rancho, 200 horses and 150 sheep. His brother had built a water dam and some good crops had been produced. He wrote to the Governor: "I find myself afflicted with dropsy, as is well known, for which reason feeling myself incapable for all duty as a sentinel or as a scout, I ... solicit my retirement ... I require some greater

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11. Title Guarantee and Trust Company, Glendale, 4.

ease and cannot persuade myself that your Honor's compassion can deny me it...." He did not wish to reside in one of the pueblos for he would suffer from "the various fatigues in which all persons, although for good, share in common." But if he retired to "La Zanja," as Rancho de San Rafael was known at that time and by which name it is referred in older documents, he could join forces with his brother and brother-in-law and make a good living. On the twelfth of January 1798, Governor Borica gave the desired permission, together with the advice of more sheep and the caution to treat both Christian and gentile Indians "with that love and charity so much recommended by the laws, but not for this to forbear living with proper precaution, so as to avoid all insult."[12]

Bancroft states: "José María Verdugo ... was corporal of the Mission San Gabriel guard much of the time down to 1798, and his successor was Pedro Poyorena...." In a footnote in reference to this statement he explains that the mission books contain but little beyond the names of padres and persons baptized, married or buried.

Upon receiving the desired permission to establish himself as a rancher, Verdugo proceeded at once to the rancho with a Los Angeles friend, Antonio Rosa.[13] The life of the

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12. Title Guarantee and Trust Company, Glendale, 8.
13. Ibid., 5.

Rancho de San Rafael was evidently quiet and peaceful until 1814, when Verdugo had difficulties with the adjoining missions.

The Arroyo Seco had been recognized as the boundary between the rancho and lands of San Gabriel; however, a new priest was assigned in 1814 and ordered a sheep ranch established on the Verdugo side of the arroyo, with corrals for the animals and huts for the Indian shepherds. Verdugo explained the great wrong being done him to the Governor in detail. The Governor promptly "ordered the sheep to be taken away and they were taken away," thus the arroyo was henceforth held as the boundary between the rancho and San Gabriel mission property.[14]

The opposite side of Verdugo's vast domain was bounded by the lands of the San Fernando mission property. This line became a matter of contention. As usual, Verdugo punctiliously appealed to the Governor. He claimed that land he believed his property had been planted by mission Indians without his knowledge. In 1817, the Alcalde of Los Angeles sent representatives of both claimants to ride over the whole of the San Fernando Valley to establish a line of division. This was done in the primitive method of the time by designating certain trees and stones for markers - a method which

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14. Title Guarantee and Trust Company, Glendale, 6.

in later years led to litigation.[15]

On July 28, 1817 Verdugo sent a statement to the Governor regarding the progress of the rancho. He lists: "1,800 large cattle, 100 small cattle, 600 wild horses, 70 gentle horses, 20 gentle mules and 50 wild mules."[16]

Verdugo's health steadily declined after his retirement. An interesting letter among the old records, from his friend Manuel Rodriguez bears this out. It was written on January 11, 1809 and addresses him as "The retired Corporal with the grade of Sergeant ..."[17]

> Antonio Ygnacio Abila has delivered to me the four cases of manteca ... whose value of fifty-five dollars, two reals, I have credited to your account. I regret your indisposition and am glad you have felt some relief from the bleedings, which in fact are very good for a pain on the side - with fresh drinks taken moderately. As respects your daughter María Antonia, it is necessary for her to be resigned to the will of God, asking for the intercession of His Most Holy Mother for what may be suitable for her. /This daughter died soon after the date of this letter./ About the end of next February or the first of March I shall necessarily need more manteca. And, nothing else needful occurring, he desires for you, your entire restoration to health.

On August 13, 1828, José María Verdugo summoned

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15. Fr. Juan Caballeria, History of San Bernardino Valley, 80.
16. W. W. Robinson, Ranchos become cities, 37.
17. Title Guarantee and Trust Company, Glendale, 8.

witnesses and signed his last will and testament. He began:[18]

> In the first place, I recommend my soul to God, and it is my will that, with the consent of our Father San Francisco, my body be interred in the church of San Gabriel with mass sung in presence of the corpse ... It is my will that three novenas of mass be held for me ... It is my will that all debts, legitimately proving that they are correct, be paid ... I declare to have four children living Ma/ria/ Josefa, Ma Ignacio, Julio and Catalina and one more deceased named Ma Antonio ... Two grandchildren, Rafaela and Antonio Longina ... to whom I leave ten cows each and a barrel of aguardiente if they should marry in the meantime.

The bulk of this huge estate was left to Julio and blind Catalina. Catalina was given cattle, horses, a two-room house with furniture, the granary, six and a half yoke of oxen and the vineyard. Julio inherited the saddles - no small item in early California when the elaborate filigree of silver or gold was valued as high as five thousand dollars. To Julio also went a "large still," pistols, shotguns, aguardiente and a small crucifix. Catalina and Julio each received half of the first fruit trees. The will closes:[19] "I declare that it is my will that the Rancho

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18. United States District Court, San Francisco, Transcript of Record, No. 381, 74.
19. Ibid.

which the Nation granted me, called San Rafael, be left to my son Julio and to Catalina, in order that they may enjoy the same with the blessing of God." Jose' Verdugo added bequests of minor importance to the will a year later. He died on April 12, 1831.

Life at the rancho went on tranquilly under the managements of Julio and his many sons. The scene here is typical of the pastoral period in California; the ease of living, extensive hospitality, fiestas and rodeos. Bear baiting - pitting a bull against a bear - was a feature at these early fiestas, together with feats of horsemanship at which the early Californians excelled. It is certain that the Verdugos had no difficulty in securing the bears, for there were many in the surrounding canyons. One writer says that it was often necessary for the Verdugos to furnish escort for visitors that they might be protected from these animals.[20]

The Mexican War in 1846 affected the rancho no more than did the annexation of California by the United States in 1848. Difficulties did not begin until 1850, when the Board of Land Commissioners was created to investigate land titles. Joseph Lancaster Brent,[21] an

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20. L. S. Ludwig, Los Angeles in the sunny Seventies, 143.
21. Harris Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 178.

expert on the subject, was attorney for the Verdugos and he duly filed claim in their behalf. The claim was based upon the Spanish concessions made to their father in 1784 and 1798. The claim was confirmed by the Board in 1855 and upheld later by the Supreme Court.[22]

The loose manner of determining boundaries by the early Californians brought the problem of finding the actual extent of the immense rancho. It was not until 1856 that the boundaries were defined in the confirmation of title by the Supreme Court. A copy of the document follows:

Julio Verdugo et al
vs
The United States

> In this case in hearing the proofs and allegations it is adjudged by the Commission that the claim of the said petitioners is valid and it is therefore decreed that the same be confirmed.
> The land of which confirmation is made is situated in Los Angeles County, and is the same conceded to Don Jose Maria Verdugo formerly known by the name of Zanja and now called San Rafael and is located about a league and a half from the Mission of San Gabriel; the same being bounded and described as follows, to wit: Commencing at the source of the Arroyo Hondo: which arroyo crosses the old road running from the Mission of San Gabriel to Monterey at the distance of about one and a half leagues from the said mission, said boundary line running from the source of said Arroyo down said

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22. United States District Court, San Francisco, Transcript of Record No. 381, 112.

stream to its mouth at the River of the Pueblo of Los Angeles: thence up the river last mentioned to the place where said river issues from the Sierra at the Mountain called Cahuenga thence in a northerly direction from said mountain at the point last mentioned to the Serrito Colorado, and from thence to the place of beginning.

Alpheus Filch
R. Aug. Thompson
Feb. 11, 1856.

When the government survey was completed it showed more than 36,000 acres within the boundaries of the Rancho. The patent to the rancho was signed by President Chester A. Arthur. It was not issued until 1882.[23]

On January 2, 1861, Julio Verdugo mortgaged land to Jacob Elias for $3,445.37 at 3 per cent quarterly.[24] This mortgage was the beginning of the ruin of the Rancho de San Rafael. High rates of interest were usual in those days, six per cent a month sometimes being the charge for money. However, the early Californian was not accustomed to dealing with money - barter was a principal means of securing necessities - and the "gringos" who extended the loans allowed them to run until payment became prohibitive. This loan by Elias to Verdugo did not include all the lands of the estate, nevertheless it was a goodly portion. The land mortgaged was

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23. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 177.
24. Robinson, Ranchos become cities, 41.

bounded on the north by the Sierra Madre, on the east by the Arroyo Hondo, south by the Los Angeles River, and on the west "by the lands of Jonathan Scott, cultivated by him, excepting only the portions sold to J. D. Hunter and J. L. Brent."[25]

The will of José Verdugo had provided for the division of his land in equal parts to Julio and Catalina,[26] therefore, in 1861, the same year as the mortgage, a partition of the estate was arranged. "The line was drawn from a point on the easterly side of the river, opposite the house of Antonio Felix, and extending northeasterly and easterly to the Piedra Gorda [now called Eagle Rock] and to the Arroyo Seco."[27] Catalina accepted the land toward the north.

There were many in the Verdugo family and nearly everyone who has written of the family in connection with the land has become confused by the number of descendants. We have noted that in José Verdugo's will he mentions four children and two grandchildren. The mistake most frequently found is in reference to Catalina. Catalina Verdugo was blinded in girlhood, and was never married. She spent most of her life under the care of her nephew Theodoro and lived

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25. Robinson, Ranchos become cities, 41.
26. United States District Court, San Francisco, Transcript of Record No. 381, 84-88.
27. Title Guarantee and Trust Company, Glendale, 14.

in one of his several homes.[28] It is unfortunate, indeed that she could not enjoy her mountainous domain with its streams bordered by willows and oaks, celebrated today as the "Green Verdugo Hills."

The ruinous interest rate of Julio's mortgage bore its fruit in a sheriff's sale in 1869. In eight years the $3,445.37 was brought up to $58,750.00. The property was bought by Alfred B. Chapman for the amount of the debt. Chapman quitclaimed 200 acres back to Julio and included the lands surrounding the homestead.[29]

There still remained a vast proportion of undivided land as well as Julio's 200 acres. Creditors, lawyers in the majority, made claim on these properties. Partition of these lands was arranged and a court appointment of referees and surveyors to satisfy the thirty-six claimants.

Twenty allotments were made and the Verdugo family received surprisingly large parcels considering low land values of the time and the amount of credit extended. Catalina, Theodoro, Rafaela Verdugo de Sepulveda (José's granddaughter who was to receive a barrel of aguardiente upon her marriage), María Sepulveda de Sanchez (another granddaughter), and Julio received sections as large as

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28. State records, Sacramento.
29. Robinson, Ranchos become cities, 42.

2,500 acres. Julio's homestead was left him intact.[30]

Catalina died in this year of the partition, probably at Theodoro's adobe which still stands in Verdugo Canyon; Julio, in 1876 at the home of his wife in Porto Suelo. The land allotted the Verdugos slipped out of their hands as easily as the rancho itself was spent. Of all the houses built by members of the family on the old Verdugo Rancho, only the adobe of Theodoro and that of María Sepulveda de Sanchez still remain. It is María's adobe (now 1340 Dorothy Drive) which was built on a hundred acre tract. She received the land in 1872 from Rafaela on a trade of the Sanchez allotment. This is Registered Landmark, No. 235. Known as Casa Adobe de San Rafael, it will continue to recall the days of the Verdugos.

The land surrounding the "Casa" saw kaleidoscopic changes. Sanchez, to whom María was married, was a sheriff of the county for ten years so they must have been in close touch with the rapidly evolving change.

Newcomers started to come in about 1886 and Los Angeles was experiencing a real estate boom. The town of Glendale was organized in 1887; a hotel was built, land was subdivided, and a newspaper was founded. The following year the boom burst. A slow development continued until the installation

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30. M. M. Livingston, "The earliest Spanish land grants in California," Historical Society of Southern California Publications, IX:3, 195-199.

of the railroad in 1904. In 1906 Glendale decided to incorporate; it was known as the "fastest growing city" until this appellation was taken by Beverly Hills - also in Los Angeles County.

Despite the rush of civilization there was a part of the old world still protected from the turmoil - a Verdugo adobe. To quote Mr. Harry Carr:[31]

> In the hills back of Glendale I knocked at the door of the old Verdugo adobe. An old man with a white beard lay dead - dim funeral candles at his head and feet in a dark and musty room with horsehair furniture and thick walls.

This was Julio, one of the ten sons of Don Julio who died in 1876. It was said that Don Julio had always affected the California style of dress, caballero fashion, but his sons were modern. This Julio, of which the author speaks died in 1915, and was supposed to have been over one hundred years old. Mr. Carr continues:

> It was Don Julio, last of the Verdugos - once owner of a kingly estate. He died in proverty. One of his descendants now makes tamales for gringos to buy; others work in garages. The great ranchos were eaten up by the gringo lawyers. Don Julio paid law fees in land. 'From here to that oak tree,' he would say, 'I shall

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31. Harry Carr, Los Angeles, city of dreams, 60.

> give you for a fee.' And the oak tree that they finally claimed was at a telescopic distance.

The above is a rather dramatic ending for the Verdugo saga. The "lords" of the land have passed, but the land remains, constantly being improved by the new owners. Only one adobe is left for coming generations, Casa Adobe de San Rafael.

It is believed that the "Casa" was built by Sheriff Sanchez for his wife María Sepulveda, whose mother was a Verdugo, between 1864 and 1872. After her death the house passed through many hands and consequent changes were made that almost obliterated the contours of the original structure. It was in 1929 that the adobe aroused a general civic interest. A group of Glendale women, protesting the cutting down of trees and subdivision of the property, formed the San Rafael Park Association. According to the State Park Commission:[32]

> The property was purchased by the City, and the management placed in the hands of the Parks and Recreation Commission and carried out as an S.E.R.A. project, resulting in the preservation for posterity of one of California's choicest landmarks, also furnishing employment for many men.

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32. California State Park Commission. Report No. 14. Registered Landmarks, October 31, 1935.

The property on which the adobe stands was purchased by the City of Glendale for $15,000. It is authoritatively estimated that the present worth of the property, exclusive of the adobe furnishings, is well over $45,000.

Within the great wall surrounding the property extensive landscaping has been carried out. To the south of the adobe a brick walk leads to the natural sunken gardens, where an authentic herb garden has been planted about a wishing well. Back of the building is the fruit orchard, while to the east is the caretaker's house, in early Spanish style, a pergola and grill.

The landscaping includes the shaggy old eucalyptus and pepper trees, orange trees and shrubs, estimated to be more than 75 years old; olive and fruit trees given by residents of the city.

The adobe itself has been wonderfully restored, the work of which revealed an old fireplace hidden by changes made by tenants in recent years. Workers also found several old rust-incrusted implements of years ago.

In the historic rooms will be housed exhibits of heirlooms and treasures, many of them being donated or loaned by residents of Glendale and other southland cities.

Miss Dora Verdugo, great granddaughter of Jose Maria Verdugo, is furnishing one of the bedrooms with furniture which belonged to her mother, Maria Antonia de Verdugo.

Mrs. Louis S. Hansen was the first president of the San Rafael Park Association, resigning this presidency after becoming the president of the Glendale City Park Commission. Mrs. W. W. Williams succeeded Mrs. Hansen as president of the San Rafael Park Association.

Members of the City Park Commission successfully carrying out the adobe restoration project to completion, are: Mrs. Hansen, president; Dr. George A. Campbell; L. H. Lawrence; Donald G. Cowlin; and Dr. Clifford A. Cole.

It was during the administration of the late C. E. Kimlin as mayor, that the property was purchased. Serving on the City Council at that time were Frank P. Taggart, Eugene J. Wix, Sam A. Davis, and C. J. Hatz. The restoration has come about during the administration of Mayor Joseph F. Baudino. Serving with him on the Council are Sam A. Davis, L. E. Olsen, John R. Grey and M. W. Lee, who has been chairman of the park committee.

J. Marshall Miller of the University of Southern California was consultant architect; Charles Gibbs Adams, landscape architect; and H. C. Vandewater, Building Superintendent for the City of Glendale, has been personally in charge of the work. Lending valuable assistance was J. C. Albers, City Engineer and Acting Superintendent of Parks and Recreation Department; and, City Manager William V. Anderson.

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