

SHORT HISTORY OF PALERMO AND "VISTA ROBLES"

The town of Palermo was a planned community created in 1888 by several wealthy land companies. It had a rapid rise and for a time, was a beautiful, thriving colony built to support the many orange and olive orchards planted there. The land south of Oroville was available at a low cost with abundant water for irrigation available from gold mining operations that were closing down due to new laws prohibiting hydraulic mining. Palermo was chosen due to the fact that its warm winter climate made growing oranges possible, and, most importantly, they would ripen earlier than those from southern California and could be shipped east for sale before Christmas. A beautiful small town was planned with a hotel, stores, a blacksmith, telegraph office, church and had palm lined streets. It was surrounded by larger estates. The millionaire gold mining magnate, George Hearst and his wealthy and accomplished wife, Phoebe Appleton Hearst were early investors, selecting a large tract to the south and east of town.

Many histories of the area say that it was Phoebe who named the colony "Palermo" due to the fact the weather reminded her of her travels in Sicily. In any case, the Palermo Citrus Colony grew quickly and the Oroville area was, for a time, the premier orange growing sector of California.

George Hearst was already California's Senator when he bought his Palermo acreage and had the land developed as a working olive-orange ranch. He hired a fellow named Ashby Moncure to handle the planting of the orchards. (Moncure built his own house near the original entrance to the property which is now known as the "Magnolia Manor" and is visible from the Palermo Honcut Highway.) There is much conflicting history about Phoebe Hearst's involvement in the property. She is said to have visited the property on occasion, but it was intended primarily as a business venture. Shortly after the house was completed, George died and Phoebe took over the administration of his holdings.

In 1910, the property was sold to Wendel P. Hammon, the "Dredger King" of Butte County, and one of the richest men in California at that time. Mr. Hammon added more acreage and planted additional olive groves. He did reside in the house at various times and it was one of his favorite residences. He eventually lost his fortune and then Vista Robles when he could not pay irrigation charges for several years. In 1940, the property was sold to the Wentworth family who occupied it until about 1963 during which they continued the olive operation, selling the olive fruit to the famous Lindsey Olive Company. After the Wentworths, various portions of the acreage were sold off, leaving the current 16+ acre configuration. In the late 1970s it was purchased by a family from the Lake Tahoe area who wanted to be near their daughter who was attending Chico State. They undertook the major renovations and upgrades that brought the house, the barn and grounds into the modern era. The quality of the work they did brought out the rare beauty of the old growth redwood finishes and Victorian details.

The current owners have enjoyed the beauty and privacy of this unique house and property for the last 17 years.