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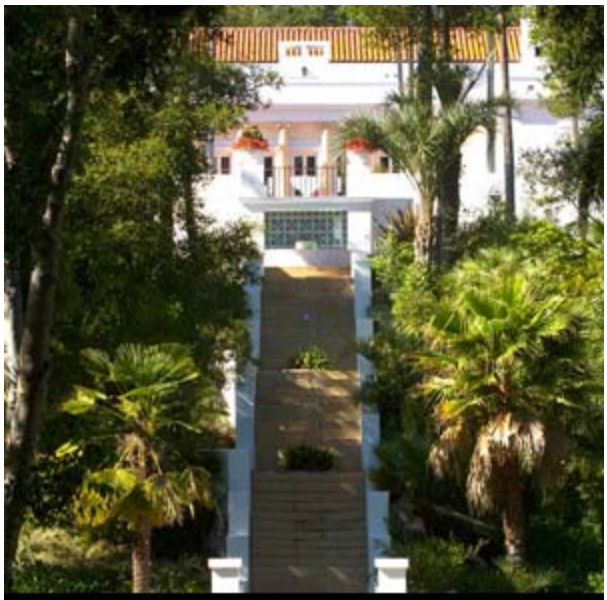
The History Page: Frond memories

A rich man's favorite tree becomes the symbol of California

By Swati Pandey Sunday, June 19, 2011



Waldron Gillespie's 1906 mansion.

Nothing says Los Angeles like a palm tree. Over decades of appearances in cinematic shots, real estate advertisements, souvenir postcards and even California license plates, palms have become synonymous with their adopted city, which chose the tree to line its streets for the much-publicized 1932 Olympics. But before all that, palm trees simply were one of many unusual design touches at the turn-of-the-century Montecito home of eccentric real estate heir Waldron Gillespie, who accidentally sparked a landscaping craze.

Gillespie, like his favored palms, was not native to California. He was a lifelong bachelor, fond of wearing formal cloaks with Panama hats and tennis shoes. He had no siblings, and his father died when he was only 2, in 1868. The death left the toddler with a massive inheritance: Waldron's grandfather had scored big in real estate in upstate New York, where the family lived, and his father had wisely requested stocks in addition to pay for his work as a consultant to then-booming railroad companies.

As soon as Waldron was grown, he set about spending his money. His chosen indulgences were travel and homes. Despite already owning a house in New York City and two in the country, he built his first home while still in his early 20s — an elaborate structure in Granville, N.Y. — on a recently purchased farm. Next he bought up property near Havana, Cuba, and in 1890, he purchased several parcels of land in Montecito, a suburb of Santa Barbara, Calif., nestled between ocean and mountains, home to a soothing hot spring and acres of old oaks. It was at Montecito that Gillespie would combine his two indulgences in one magnificently gaudy mansion, bringing home what he saw on his travels, including the palm tree, which transformed the plant into a symbol of luxury in Southern California.

Gillespie hired a friend to carry out the design: Bertram Goodhue, also a lover of travel and homes, who would build instead of buy them. In 1901, Gillespie footed the bill for the two men to take a seven-month tour from Europe to India. Gillespie envisioned a grand, globally influenced estate on 30 Montecito acres where he had already begun to plant tropical trees, including 125 palms. He wanted Goodhue to take inspiration particularly from Persia, which had a climate similar to Montecito's. The two men traveled on horseback the several hundred miles from Rasht, on the Caspian Sea, to Bushehr, on the Persian Gulf. Goodhue copied into his sketch book the "shallow, lucent and motionless" pools

of Persian palaces, their small, careful courtyard gardens, their forests of chenars and cypresses. Many of the palaces boasted walks lined with palms, the ideal plant for arid soil, as well as for emphasizing the stature of the palaces. They drew the eyes forward and upward, obstructing little with their limited foliage.

Upon the men's return to the United States, Goodhue began work on Gillespie's estate. It was located between the homes of East Coast transplants who disdained the Spanish Mission Revival Style of Santa Barbara and who had brought their native architecture west — building Queen Anne, shingle or Colonial-style houses. Goodhue instead built a villa that could be categorized as vaguely Mediterranean. A long driveway, bordered by elegant date palms, led to the estate. In front of it was a long flight of steps; inside were 10,000 white-marbled square feet. Shallow reflecting pools punctuated the floor and, in the center of the house, a courtyard opened to the sky and bloomed with orange and banana trees — and more palms. Gillespie laid the floors with thick Oriental rugs and hung a massive Caravaggio above the fireplace. He dubbed the estate El Fureidis, derived from the Arabic for "little paradise."

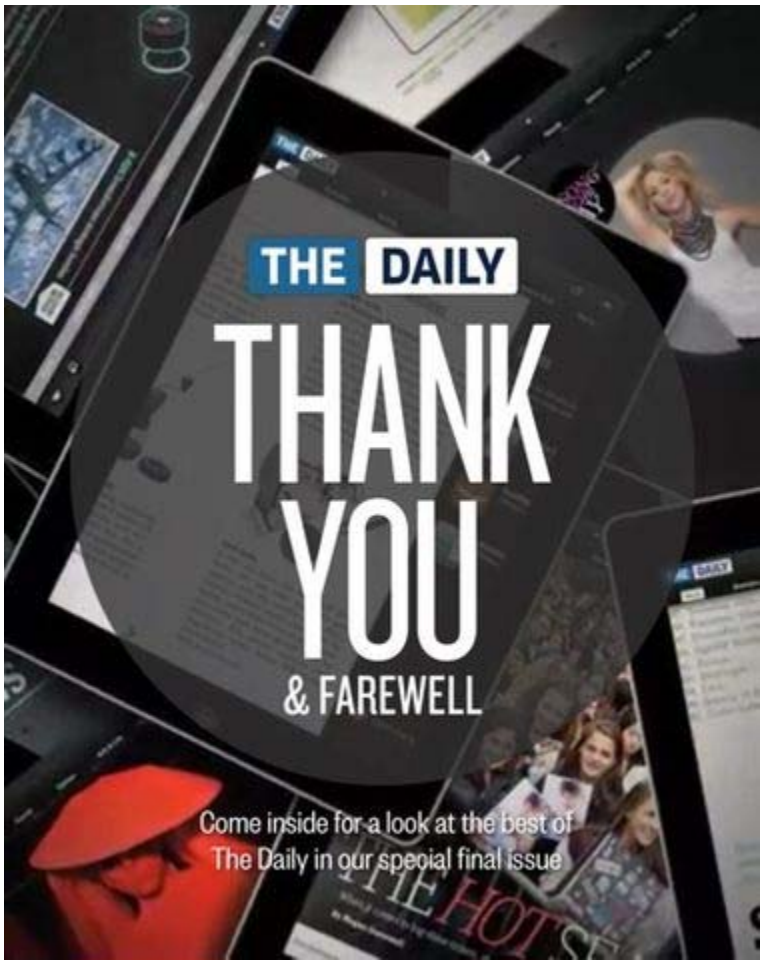
After its completion in 1906, the Gillespie house quickly became the center of Santa Barbara social life. Gillespie rented it for parties, masquerades and balls. A home-themed magazine, Country Life in America, named El Fureidis one of the best country houses in the nation. Neighbors, and soon visitors from Los Angeles, borrowed the element that struck them as most exotic and most easily replicable: the palm trees.

Over the next several years, grassy lawns and flower beds gave way to desert-style landscaping and palms throughout Santa Barbara front yards and then in Los Angeles. Palm trees came to line several L.A. streets, and eventually came to convey all of its stereotypes: Like L.A.'s arriving strivers, the tree is an immigrant. Like its starlets, palms are alarmingly thin. Like its natural disasters, they can cause damage without warning when they drop fronds. And like the city, they have a noir element to them — after decades of life, they can begin to decay without quite showing it.

El Fureidis' glory would fade. After World War I, Gillespie spent less and less time in California. The Depression made the estate more difficult to maintain, and he sold off portions of acreage. In old age, having grown accustomed to putting money in several different banks and maintaining sole access, Gillespie couldn't remember how to access his fortune and spent his final years cash-poor despite his wealth, living in his New York mansion until he died at age 88 in 1954. El Fureidis was sold to antique dealers, who in turn sold off everything they could. Palms and other exotic plants were shipped to the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City and to Disneyland. The estate, valued today at $29.5 million, achieved brief notoriety as Tony Montana's house in "Scarface" but otherwise has fallen into obscurity.

Palm trees' time in the sun is now coming to an end, too.

The city that once welcomed them now wants to replace them with more environmentally friendly trees that are less disease-prone. The city council voted in 2006 that, except in well-touristed places, it would plant leafier trees like sycamores instead of new palms when the old ones die. But like old soldiers, starlets and like El Fureidis itself, palms — so often filmed, photographed and immortalized — can never die.



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