

by Hattie Beresford

COGULS EXPANSIONS

Francis Townsend Underhill: Renaissance Man

From 1884 until 1929, Santa Barbara was blessed by the attentions of Francis Townsend Underhill, a true Renaissance man whose work in the fields of animal husbandry, ranching, plant propagation, architecture, and landscaping had a significant and lasting effect on the community. His interests in yachting, polo, and horse racing contributed greatly toward establishing quality programs that drew well-heeled Eastern visitors and residents, and his active participation in dozens of clubs and numerous civic enterprises enriched the lives of all Santa Barbarans.

Born in New York in 1863, Francis Townsend Underhill was a ninth-generation descendent of Captain John Underhill, who helped finance the *Mayflower* expedition to the New World and established the Underhill family in Boston in 1628. Francis' banker father died when he was four, and his mother followed when he was eleven. Raised by two maiden aunts in Oyster Bay, New York, he was primarily educated by tutors and spent the last four years of his education traveling.

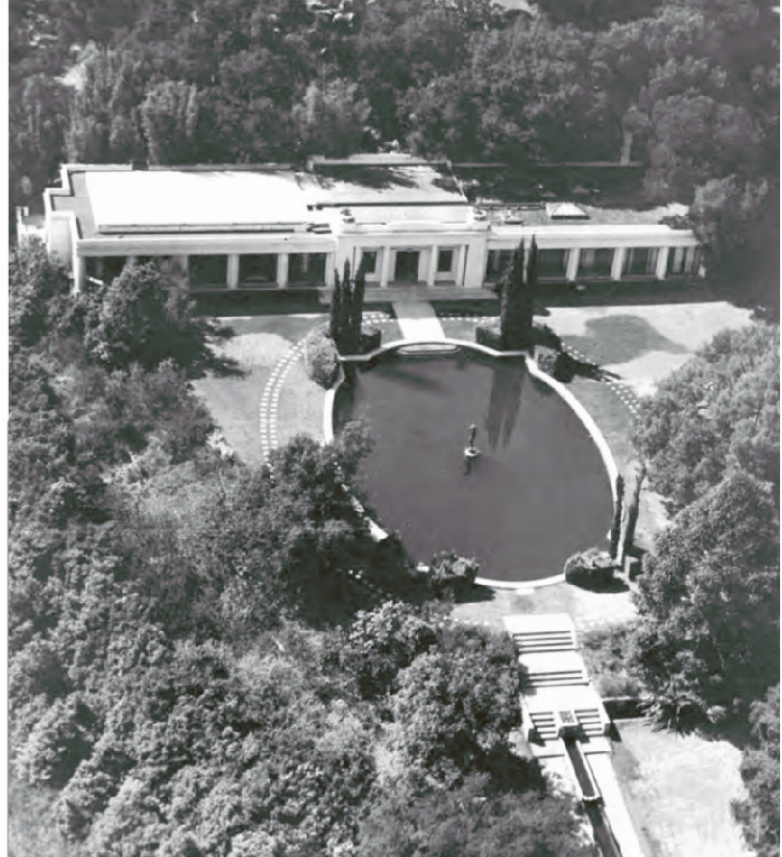
Underhill's early years in the East were punctuated by luxurious pursuits available only to the wealthy class. When he established himself in the West, however, he took up work that benefitted a more general population.

A Wealthy Easterner

While still living in the East, the young Underhill developed an interest in polo, horse racing, travel, driving, yachting and architecture. In 1883, he became one of the founders of the first indoor horse show in America, the National Horse Show, founded at Madison Square Gardens. For over 25 years, he served as a judge at the National and other prominent shows throughout the nation.

Underhill was a member of at least five Eastern yacht clubs. In 1888, he emulated his esteemed ancestor and bought the *Mayflower*. This ship, however, bore no pilgrims yearning for religious freedom. Instead, the sloop *Mayflower* had successfully defended the America's Cup against the British challenger in 1886. For a time he also owned *Mischief*, the 1881 America's Cup champion.

Though he had no formal training in architecture, Underhill's education included studies of the great buildings of Europe, and he didn't hesitate to build his own estate on Long Island designing the house, gardens and



At George Owen Knapp's Arcady estate in Montecito, Underhill designed a Roman pool house with sliding roof and a series of pools and waterways that ended in front of a little teahouse (photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)

furnishings himself. At age 20, Underhill married Henrietta Graham Meyer, and they raised three daughters at the Oyster Bay estate.

Underhill was famous for his driving prowess and was known as an expert whip. The story goes that fellow members of the Coaching Club made a bet that it was not possible to make figure eights with a coach-and-four in the narrow streets of New York. Underhill accepted the challenge



Underhill (second from right) on the dais at Plaza del Mar with the admirals of the Great White Fleet in 1908 and fellow local dignitaries (photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)



Spectators enjoy a polo match in the 1920s at Bartlett's Polo Field on Middle Road in Montecito; the Underhill-designed clubhouse stands in the background (photo Courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)

and was told he could only use one hand. On the appointed day, the judges were gathered in Central Park as a supremely confident Underhill drove up in a coach fully loaded with passengers.

It soon became apparent that it had been foolish to bet against him. The author Welford Benton wrote, "Four times the Underhill thoroughbreds, catching confidence telegraphed down the reins from that Masterly hand on the box, trotted briskly as if on a straight road as they made perfect eights..." and then straightened out without a change of pace to continue the trip to Philadelphia as passengers and judges alike cheered."

In 1896, Underhill published *Driving for Pleasure: The Harness Stable and Its Appointments*. Complete with photographs, the book was well received and became a standard in the field.

Caroline Astor counted him on her famous Four Hundred social registry. He was also a member of other elite organizations such as the Knickerbocker Union, the Society of Colonial Wars, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Union Club of New York. Underhill was more than just a "swell," however, and, probably influenced by friend and neighbor Theodore Roosevelt, served as a captain in the Spanish American War with a company of New York volunteers.

A Westerner at Heart

Francis Townsend Underhill first visited Santa Barbara in 1878 at age 17. Returning again and again, he found that the Western lifestyle with its

multitude of fresh opportunities appealed to him. He began dividing his time between the civilized but prescribed life of the East and the relatively untamed freedom of the West.

In the 1880s the Southern Pacific Railroad's Coast Line was steadily creeping south from San Francisco and north from Los Angeles, and another railroad, the narrow gauge Pacific Coast Railway from San Luis Obispo to the Santa Ynez Valley, was under construction. The opportunity was ripe to invest in Western lands.

In late 1884, Underhill purchased the Ontare Ranch from Dixie Thompson for \$18,000. In January he chartered several rail cars and filled them with sheep, Holstein cattle and thoroughbreds as well as equipment and supplies. His family and staff traveled west with him. Reaching Los Angeles, the entire entourage continued overland in wagons and carriages. As they passed through Santa Barbara, the citizens stared in mute amazement as his herd of fine blooded horses paraded down State Street.

Underhill left the ranch under the direction of his cousin, George Townsend Cole, who supervised the construction of a two-story house



Underhill designed the Alston Road estate of fellow horseman, C.K.G. Billings. The stripped classical style was ornamented with elaborate wrought-iron work seen here at a side entrance (photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum).



The Underhill-designed clubhouse at Bartlett Polo Field was remodeled into a residence after the Depression put an end to polo fields in Montecito (photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)

with offices and living spaces for the manager, overseers, and guests. There was also a bunkhouse for the help and large stock stables, created with the best sanitation in mind. In September, George Coles reported that four of the thoroughbred horses were in Los Angeles training for the races and five milk cows and three bulls were at the State Fair.

No sooner was the Ontare Rancho underway than Underhill purchased 5,260 acres of land 1½ miles south of Los Alamos from Doctor J.B. Shaw in spring 1886. This land bordered on the route of the Pacific Coast Railway whose terminus at the time was Los Alamos.

In 1887, the Pacific Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad, offered Underhill \$125,000 for the Ontare Ranch whose water rights they wanted for their planned subdivision of Hope Ranch. He accepted and moved the ranching operation to Los Alamos.

Ranch hands constructed a large stable with extensive sheds and an enormous barn that included a carriage house in its center. Underhill designed a two-story clapboard ranch house, and he planted an arboretum of cypresses, black locusts, eucalyptus, pines, palms and almond trees while taking care to preserve the ancient specimens of live oak. His livestock in 1887 included 300 head of cattle, 60 thoroughbred mares, four principal stallions, and several Clydesdales and Hambletonians. The ranch land abounded in wild game and the hunting dogs did not need to travel far to find deer.

Elizabeth Eaton Burton wrote, "Now that he had invested so heavily in lands out West, he decided to spend most of his time here, and his ranch became a hospitable center for all his friends."

As one of those friends, Elizabeth remembered that the fun of the whole expedition to El Roblar "consisted in driving over there in a four-in-hand with Frank Underhill on the box seat. It took us all day, with several relays of horses, to travel some sixty miles. But as we always had pleasant

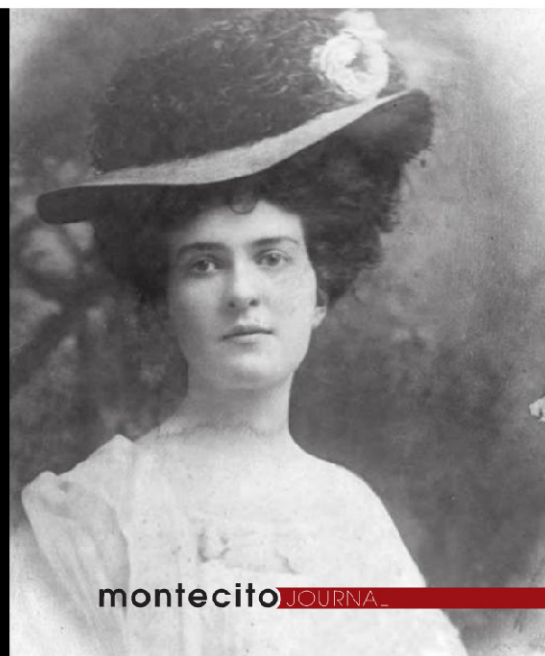
company and a delicious picnic luncheon, followed by a siesta in the heat of the day, what cared we how much time it took to reach our destination?

"The Ranch, a great tract of land extending over low wooded hills, is centered around barns and corrals and an L-shaped ranch house with covered porches. These covered porches were much needed, for the climate was hot and dry so that we sat in their shade and did not venture out in the middle of the day.

"Naturally there were rodeos when the branding took place, and these were usually festive occasions, when all the native Mexicans turned out to show their prowess....When Frederic Remington came up, a rodeo with all its gay accompaniments of the barbecue, music and dancing was staged during his stay and all sorts of games were organized. I remember one which got rather out of hand, but proved to be a great success. The men began by using the hoses around the house to souse each other, warming to the watery battle until soon they all looked like drowned rats, while we women rushed up to the second story for safety, splitting our sides with laughter.

"At night, around a fine big fire (for it grows very cold there after sunset) we often played games or held a law court and tried men for horse stealing. Over this we had many good laughs, for our 'district attorney' was full of clever repartee and the 'judge' was not far behind him. So convincing were they, that the foreman of the ranch, a rather simple soul,

Herminia Carmelita
Claudina Dibblee
Underhill (photo
courtesy of Santa
Barbara Historical
Museum)





Underhill's Ontare Ranch, seen here in 1886, was nestled into foothills bare of housing tracts and landscaping (photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)

became quite confused and half convinced that he was really guilty.”

In 1900, Underhill, tired of living a split life, divorced his wife of 17 years and moved to California permanently.

Montecito

Underhill leased a home on Channel Drive, and his newfound freedom saw him planning a business with longtime friend Joel Remington Fithian, who was a businessman, rancher, and owner of the Santa Barbara Country Club. Since they both loved to drive, the two decided to establish a sightseeing stage line from Santa Barbara to San Marcos Pass, a venture that was generally unprofitable.

Underhill also purchased the racetrack property off East Cabrillo

Boulevard and set about making improvements to the grounds, which had been neglected. He intended to place a string of horses in charge of Sidney Stillwell for training.

Whether he was motivated by changing interests or financial reverses, Underhill shut down his El Roblar operation in 1902 and drove all his horses, stallions, brood mares, draft animals and unbroken colts to the race track in Santa Barbara where they were auctioned off.

In 1902-03, he designed and built a small cottage on 6 parcels of land he'd purchased on Channel Drive near the Country Club. He left town, however, to join the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in San Francisco and later served as secretary to Union Pacific Railroad president E.H. Harriman, whom he accompanied to Europe. He returned to his Channel Drive property in 1904 and designed a large single-story redwood bungalow, which he named *La Chiquita*. His creation was listed as one of the twelve best country houses in America by Henry H. Saylor who wrote for *Country Life in America* in 1915.

In an interview with Saylor, Underhill said that the more he studied houses and gardens, the more convinced he became that the architecture of a house and its landscape should be entirely dependent upon the



In 1888, Underhill imitated his famous ancestor (who helped finance the original *Mayflower*), and bought the *Mayflower*, a racing vessel that had defeated its British challengers in the America's Cup Race of 1886 (courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZC2-3439)



(above) Montecito was one of many thoroughbreds slated to race in 1901 at Underhill's racetrack

(left) Underhill at the race track in 1901 sports the huge sombrero that "made his slight well-dressed body look like the stem of a mushroom" (photo courtesy of Montecito Association History Archive)

site and the environment. Its south wall made entirely of multi-paned windows and doors, *La Chiquita* was able to take advantage of the ocean view visible under the branches of the spreading oaks.

David Gebhard, writing in *Santa Barbara Architecture*, said that *La Chiquita's* many bays and windows reinforced the feeling of being in an open pavilion in the woods. For him, Underhill's bungalow, "with its blend of control, rationalism and informality," was a classic example of American Arts and Crafts architecture. (In 1925 *La Chiquita* was sold to the developers of the Biltmore Hotel.)

With his Montecito nest well underway, Underhill attended a masked ball, a Pink Domino, at the Country Club. When the masks came off at midnight under the rose-colored lights of the floral fairyland of the transformed hall, Francis Townsend Underhill espied the lovely 18-year-old Carmelita Dibblee. Three weeks later, they announced their engagement. For those who wondered at the May-December romance, a New York Society column put it succinctly: "Mr. Underhill is an extremely rich man"

Nineteen hundred and six was a busy year for Underhill. He sold El Roblar Rancho to Balfour-Guthrie Investment Company, joined the ranks of autoists with a 30-35 Ranier, gave an open-house party for the completed *La Chiquita*, bought 232 acres of the old Ortega Rancho along Sheffield Drive and renamed them *Los Alisos*, and on October 4 was married at Carmelita's family home. Though Carmelita had recently attended three years of convent school in Paris, a Presbyterian minister

performed the private ceremony, after which the couple honeymooned in Europe for several months.

Upon their return in 1907, Underhill razed the home of a previous owner of the Ortega Ranch, Henry L. Williams, the spiritualist founder of Summerland, and began construction of a new home on its site. Perhaps Henry's spirits were displeased because, before the home was completed, fire devoured it entirely. It was never replaced, and he and Carmelita remained at *La Chiquita*.

Architecture and Landscape

With the success of *La Chiquita*, Underhill's friends and neighbors began to see him in a new light and commissioned him to design their houses. Ironically, few wanted a simple bungalow, but that didn't deter Underhill. Over the next 20 years, he would enhance the architectural landscape of Montecito and Santa Barbara with over 32 houses and several gardens.

One of the first to avail herself of Underhill's talents was his mother-in-law, Francisca de la Guerra y Dibblee, for whom Underhill designed a simple single-story classical home that backed onto Junipero Plaza. From 1910 to 1917, Underhill operated an architecture and landscape office in Montecito which employed four to six assistants who had architectural training. In 1911, he was involved in the restoration of Casa de la Guerra.

Underhill was more than willing to create plans for the eclectic tastes of his clients. His designs ranged from Classical Greek and Roman edifices to English half-timbered manor houses to Mediterranean villas and Swiss chalets. David Gebhard wrote, "He usually confined historical references to a few salient details – the principal entrance or an interior fireplace, for example. In their Cubist plaster volumes, his houses come quite close to the simplicity of design that we associate with concurrent work by Irving J. Gill."

Among his many commissions, he designed homes for fellow yachtsman, horse breeder, and Union Carbide owner, C.K.G. Billings' Alston Road estate; Arrow Shirt mogul Frederick Forrest Peabody's *Solana*; president of Waldorf-Astoria Hotel Company George Boldt's home and the clubhouse at Bartlett Polo Field along Middle Road.

One of his most remarkable projects was the Roman bathhouse and lower garden for George Owen Knapp's *Arcady*. The Roman pavilion contained changing rooms and an indoor pool, and its ceiling could slide open to bathe the interior with sunshine and fresh air. Immediately outside was a terrace beyond which lay a large oval swimming pool and then a children's pool and a decorative lily pond. A 1,200-foot walk of small pools, stairs, terraces and a grotto cascaded down the slope to end at a teahouse.

Poor health would eventually lead his doctors to order him to give up his architectural pursuits and to go back to the land, and his commissions dwindled after WWI.

Underhill Opines

Francis Townsend Underhill was involved in many aspects of community life. To name a few, he served as vice-president of the Civic League which organized the festivities for the visit of the Great White Fleet in 1908, was involved in the Good Roads Movement, and was an investor in the Rincon Causeway project. He designed a dormitory for the Deane School and served on its board. He was a charter member and four-year president of the Santa Barbara Club, the Society of Los Alamos, both La Cumbre and Santa Barbara (Montecito) country clubs, and Commodore of the Santa Barbara Yacht Club.

On issues before the city, he was not shy about expressing his opinion. In 1907, the Anti-Saloon League placed an initiative on the December municipal ballot asking that the sale of liquor in Santa Barbara be



prohibited. The No-Saloon group took out ads with headlines that screamed, "The Saloon At Its Best is the Worst Thing That Ever Cursed This Land."

Francis T. Underhill added his voice to the fray by writing the editorial, "Prohibition, Mother of Deception." He wrote, "The education of temperance is estimable while the insistence on enforced total abstinence is absurd." He believed that many prohibition advocates were undesirable fanatics. "It is very trying to note the almost sacrilegious way in which the Scriptures are made to serve the end of the prohibitionist,"

he wrote, “notwithstanding the fact that ‘our Lord’ saved the good wine until the last.”

On election day in Santa Barbara, big tally-ho’s filled with white-gowned children drove about town singing hymns and shouting, “Vote dry! Vote dry!” but the initiative was roundly defeated.

In 1911, Underhill took on another ballot issue: women’s suffrage in California. At the time, women could only vote in 6 U.S. states and not at all in federal elections. Underhill was against giving women the vote and cautioned, “...when it comes to giving equal suffrage, the normal male should hesitate before deliberately putting a noose around his own neck.” Underhill believed women’s lot was burdensome enough. With the added pressure of the vote, the weaker sex would completely succumb; far better to leave such things to a man.

“The feminine mind,” he wrote, “is illogical and inclined to hysterical conclusions.” If women were able to vote they’d start changing all the laws and the whole fabric of society would be destroyed.

“Be not overcome by subtle arguments from the mouths of silver-tongued matrons!” he warned.

His words provoked a ration of rebuttals from men and women alike and in October, the majority of California men voted to give California women complete suffrage.

Last Days at Los Alisos

Having been labeled a chauvinist pig and ordered to cease and desist with his architectural endeavors by his doctors, Underhill decided to breed hogs and propagate dahlias at Los Alisos. He invested \$25,000 in a herd of 100 prize Hampshire hogs and set about perfecting the breed. A newspaper in 1918 said, “It isn’t generally known that in Montecito’s exclusive environment, there’s the world’s most famous hog ranch, but it’s true.”

In 1919, breeders from throughout the state came for an auction at his new concrete amphitheater which doubled as a barbeque area. The newspapers said, “Mr. Underhill’s porkers are not of the common hog clay, for they don’t wallow in mud.... They are so pampered that the adjectives ‘lovely’ ‘beautiful’ and ‘exquisite’ might be applied to them.” After years of research and testing, Underhill published “A Brief Essay on the Evolution of a Hampshire Herd with Reflections on the Art of Animal Breeding.”

Carmelita and Francis moved onto the Los Alisos property in 1925, and four years later, after an illness of several weeks, he died.

Underhill had adopted the West as his home, forsaking all that he had known to live out his life in pursuit of his dreams. His friends remembered his eccentricities fondly and Elizabeth Eaton Burton wrote, “Though he



Unidentified guests at Underhill’s Rancho El Roblar in 1893 entertain themselves with a game of horseshoes and pose on the porch (photos courtesy of Santa Barbara Historical Museum)



had long ago left his New York ways behind him, he always remained a dapper New Yorker in his dress, although he made an exception by the wearing of a huge sombrero, which made his slight well-dressed body look like the stem of a mushroom. When seated in a Mexican saddle, he felt himself lord of all he surveyed.”

William Paul Blair writing in *Pacific Horticulture* wrote, “Underhill exemplified the Renaissance concept of *virtù*, a strong motivation toward excellence in a number of fields of endeavor.” And Welford Benton, who met Underhill wrote, “And withal Francis T. Underhill is a kindly gentleman who knows how to laugh when there’s anything to laugh at. It may be that is his greatest claim to distinction.”

(The author wishes to acknowledge the excellent files at the Montecito Association History Archive and the Santa Barbara Historical Museum as well as the gracious loan of Kathi Brewster’s personal files on Underhill.)

