



THE house ON Hermitage Road

The house at
1901 Hermitage Road
in Ojai ... talks



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photos: NOAH WEBB

TO MARGARET MENNINGER, WHO LIVED THERE FROM 1996 TO 2016, THE LANGUAGE WAS BIRDSONG — SO MANY DIFFERENT SPECIES, ALWAYS WARBLING.

TO WENDY HILGERS, WHO LIVED IN THE GUESTHOUSE FROM 1969 TO THE EARLY 1970S, IT WAS LONG CONVERSATIONS IN THE MAIN HOME'S KITCHEN.

AND TO SONNY WARD, AN ARCHITECT WHO LIVES THERE NOW WITH HIS HUSBAND AND THEIR DAUGHTER AND SON, IT'S THE VERY BONES OF THE HOUSE, WHICH ARE STILL INTACT.

"I let the house tell me what it's capable of," Ward says.

The 3,500-square-foot historical home, built in 1901 or 1903 (historians aren't sure of the exact year), hasn't lost its unique Ojai voice after more than 100 years.

Ward and his husband, Michael Lombardo, lovingly spent two years restoring and renovating the interior, with the goal of maintaining its vintage features while adding new ones like skylights and a modern kitchen. They've done the same outdoors, gradually replacing water-ravenous foliage with California natives.

"As much as possible, we've kept, added to, or moved around what was already here," Ward says, referring to plants, buildings, and physical details of the home's interior.

Their nearly 43-acre property, which they call "the ranch," sits off a private road at the north end of Gridley Road on a larger group of properties known as the Hermitage or Hermitage Ranches, nestled in a canyon against a hillside adjacent to Los Padres National Forest. The Hermitage started out circa 1878 as a single homestead of 160 acres that grew to 290 acres, and was eventually split into 10 parcels.

Over the years, the overall Hermitage property and ranch house have been home to 11 different owners, including homesteader Andrew B. Bronson, who came up with the name "the Hermitage"; Harry Cockley, who built the 1901 Hermitage Road house; and state Sen. Orestes Orr. A few of the former owners didn't actually live on the property, and most were from elsewhere in the country. Like others drawn west to California, they were seeking a warmer climate.

The term "Hermitage" refers to the property's somewhat hidden nature, unseen from the valley below. The address was originally 2484 Gridley Road, but the fire department requested a change, to be consistent with the home's actual location on Hermitage Road; "1901" happened to be one of the address number options as well as one of two possible dates the home was built.

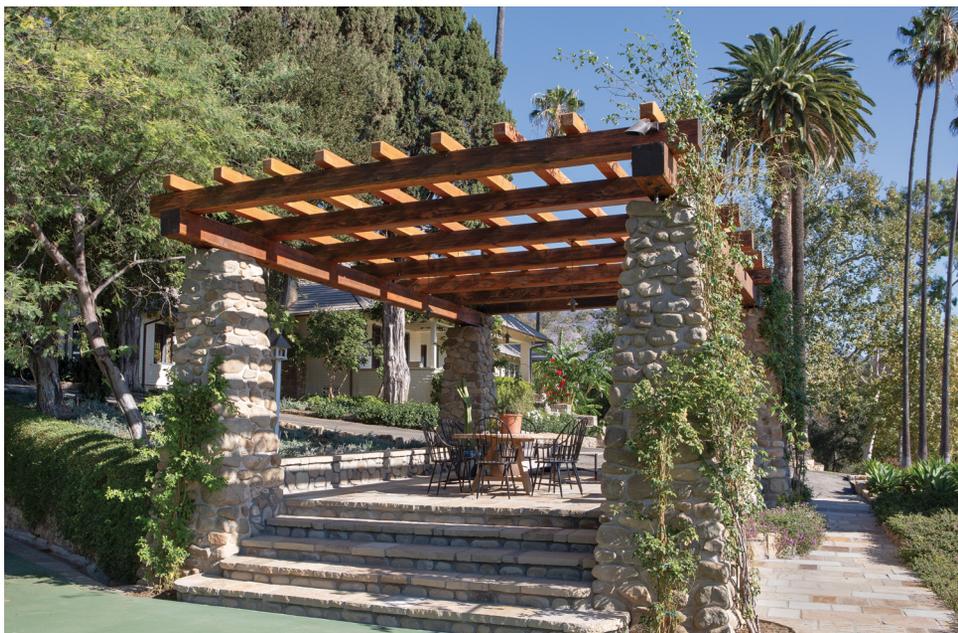


photo: AMY NEUNSIINGER

Ventura County conducted a Cultural Heritage Survey of unincorporated properties in the Ojai Valley in 1985, which found that the 1901 Hermitage Road house was potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or designation as a Ventura County Historical Landmark. The county regards the home as a "site of merit."

Ward and Lombardo are committed, like previous owners, to maintaining the home's authenticity.

Former owner Menninger, who still lives in Ojai with her husband Fritz, says that "part of the responsibility of owning the Hermitage was recognizing its timelessness; it has Old World charm. It's not anything I would have considered changing, from day one."





The home, which includes a 1,500-square-foot guesthouse (designed by owner/architect Berkeley Brandt in 1930), is part of a working ranch surrounded by orchards filled with avocado, Pixie tangerine, and other citrus trees, as well as grapevines. The fruits of all this flora are sold as produce or wine.

The landscape closer to the house includes ground cover of creeping rosemary (a remarkably dark green alternative to grass) and lantana; agave; azaleas; jasmine; California oaks; palm trees; a 100-year-old Italian cypress; poinsettias; and numerous other fruit trees bearing pears, plums, persimmons, lemons, and apples.

Ward offered a tour of the property's bumpy and sometimes steep pathways in a Kawasaki utility vehicle, accompanied by the family's two boxers, Freddy and Elly. He pointed out additional features of the property, including a barn, pool, garages, horse corral, old aviary turned into a gym, and several structures he built himself.

While others were baking banana bread during the pandemic, Ward was making sheds. His handiwork included an open shed for growing seeds, an aerated compost shed that shortens manure-making time, and a chicken house made of cedar recycled from old New York dairy barns.

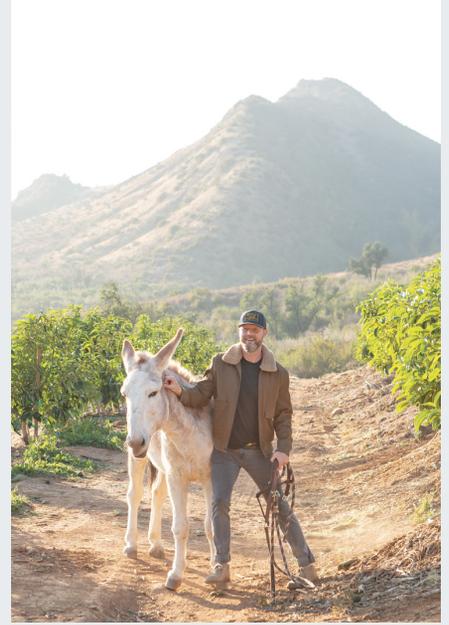
He also created a meadow. After clearing a large area, he tossed wildflower seeds and let nature go to work, generating a rugged sea of purple and yellow blooms.

Other residents of the ranch include three horses and three mammoth donkeys (a U.S. variety of tall donkeys originally brought to America by, among others, George Washington).

Ward and Lombardo, an entertainment executive, also own a home in Los Angeles. They almost didn't end up in Ojai, and deliberately stayed away for more than a decade.

The couple used to rent a house in Ojai on Reeves Road for vacations, but had never been there during the toastiest days of summer until 18 years ago, the year their daughter Josie was born.

"It was hot as hell — 100 degrees — and we had no air conditioning," Ward says. "We were miserable."



So it was 12 years before they came back, but for much more than a visit. On that trip, they bought the 1901 Hermitage Road house.

The home's front porch was the biggest selling point.

Ward and Lombardo had been looking for a house in Santa Barbara County, but couldn't find anything. A friend suggested they visit the Hermitage, which was up for sale, so they decided to take a look despite previous reservations about Ojai's summer heat.



photos: NOAH WEBB

As soon as they ascended the 13 stone stairs leading up to the front porch, turned around to see the view of the heart of the Ojai Valley, and felt the breeze that constantly blows no matter how hot the weather is, they were hooked.

“It’s just magical; it’s the most beautiful place in the world,” Ward says. That same covered porch has been around since 1901/03, and serves now as a spot for morning coffee, meditation, meals, and mingling with guests.



accommodations and a social spot for artists who participated in the Ojai Music Festival and Ojai Playwrights Conference.

Menninger, who hosted many of those notables, did not want to share names of specific people who stayed there, out of respect for her former guests’ privacy. She did confirm that a 48th birthday party for pianist Emanuel Ax took place at the house when he was artistic director of the 1997 music festival.

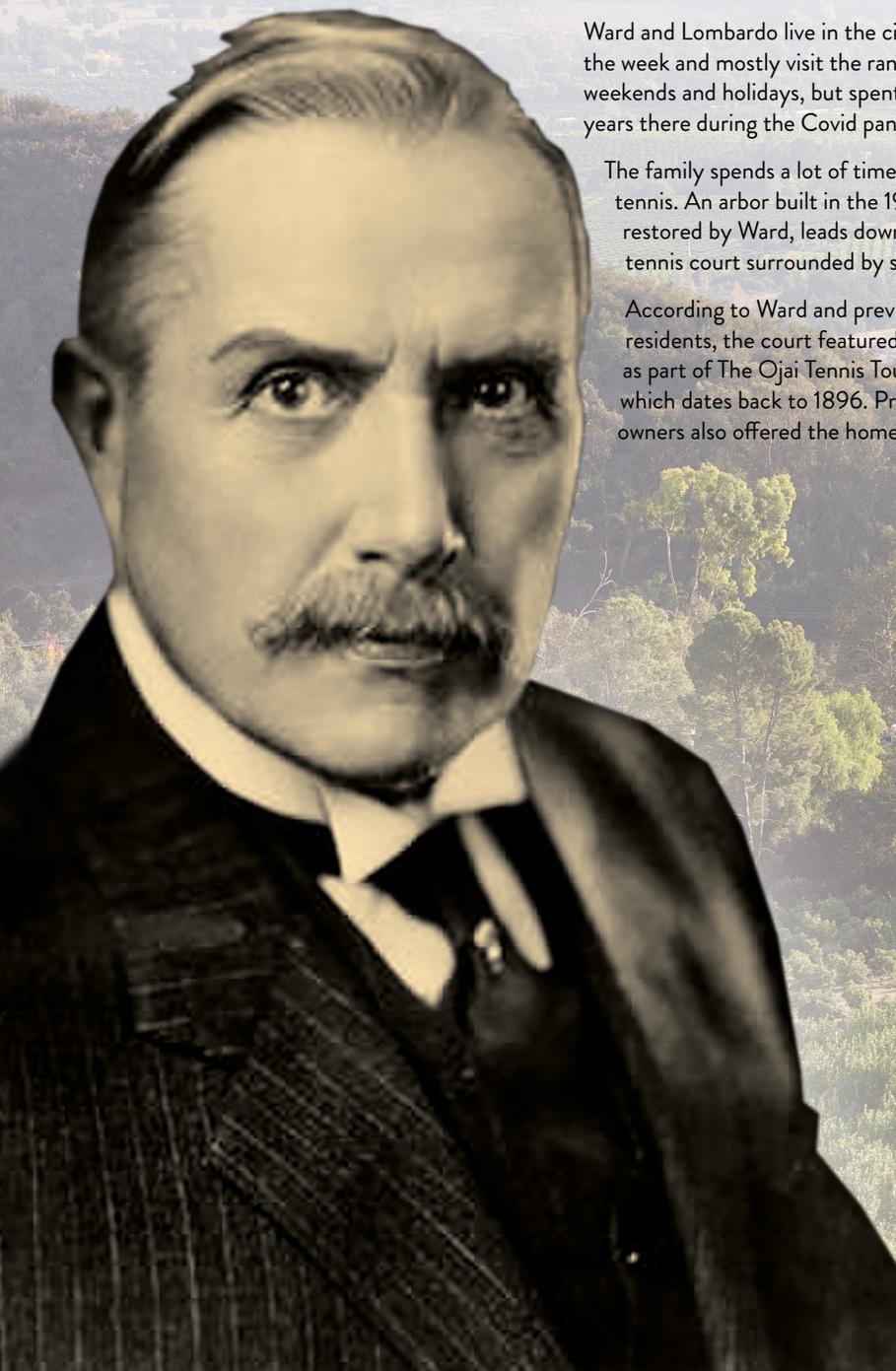
Ward, a member of the California Architects Board, helped with the design of the restoration and renovation and wanted to make the home more modern while avoiding drastic changes.

He’s proud, for example, of the original weighted windows, which move up and down via a rope on cylinders; the California redwood paneling in the dining room; and the pocket doors. The library, in addition to some of the original shelves (which hold, among other books, a set of *Hardy Boys* mysteries for Josie, who didn’t want to read *Nancy Drew*), features a hidden door that leads to their son Johnny’s room.

Ward and Lombardo live in the city during the week and mostly visit the ranch on weekends and holidays, but spent two full years there during the Covid pandemic.

The family spends a lot of time playing tennis. An arbor built in the 1920s, restored by Ward, leads down to a tennis court surrounded by stone walls.

According to Ward and previous residents, the court featured matches as part of The Ojai Tennis Tournament, which dates back to 1896. Previous owners also offered the home as guest



To take full advantage of the natural light and canyon breezes, Ward and Lombardo added skylights and opened up the home to create axis lines from one end of the house to the other. In the entryway, for example, previously separated from the kitchen by a



wall, you can see into the breakfast room, which has citrus-themed wallpaper on the ceiling.

Chet Hilgers, a longtime Ojai resident, lived in the main property's guesthouse with his parents and sister for a few years starting in 1969, when the main house was owned by Bill and Margaret Thomas. Bill Thomas, who owned the JBL audio speaker company, retired in 1970 and bought the Hermitage. He and his neighbor William Myers combined their properties in 1975 and subdivided them into the 10 current parcels.

Hilgers recalled a story that revealed the desirability of the Hermitage Ranch to unscrupulous outsiders:

Left: The home's architect, John C. Austin served as an architect for landmark buildings including Los Angeles City Hall, the Shrine Auditorium, and Griffith Observatory.

Thomas and Hilgers' dad, Chris, who did odd jobs around the ranch, were once working on a bulldozer, with Thomas out of sight underneath the machine, when "some guy came up in a Cadillac in a cloud of dust and asked, 'Who owns this property?'

Maybe I could cut you guys in on a deal if you introduce me to whoever the sucker is.'" Thomas then popped out from under the bulldozer to introduce himself as the sucker/owner.

Chet's mom, Wendy Hilgers, who still lives in Ojai, said she and Chris moved to the ranch guesthouse in 1969 to help with repairs after the great flood that winter.

"We spent a lot of time in the big house," she said. "The owners were so wonderful.

Most of the time we were in the kitchen, in these big old chairs, talking."

A historical report on the 1901 Hermitage Road home prepared by historian Judy Triem of San Buenaventura Research Associates describes the house's architectural style as "transitional between

the Shingle style and the Craftsman Bungalow."

The Shingle style, popular from 1880 to 1900, was distinctly American — informal and eclectic, featuring asymmetric buildings that blended into natural surroundings, often with stone foundations, and porches or balconies that encouraged outdoor interaction.

Craftsman style features, according to the report, include "the interior use of wood paneling and other exterior features such as the use of dressed masonry for the foundation, fireplace, and walls."

The home's architect, John C. Austin, was born and educated in England, and eventually lived and worked in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Pasadena. According to the Los Angeles Conservancy, Austin served as an architect for landmark buildings including Los Angeles City Hall, the Shrine Auditorium, and Griffith Observatory. He received a commendation from L.A. Mayor Samuel W. Yorty "for serving in an outstanding manner as a distinguished architect."

The historical report suggests the property could be eligible for landmark status





photos: AMY NEUNSINGER



because it is associated with the Ojai Valley's citrus-growing history; showcases the Shingle and Craftsman styles, by Austin, a prominent architect whose early surviving works are rare; and maintains its integrity because the design of the home hasn't been substantially altered.

One aspect of the home Ward wanted to preserve was portions of a concrete patio that included the handprints, initials, and etchings of former children and residents who lived in the house.

He and Lombardo took out the concrete, but kept the pieces that included imprints from the past. Those pieces are now stones in a garden path.

One features the initials and handprints of "LB," from one of the children of Berkeley and Grace Brandt, whose family lived in the house the longest, from 1923 to 1970.

Ward and Lombardo have added "J1" and "J2," referring to their own children.

Creating the pathway, Ward says, "was sometimes heavy, sometimes joyful, like any restoration."

The house seemed to whisper back, "Thank you." ■