

Neighborhoods

SMITHCLIFFS: A PINE DAPPLED PARADISE

By Duncan Forgey

Just south of Emerald Bay, a rugged promontory thrusts into the Pacific, taking the endless pounding of the sea. Neatly situated upon it is an enclave of 17 striking homes befitting the finest and most desired of Southern Californian lifestyles. Just a decade old, these homes have engendered intense scrutiny from the real estate community. The development is called Smithcliffs, after one of its most recent owners. The 10.4 acres have a long history.

This was a special place to the Gabrielanos Indians who roamed the area before the coming of the Europeans. It was from this point that they gathered to watch the sun set. Some even settled upon the bluff as they wandered the friendly hillsides of coastal Southern California. It was a viewpoint with spiritual significance.

This romantic palisade remained a place of undisturbed beauty until the turn of the 20th Century. Once a year, thousands of brilliantly colored Monarch butterflies stopped here on their migration from South America to enjoy the vast collection of trees upon the bluff top.

In 1915, a wealthy lady of Victorian upbringing purchased 20 acres that included Emerald Terrace, Crown Point and Smithcliffs. Her name was Dobbins and she built a mansion for herself on the property. Soon she built a second home for her daughter Wilhelmina and her son-in-law Thaddeus Lowe Jr. He was the son of a well-known railroad tycoon and Civil War spy.

The real star of the next two decades was Florence, Wilhelmina and Thaddeus' daughter, a unique character who married the established Reverend Rankin Barnes of the St. James Episcopal Church in South Pasadena. However, Florence, called by her nickname "Pancho," was too racy for the conservative lifestyle of South Pasadena. She was described as "an oddly shaped, almost grotesque" woman who wore outlandish clothing, smoked cigars, worked as a stunt pilot in Hollywood, and had an affinity for wild parties. Smithcliffs became her party house.

In 1936, Oscar Howard, an oil millionaire, purchased Smithcliffs and it was returned to the serenity of a wealthy beachfront estate. Life was relatively quiet when it was sold to Lon Smith and his wife Margurite, who lived on the property for 34 years. Mr. Smith had gained a vast fortune by being a "lease hound" in the early wildcat days of California. The Smiths entertained many of the old families of Laguna at the estate well known for its forest of pine trees, fruit trees and collection of live pheasants.

In 1985, Margurite sold the property to local developer and businessman Gary Brinderson for \$15 million. He originally intended to divide it and sell one of the parcels. However, it soon became apparent that it was more feasible to subdivide the land into multiple lots.



Smithcliffs from the air

This decision began a six-year political and economic campaign that included numerous hearings, lengthy commission meetings, heated panel discussions, and three lawsuits. Smithcliffs was like a baby lying breach in its mother's womb, readying itself for delivery.

Brinderson compromised on many issues, including the relocation of approximately 70 very old and valuable trees. Today, these same trees give Smithcliffs a mature ambiance contrary to newer high-end developments of the Newport Coast. Also unique to Smithcliffs was the decision to allow "architectural freedom" in the design of the homes. It is unusual to see a stark contemporary home next to a traditional Cape Cod surrounded by large mature pine trees. Mr. and Mrs. Brinderson, now homeowners, find the lifestyle idyllic as they spend hours on their veranda listening to the seals and seagulls playing along the coastline.

There were originally 29 lots in the development. Currently there are only 17 homes, since some buyers purchased more than one lot to enhance their property. One home is currently being built and one more is in the planning stages.

Prices in Smithcliffs currently range from \$2,995,000 to \$4,290,000. The highest sale in the development was \$10 million. There is a home on the front row that would surpass this value easily if it were being marketed today.

Smithcliffs offers a priceless lifestyle with an equally priceless past. If you are fortunate to visit this little slice of heaven you will see that the baby was finally born in 1991. It was a gorgeous baby and mother and child are doing just fine.

