



# EAGLE ROCK VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Fall, 2016

## A Home for History

**E**l Alisal is a rustic 4,000-square-foot Craftsman-style home built by Charles Lummis, a colorful journalist and historian who deeded the home to the Southwest Museum prior to his death in 1928. The state later purchased the property and transferred it to L.A.'s Department of Recreation and Parks, which oversees its use. They issued a public request for proposals for the house in December, 2013. Last June, Occidental filed what it called "a deliberately unconventional" response which declared that the proposed five- to 10-year lease they offered wasn't enough to bring about the kind of genuine transformation the city wanted to see. After six months of constructive negotiations, the department has agreed in principle to the idea of an unprecedented 35-year lease, with an option to renew for another 15 years.

Given the excellent relationship that has emerged with the city, says Jeremiah "Jem" Axelrod, an adjunct profes-

sor at Oxy, "The key at this point is to raise the additional funds we need to be able to move ahead and restore El Alisal for our students, faculty, and the entire community," as the home for Oxy's proposed Institute for the History of Los Angeles.

"Our goal is to weave this architectural treasure back into the fabric of the community, resurrecting its role as one of the city's major public intellectual and cultural institutions by creating a center for the study of Southern California history" says Axelrod.

He will discuss this effort at the Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society meeting Tuesday, October 18 at 7:00. All are welcome and light refreshments will be served. For more information see our color insert reprinted from Occidental Magazine.



**O**ccidental College shown under construction in 1913, Swan Hall in the foreground. How could this hitherto urban school maintain its ties with the city with its main entrance road ending in a swamp? Underlined in the upper left are the tracks of the Los Angeles Railway one of two lines in easy walking distance. Oxy somehow obtained water and sewage disposal. The Oxy of 1913 was briefly on the edge of the rapidly growing Los Angeles infrastructure.

### Greetings, Friends:

#### Not Your Father's Preservation Report

Recently, I reviewed the Historic Resources Assessment Report for 1554 Hill Drive, known as Chateau Emmanuel or the Bekins-Lane Estate. One of our most stately homes and a large estate-size property, it has long been regarded as a historic resource although never officially designated. So I was anxious to see the documentation that would add to the information we have on file in the ERVHS archives.

The report, commissioned by the proposed developer of the property, listed the four owners, Owen Hudgen, followed by Martin Bekins, Wilfred Lane and the Kvassay family. Surprisingly, the report concluded that the estate's association with Martin Bekins, founder of Bekins' Van and Storage Company and Wilfred Lane, founder of Lane-Wells and the discoverer of the forerunner of the fracking process, was not considered "historically significant" since their most noted accomplishments preceded their living on the estate. Thus the improvements to the grounds and structures built by these owners were not significant.

This redefinition of history seems designed to evade the California Environmental Quality Act, which includes the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, in particular:

*9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*

The report concludes that only the 5577 square foot French-Revival-Influenced 1925 residence has significance, and that the proposed 40-foot tall, 36,485 square foot contemporary-style retreat structure would not have an impact on the historic property; this despite the fact that the proposed massing of the new structure would be 818% greater than that of the historic house.

The document also fails to address the fact that the proposed development is located in the Hill Drive neighborhood containing many stately homes that represent the historical development of our community. It concludes that none of these houses are

of significance.

I have been involved in preservation since 1981 when it was a grass-roots effort. We began to attract lawyers, architects, historians, engineers and planners with an interest in the historic environment. With the founding of the California Preservation Foundation in 1977 and the Los Angeles Conservancy in 1978, the premise that Los Angeles had no history and that newer was always better began to change. Laws were created to protect our historic resources.

Now with the growth in interest in historic properties, historic preservation has become an industry, with specialists in law, architecture, engineering, planning and construction. The up-side of this is that we now have a professional historic preservation community. The down-side is developer financed historic preservation reports like the one cited above.

#### The objectives of the Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society

- to preserve, clarify through research and to perpetuate the history of Eagle Rock Valley
- to make this history available to students, researchers, libraries and all interested persons
- to preserve and protect our local landmarks, especially the Eagle Rock

Membership is open to all who would further these objectives

Public Archive Hours 10 to 12 every Saturday  
at the Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock  
2225 Colorado Blvd. Eagle Rock CA 90041  
for information call 323-257-1357

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Visit our website at:

[eaglerockhistory.org](http://eaglerockhistory.org)

Photos by Kevin Burke | Historic photos courtesy Occidental College Special Collections



## Jem of an Idea

Under the guidance of adjunct professor **Jeremiah Axelrod**, Highland Park's Lummis House is the focus of Oxy's proposed Institute for the History of L.A.

**Two years ago, Jeremiah “Jem” Axelrod**—an adjunct professor of history, American studies, and urban and environmental policy at Oxy—was inspired by his colleagues' and students' enthusiasm for research on Los Angeles' diverse communities to turn his long-gestating idea for a Los Angeles studies institute into a formal proposal to President Jonathan Veitch.

At the same time, just a couple of miles to the south of campus, the Historical Society of Southern California (HSSC) was absorbing the unwelcome news that the city was not going to renew its lease on El Alisal, the

historic Charles Fletcher Lummis house that had been the society's home since 1965.

Today, the unlikely convergence of these two events has resulted in a full-blown effort by the College to negotiate an unconventional lease agreement with the city and raise \$3.2 million to fund restoration of El Alisal to serve as the home for Oxy's proposed Institute for the History of Los Angeles.

With Veitch leading the charge, the College has already received two substantial grants from Howard Ahmanson and the Ahmanson Foundation, developed a detailed restoration plan, entered negotiations with

the city, and garnered the support of local, state, and national groups—from neighborhood councils to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

“Our goal is to weave this architectural treasure back into the fabric of the community, resurrecting its role as one of the city's major public intellectual and cultural institutions by creating a center for the study of Southern California history that will also serve as a scholarly, artistic, and cultural resource—all built around Oxy's core mission of undergraduate teaching and learning,” says Axelrod, author of *Inventing Autopia: Dreams and Visions of the Modern Metropolis in Jazz Age Los Angeles* (2009).

Located in Highland Park, El Alisal is a rustic 4,000-square-foot Craftsman-style home built by Lummis, a colorful journalist and historian who deeded the home to the Southwest Museum—one of his many creations—prior to his death in 1928. The state later purchased the property and transferred it to L.A.'s Department of Recreation and Parks, which oversees its use.

Recreation and Parks issued a public request for proposals for the house in December 2013 after notifying the HSSC that it would have to leave by the end of the following year. Last June, Occidental filed what it called “a deliberately unconventional” response to the RFP that declared that the proposed five- to 10-year lease on offer wasn't enough to bring about the kind of genuine transformation the city wanted to see. After six months of constructive negotiations, the department has agreed in principle to the idea of an unprecedented 35-year lease, with an option to renew for another 15 years.

Given the excellent relationship that has emerged with the city, “The key at this point is to raise the additional funds we need to be able to move ahead and restore El Alisal for our students, faculty, and the entire commu-



**FAR LEFT:** An exterior of Lummis House, TV aerial and all, from the 1960 Library of Congress Historic American Building Survey. **LEFT:** The Museo at El Alisal, containing Lummis' collections, from the 1975 book *Charles F. Lummis: The Man and His West*.



**OPPOSITE:** Diversity and interchange were Charles Lummis' hallmarks—"very much in opposition to many of his peers at the time," says Axelrod.

**RIGHT AND BELOW:** Interior views of El Alisal today. Lummis House would be the focal point for Oxy's effort to become the pre-eminent archive of northeast Los Angeles, hosting oral history projects, digitization initiatives, and such.



**ABOVE:** Charles Lummis visits his old college friend, President Teddy Roosevelt, at Occidental's Highland Park campus in 1911. During his lifetime, Lummis "hosted raucous parties, cultural events, scholarly gatherings, and daily familial get-togethers at El Alisal," says Axelrod. "We are proposing to revive a bit of that tradition for Oxy, northeast L.A., and visitors from all over. He'd be very happy to see his old home come back to life in this way, I am sure."



nity," Axelrod says. (Board of Trustees policy requires full funding be in place before such a project can move forward.)

The interdisciplinary faculty advisory committee Axelrod organized sees real promise in the project, particularly for its potential for Oxy's student researchers. Also receptive to the idea of Oxy bringing new life to El Alisal are a wide range of historic, preservation, and community groups. In addition to neighborhood councils in northeast Los Angeles, among those who have expressed support for the College's efforts are the Highland Park Heritage Trust, Autry National Center, California Historical Society, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Los Angeles City Councilmember Gil Cedillo, in whose district the Lummis House is located, also has been actively supportive. Although deeply disappointed by the city's decision, the HSSC—until recently headed by historian John Pohlmann '62—cooperated with the College as it explored the possibilities.

"Occidental is ideally situated, in temperament and locale, to assist the Lummis

House in again becoming a centerpiece of historical and cultural activity," William Deverell, director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, and Ted Bosley, director of the Gamble House, wrote in a letter of support. "We are excited by the possibilities, and we wholeheartedly endorse your interest in helping to bring this critical site back so that it may once again play a major role in our part of greater Los Angeles."

And what would Charles Lummis—a native New Englander who famously walked 2,200 miles from Cincinnati to Los Angeles in 1884 to take a reporting job at the *L.A. Times*—think of the idea? "Although terms such as oral history projects and digitization initiatives might be foreign to him, Lummis would fully understand and appreciate the concept behind them: to collect and preserve the precious shared memories of a community not only for scholars but for those community members and their descendants," Axelrod says. "As city librarian of Los Angeles, he worked hard to do exactly that himself."—**JIM TRANQUADA**



"I am certain Lummis would be enthusiastic about the Institute's mission to bring the Oxy and northeast L.A. communities together in shared interest and study of the city's rich and diverse history," says Axelrod (with daughters Amalia and Sophie inside Lummis House).

## ERVHS Parties!

**I**t's true! The Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society is officially 55 years old! We decided to celebrate our anniversary in conjunction with our annual Ice Cream Social this year. What a fun and successful event! There were neighbors and friends of all ages in attendance, raffle prizes abounded, and live music and dancing in full glory! It isn't a party without some delicious cake to celebrate, so we made sure to pass slices out after singing "Happy Birthday" to us. Thank you to all who attended the event and made an afternoon of it. Your attendance directly supports our ability to preserve our collective local history.

We appreciate the efforts of our volunteers, the Eagle Rock High School Key Club and the Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock. Thanks to Peter Breede, Fifth Friday Folk Dance Band, Betchen Barber and the Oxy Folk and Historical Dance Troupe and The ERHS Latin Jazz Band for spirited entertainment.



On the center stage in the center of Eagle Rock the party begins. The crowd built throughout the evening, festive and mostly local.

On that note, thanks to the raffle prize donors who generously donated their goods and/or services to make our party a fundraiser to boot! Please patronize these stores: Trader Joe's, Oinkster, Galco's, Street Food Cinema, Tritch Hardware, Sprouts, The Lab for Hands on Learning, Colombo's, Dave's Grillin' & Chillin', Starbucks and Sir Michaels. Also author Frank Parrello, Fred Guapo of Hall & Chambers Realty, and local artist David McNutt.

Here's to next year!

How delightful! It was a total blast! At our booth at the Eagle Rock Music Festival on August 20th, we may have had our busiest year ever! From the very start of the event to the end of the night, neighbors were there with questions and inquiries about Eagle Rock's interesting history. It was great to talk to old friends. We sold many books on Eagle Rock's history and gathered several new members into our organization.

We hope that if you stopped by we piqued your interest in history. We are open Saturdays from 10am – noon in the basement of the Center for the Arts at 2225 Colorado Blvd. Please come by, check out our fabulous collection, and maybe help us answer a question or two. You may have information that we don't have or know about! Thank you for visiting us at the music festival and hope to see you again at our archives.





**at the Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock  
2225 Colorado Blvd. Eagle Rock CA, 90041**

**OXY'S CENTER FOR THE HISTORY  
OF L.A. AND THE LUMMIS HOUSE**

**TUESDAY, OCT. 18, 2016, 7:00**

**GLEN CREASON:**

**MAPPING LOS ANGELES**

**TUESDAY, FEB. 21, 2017, 7:00**

**SAVE THE DATE**

**AN UNTOLD HISTORY**

**TUESDAY, APRIL 18, 2017, 7:00**

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Category:

☐ Individual \$20   ☐ Business \$35   ☐ **New**

☐ Family \$25   ☐ Life \$300   ☐ **Renewal**

Will you help with the ongoing activities of the ERVHS ?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

☐ Archives   ☐ Newsletter   ☐ Oral history

☐ Meetings   ☐ Fundraising   ☐ E-mail me

☐ Publicity   ☐ Displays   ☐ to help

Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Clip and mail to : **ERVHS**  
**c/o Center for the Arts**  
**2225 Colorado Blvd.**  
**Eagle Rock, CA 90041**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**The Member's Corner**



**Alicia Nakata**

Alicia is our newest Historical Society member! Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, Alicia decided to go stateside for college. She graduated from Cal State Long Beach in Elementary Education. She went on to teach in South Central L.A., Highland Park, and eventually to Mt. Washington West, where

she also settled down in a home she currently resides in today. After 34 years of teaching, Alicia retired. Along the way she met and married her husband, also born and raised in Honolulu, and had two daughters.

Where does Eagle Rock come in to all this? Alicia became an attendee of St. Barnabas Church in 1976. Adjacent to our public branch library on Caspar Ave., St. Barnabas is a local architectural treasure, a beautiful and historic church. Through other long time churchgoers, Alicia was encouraged to reach out to Eric Warren, our Vice President, to find out more about the history of St. Barnabas. Our President Frank Parrello and Eric have been able to find a trove of historical information from our archives to share. Alicia and others are inspired to eventually write a book on the history of St. Barnabas. We can't wait! Thank you, Alicia, for your curiosity and bringing new light to this fascinating place!

-Katie Taylor