

How 'Stonedene' grew to 25 rooms

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This is the continuation of the story of Stonedene and the Martin family in Suisun Valley. - Editor

After Samuel Martin's death in 1885, his son, Henry, and daughter-in-law, Carrie Pittman, took over the management of the Martin ranch. They lived in the stone mansion that Carrie had named "Stonedene," the Scottish words meaning "House of Stone."

The compact nearly square house had been built in 1861 entirely of local Tufa stone in the then-fashionable Gothic Revival or American Gothic style, complete with elaborate wooden gingerbread decoration. Its entrance, topped by the steep middle gable, fronted what is today Suisun Valley Road. In addition, the whole front of the house was shaded by a porch, supported by slim columns. All the windows had wooden shutters, helping keep the house cool in the summers. Inside, the 13 small rooms all were wallpapered in the style of the time.

For the next few years, the Martins and their two children, Samuel H. and May, as well as Henry's mother, Jemima and possibly Carrie's mother, Louisa Pittman, lived here. (Louisa died in 1889, Jemima in 1890.)

Besides managing the ranch, producing cattle, grain, and later a large vineyard, the couple also oversaw the operations of the Cordelia Hotel. Carrie inherited that prosperous business after her mother's death. She was ably supported by her husband in operating the business.

Like his father before him, Henry was involved in serving Solano County in a variety of capacities. As a young man, he had studied to become an engineer. He later served as a county engineer under Frank A. Steiger.

Being the proprietor of the Cordelia Hotel seemed to have suited Henry Martin just fine. Around 1901, he and his family moved permanently into the hotel, and they continued to live there until both his, and later Carrie's death. The couple raised their family in the hotel, occupying rooms on the second floor.

Henry Martin died on March 8, 1924. Carrie survived him by more than 13 years. She died, at age 83, on Nov. 27, 1937.

Her grandson William Smith Jr. recalled that one of her last wishes had been to participate in the grand opening of the Golden Gate Bridge. The inauguration ceremonies included a public walk across the length of the bridge. On Thursday, May 27, 1937, Carrie Pittman joined the many visitors in walking across the newly opened Golden Gate Bridge.

One of her last public appearances occurred a few years before, on June 3, 1934, at the unveiling of the bronze statue of Chief Solano. An honored guest at center stage, she contributed a speech to the program, in which she recounted her father's friendship with and appreciation of Chief Solano.

During all these years, Stonedene apparently stood empty and unused.

After his father's death in 1924, Samuel Jr. inherited the ranch and Stonedene. In 1929, he set about to renovate the old house. One of his goals was to change and enlarge the house sufficiently enough, so that both his family (he had married Beth Pleasants, though the couple remained childless) and his sister May's family (who married William J. Smith and had one son, William Jr.) would be able to live there.

During his younger years, Samuel had studied and lived in Berkeley, where he also had made the acquaintance of architect Julia Morgan.

Local lore has it that they were classmates at the University of California, Berkeley.

Julia Morgan was born in 1872, about 11 years earlier than Samuel Martin. She attended UC Berkeley to obtain an undergraduate degree in engineering. By 1896, when Samuel was still a young boy, she was in France, trying to be admitted as the first female student at the Ecole Nationale et Speciale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. It took her two years to be accepted there as a student of architecture.

After her return to San Francisco in 1902, she was employed in the offices of architect John Galen Howard, who designed the elevations and decorative details the Mining Building in memory of mining magnate George Hearst, as well as the Hearst Greek Theatre.

In 1904, Julia Morgan left Galen's offices and opened her own office. She soon began to make a name for herself. Her commissions included the rebuilding of the Fairmont Hotel after the 1906 earthquake. In 1919, she began to work for William Randolph Hearst, first on his ranch at San Simeon, and later on Hearst Castle.

Samuel Martin attended UC Berkeley around 1913 and, like his father before him, majored in engineering. He may well have met Julia Morgan during that time, but

certainly not as a classmate.

At any rate, in 1929 he commissioned her to renovate Stonedene and to enlarge the living space.

Julia Morgan added a new wing at the rear of the house, as well as a separate carriage house, using the same local stone and similarly steep roofline. The house's main entrance was moved from the front to the back of the new wing. The original front porch was removed. Slate tiles replaced the old roof tiles. She changed the windows to become elongated French windows, emphasizing the vertical lines introduced by the steep gables. On the west side of the house, she added a large one-storied solarium.

The inside of the house underwent changes, too. Instead of the many small rooms, Julia Morgan created a large parlor. The newly added wing featured another 12 rooms, a full attic and a basement. Beamed ceilings, arches in the long hallways, and a stippled plaster wall in the dining room all were added touches.

Once the expansion was finished, Stonedene offered two separate apartments, one upstairs and one downstairs. Each unit had its own living areas and a kitchen, offering enough space for two families. Altogether, the house now had 10,500 square feet, 25 rooms, four bathrooms and was surrounded by three acres.

Unfortunately, Samuel's idea of moving both families back into Stonedene did not come to fruition. According to William Smith Jr. the expansion had cost close to \$50,000. Carrie was very upset and refused to move back. For the rest of her life, she and the William Smith family stayed at the Cordelia Hotel.

The year 1929 also brought other troubles to Samuel. The depression made farming a difficult business. He had planted roughly 100 acres in grapes, located in the area where today stands Solano Community College. The property was leased to a Japanese tenant, Ben Matsumoto.

The grape harvest that year filled 37 freight cars, shipped to New York. In normal years, this amount would have brought a tidy profit. That year, though, shipping bills came to more than \$8,000, nearly breaking the farm.

During the 1920s, Samuel also branched out into fruit orchards, planting cherries, apricots, peaches, pears, prunes, and walnuts. But fruit ranching was no longer as profitable as it had been in previous years.

Samuel died in 1962. All the land was sold, including the acreage that today houses Solano Community College. Only the three acres surrounding Stonedene remained.

In 1974, the property was sold to the Curry family, who brought the house back to life. In 1977, Stonedene was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It has since changed hands again.

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