

Historic Lummis Home

By Jean Douglas Robson

El Alisal, home of Charles F. Lummis, southwestern author, editor, librarian, historian and archaeologist, was built to "last for a thousand years."

Built with his own hands, El Alisal was given that Spanish name for the giant Sycamore which grows beside the house.

Constructed of granite boulders and concrete between 1896 and 1910, the house is heterogeneous in composition of studied primitive decor.

El Alisal, a two-story "castle," occupies a 2½ acre site on the west side of the Pasadena freeway in the shadow of Mt. Washington in Highland Park.

Lummis was born in Lynn, Mass., on March 1, 1859. His father, a noted Methodist minister, later a college professor, started his son on Latin, Greek and Hebrew before he was nine.

Harvard man

He graduated from Harvard in '81, where he had published and sold 12,000 copies of his poems, printed on birch bark. In 1884, Lummis walked from Cincinnati to Los Angeles, a distance of 3,000 miles, sending accounts of his progress to the Los Angeles Times where he was made first city editor on his arrival. The city's population was 12,000 at that time.

During his service as war correspondent with the Times, while he was with the Army in pursuit of Geronimo in 1887, Lummis suffered a paralysis (at 28) which made his left side useless.

No wheel chair

Characteristically, he refused to spend his convalescence in a wheel chair. Instead, he went to the Pueblo of Isleta in New Mexico with Indian friends

where he broke wild horses and as a "one-armed hunter" helped supply meat for the encampment.

In 1894, Lummis became editor of "The Land of Sunshine" after having had a number of books published on life in the Southwest, including a booklet on will power, "My Friend Will."

He brought with him a number of crusades for which the modest little magazine provided him a podium to advocate support from. These crusades were: preservation of the California missions, decent treatment of the Indians, conservation of the redwoods, and recording Indian and old California folksongs.

His forthright editorials opposing Imperialism in Cuba, Panama and the Philippines; "stupidity in the Indian and other governmental departments" and injustice anywhere, were not altogether popular opinions. But, after the death of McKinley in 1901, Theo-

dore Roosevelt, the new President, telegraphed Lummis to come to Washington and as an authority on Indian and Western matters in general he helped Roosevelt to prepare his first address to Congress.

Lummis held the post of librarian for the city of Los Angeles from 1905 to 1910 during which he improved the efficiency of the existing system.

Built museum

One of his greatest accomplishments was the building of the Southwest Museum, which he founded in 1907. This monastic-looking building overlooking Sycamore Grove, has been regarded as a scientific institution of high repute and as one of Los Angeles' foremost cultural assets.

Among the many treasures are memorabilia of General John C. Fremont and Lummis' archeological collections and fine library of southwestern books.

As Charles F. Lummis was a singular man 'El Alisal is a singular house. The building of 'El Alisal is a romantic story of persistence and courage. A fifty dollar a month editor, supporting four people, he put to work his Yankee ingenuity and native intelligence and dug the material out of the ground to build the house. To assist him he had his two young sons and two Indian boys from Isleta.

In 15 years the 14 rooms were not all completed. The foundations are deep, the walls are two to four feet thick, the front door weighs 2,000 pounds. It was built to last as a working museum and a place of pilgrimage for those who adopted his famous slogan "See America First!"

Noted guests

Among the many who enjoyed "Don Carlos" hospitality were: John Muir, Will Rogers, Schuman-Heink, Mary Garden, John Burroughs, Maud Allan, David Starr Jordan, Charles Cadman, Douglas Fairbanks, Carrie Jacobs Bond, William Allen White, Helen Morjesko, Gutzon and Solon Borglum, Henry Van Dyke and many others. Scenes for the famous film, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" were made here (with Rudolph Valentino).

Lummis was a small man (5 feet, 7 inches) with a lithe figure and very blue eyes. Far ahead of his time, he defied convention by wearing corduroy in the winter and white sport clothes in summer.

As head librarian he attended American Library Association meetings wearing a sombrero and carrying a guitar.

Era of laughter

Many fiestas and Spanish banquets were held in his home, and music and laughter echoed throughout "the Castle." An L-shaped arrangement of eight rooms with cement floors comprise the downstairs. The entrance room is 16x16, containing a fireplace, an enclosed handcrafted cabinet and other mission-type furnishings, and exposed beam ceiling, as in most of the rooms.

The Musso or museum 25'x16', is beamed with telephone poles burned and rubbed velvet smooth. There is a long book case and glass cases containing his various collections of arrows and artifacts. There are pictures, taken by Lummis in North, Central and South America, and an ornamental fireplace.

In the Southwest corner is the grand portion of the round tower which dominates the 'castle'.

Indian pottery

Painted in ivory, with a beamed ceiling, the Comedor or dining room is 22'x16', contains an unusual collection of Indian pottery and an intricately carved cabinet built in New Mexico in 1776.

The Cocina or kitchen was patterned after that of a mission, in which Indian cooks used an open fire with a smoke outlet overhead.

There is a pantry, laundry room and basement, as well as two upstairs bedrooms and a tower room.

On November 28, 1928, Lummis died at El Alisal. His daughter, Turbese, describes the last rites:

"Wrapped in a chief's blanket and laid on a board among joyous red flowers, he lay facing El Alcalde (the giant, fourfold sycamore in the patio.)"
