



# A Thing of Beauty

## The Art and Architecture of the Oaks

Santa Paula Canyon has been the recipient of multiple and enduring good fortunes, the most fundamental of them arising from the area's abundance of trees and ready supply of water. The rugged mountains that form the neighborhood's backdrop are often touched by winter snows, but only rarely does this inclement weather invade the valley floor.

We know that the first generation of settlers in Santa Paula Canyon took note of the area's picturesque and amenable qualities because the locals were prone to boasting about them in print on a regular basis, and recording their impressions in photographs. But we also know that in the early days, even Southern California's relatively benign natural environment was at least as much a force to be overcome as to be praised. These pioneers struggled mightily to wring a living from the land, leaving them few opportunities to admire the scenery for its own sake.

The mid-1920s marked the inception of a rapid transition in the way Santa Paula Canyon was perceived, understood and appreciated by local residents. By that time, one of the most visible reminders of its workaday past, the Blanchard and Bradley Mill, was gone. With the site converted into a city park, the

laughter of picnickers had replaced the crunch of a millstone. After 1910 the canyon was also being edged out in importance as a source of water for the city, as groundwater wells began to supplement supply. When the graded dirt surface of Ojai Road was paved in 1920, the much-touted scenic “triangle route” between Santa Paula, Ojai and Ventura could be enjoyed more readily than ever. Even before the subdividers started their work, the changes in the canyon were, all at once, visible, audible and perceptible.

A new generation of settlers to the canyon had the opportunity to evolve somewhat more idealized views of their natural setting, born of the comfort of reliable transportation, modern communications, indoor plumbing, and making livings that did not necessarily require the development of calluses. The newer residents included architects, builders and artists, who drew inspiration from the natural world they found in Santa Paula Canyon. This generation of canyon dwellers was possessed of the ability, as well as the luxury, of interpreting what they saw within their chosen means of creative expression.

More than a few of these individuals settled in the Oaks, contributing their talents to the human-created physical form of the neighborhood. When, during the 1920s and 1930s, the small town of Santa Paula boasted two practicing architects, Roy Wilson and Robert Raymond, both were residents of the Oaks neighborhood and in Wilson’s case, also the location of his architectural office. When John Stroh began practicing architecture in Santa Paula as part of the Wilson firm during the 1940s, he too built his home in the Oaks.

Photographer Horace Bristol settled in the canyon during the early 1930s, before going on to fame as a photojournalist. While the home and studio of Santa Paula’s most famed artists, Jessie Arms Botke and Cornelis Botke, were located in nearby Wheeler Canyon, the two were entwined with the Oaks neighborhood through their friendship and artistic kinship with Roy and Agnes Wilson. Banker and artist Douglas Shively also chose the Oaks as the location for his home, and Santa Paula Canyon as the subject for many of his paintings. They were all of a piece in understanding the canyon not just as a place to live, or to make a living, but as a thing of beauty.

## Roy C. Wilson: Ventura County's First Licensed Architect

Few members of the Santa Paula community had a more far-reaching impact than architect and resident of the Oaks neighborhood, Roy Wilson. Born in 1887 in Fremont, Kansas, Roy Calvin Wilson was the third of five children born to George Washington Wilson and Anna Burlingame. Arriving in California in 1900, the family settled near the Arroyo Seco in the present day Highland Park area of Los Angeles. Roy left school after the seventh grade and took various jobs to supplement the family's income. One of those jobs was as a draftsman for Los Angeles architect Edwin C. Thorne. Inspired by him to learn more about architecture, Wilson moved to Berkeley to take classes at the university. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire cut his education short, but the rebuilding efforts provided him with practical experience in construction and design. He was drawn back to Southern California and in 1911 married Agnes Thorne, the daughter of his mentor.

Roy and Agnes Wilson arrived in Santa Paula in 1914, purchasing land in the Allen Tract in December of that year from William H. Allen. The forty-seven acre plot, bounded on the west by the Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy grant line and on the east by Santa Paula Creek, included Allen's small wood frame home, and a lemon orchard set out by Allen some years earlier. Wilson set about improving and enlarging the house almost immediately to ac-

*The canyon ranch purchased by Roy and Agnes Wilson in 1914 from William Allen, as it looked circa 1920 from the cliffs above Santa Paula Creek. The first lemon trees on the property were planted by Allen. (John Nichols)*



commodate his growing family. The house remains today at **1021 Grant Street**, not readily betraying its circa 1895 origins.

Roy Wilson began his architectural practice in Santa Paula during the mid-1910s and gradually began receiving commissions, quite likely the first of which was the design of a home for Samuel B. Bagnall on Say Road in 1915. For the next few years, the Wilsons apparently split their time between Santa Paula and the Thorne home in

Los Angeles, and while in Santa Paula, Roy spent at least as much time cultivating the lemon trees on his ranch property as he did in the practice of architecture. By the early 1920s his practice had grown enough to make Santa Paula the family's home on a permanent basis, and he became the first licensed architect in Ventura County. His office during the 1920s and 1930s was located at 959 E. Main Street, and later at 112 S. Mill Street.

During the first few years of the 1920s, Wilson received a number of prominent commissions, including three related to the Limoneira Company: a residence for company President C.C. Teague, a large dormitory and recreation building for the Limoneira Ranch, and the Limoneira Company Headquarters on 10th Street in downtown Santa Paula. Wilson's father-in-law Edwin Thorne and associated architect Peter Ficker actually did much of the design work for these large early commissions.

So successful was his practice that by the middle of the 1920s, few of the numerous new buildings then being constructed on Main Street were designed by anyone but Roy Wilson. He was also responsible for the design of a

*Roy Wilson (right) and his father George Washington Wilson, probably circa 1915, outside of the home Roy and Agnes bought from William Allen in 1914. (Wilson family)*

