

The Alexander Mansion

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In about 1884, an enterprising man named Samuel Thomas Alexander moved from Hawaii to Oakland, then traveled north seeking new investments for his own agricultural empire after having already established one in Hawaii with his partner Henry Perrine Baldwin. From a young age, Alexander had many ideas he wasn't afraid to try, and as a result, his legacy continues to live on in the corporation Alexander and Baldwin, Inc. and in a vacant brick house at 16675 Palm Avenue in Olinda, California.



Between the years of 1884 to 1900, Mr. Alexander acquired extensive landholdings in the valley and established the 1,740 acre Alexander Ranch. He planted olive and fruit trees in 1887 and then arranged for the ditches to be extended to assure water for his orchards and smaller ranches in the area. In 1890, Samuel T. Alexander had a two-story, red-brick mansion built with beautiful white verandas. It was his summer home and intended headquarters for his ranch. George Landon was the ranch's first superintendent. Unfortunately, Mr. Alexander wouldn't live to see his olive trees mature as he died in 1904 while on a hiking trip to Victoria Falls, Africa, with his daughter Annie.



Freda Ehmann

After his death, his widow Martha sold his olive groves to George D. Barber and then a few years later, Ehmann Olive Company, under the ownership of Freda Ehmann, purchased the property and named it the Monte Vista Ranch. Freda brought Ralph Peral and his nephew Bernardo Romero over from Spain to graft four different varieties of olive trees and to manage the orchards. In 1913, approval was given by the Board of Supervisors to subdivide about 1,000 acres of the ranch into smaller parcels to be sold to settlers. The Ehmann Olive Co. continued to use the Alexander house as its Happy Valley headquarters and in 1915, the company took the grand prize for its olives at the Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

West Coast Orchards purchased the Ehmann Company's Happy Valley property in the mid-1920s and continued in the olive growing business for many years with Bernardo Romero as manager of the 600 acre ranch and house until he retired in 1949. His son, Roy Romero, then took over management until he retired in 1986 and then he passed management over to his son-in-law Dale Hockersmith and daughter Cathy. When Mr. Hockersmith left in the late 1980s, West

Coast Orchards rented the house to Carlos Perez until it was eventually sold along with 42 acres to John and Geraldine Villasana in 1996.

Through the years, the Alexander house had been under the care of the ranch superintendents. At some point in time, however, it was left to vandals and neglect. Driving by the house, one can see the former beauty in the red bricks and large white verandas as the outside doesn't look too bad – minus some cracking in the brick. Inside is a different story according to Dennis Possehn, the Alexander Mansion Committee Chairman. In a letter, he writes that the while the outside walls still have the original plaster, the interior walls have been stripped by previous owners down to the studs, the roof has been partially replaced, and portions of the wood decking will need replacing.

The Alexander Mansion Committee was formed to help save the old Happy Valley landmark, but the scope of the project has made it difficult to move ahead. A formal engineering report by Pace Engineering has given a very expensive quote, largely due to the seismic building code that demands retrofitting be done to bring the house up to code.

Still, the Alexander Mansion Committee isn't giving up and still maintains hope that with community awareness and interested involvement, the historic house can be saved and serve as a community asset. To learn more about the mansion, its history, or to offer support, you can contact Dennis Possehn via email at dp4ster@tds.net. A savings account, "Alexander Mansion Fund" has also been established at North Valley Bank in Anderson to accept donations.

It would be a shame if we let yet another piece of our rich history fall by the wayside. It could possibly be Shasta County's equivalent to Tehama County's Bidwell Mansion.