

All About Oakridge



A Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument
Former Residence of Barbara Stanwyck and
Jack Oakie and Victoria Home Oakie



"Home" for the Holidays



As we look forward to what will undoubtedly prove to be a non-traditional holiday season this year, we thought you might enjoy a glimpse into the rather unconventional ways festive occasions were celebrated at the Oakridge Estate in days gone by.

Thanksgiving 1936 was held on a hilltop in the fields of Marwyck overlooking the San Fernando Valley. Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor, along with Zeppo and Marion Marx, invited the ranch's manager Harry Hart and his wife Bertie to celebrate with Carole Lombard and Clark Gable. The residences were yet to be constructed so there were no ovens in which to roast a turkey. Carole sent over a crew to build a barbecue pit in one of the fields and a holiday feast of steaks and potatoes was enjoyed picnic style on a tablecloth spread out on the ground.



Left to Right: Bertie Hart, Robert Taylor, Barbara Stanwyck, Zeppo Marx, Marion Marx, Clark Gable and Carole Lombard (From "A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907-1940" by Victoria Wilson, Image Courtesy of Tim Marx)

Christmas Day at Marwyck was celebrated with presents and a trip to the racetrack. Santa Anita was the place to be seen on the holiday and the Hollywood elite flocked to the luxurious venue for the annual Christmas Stakes. Barbara's adopted son, Dion, stayed home with his Nanny with what we hope amounted to a huge haul from Santa.



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Jack Oakie's "Around the Pool Birthday Walk" began when he turned 40 on November 12, 1943. The annual ritual commenced at the diving board. He and wife Victoria would walk one lap around the Oakridge swimming pool for every year of Jack's life,

including one for the coming year. The Oakies divided the years, walking half in one direction and the other half in the opposite direction. During each lap, Mrs. Oakie insisted that Jack tell a story from that particular year of his life. Many years later, a "Pool Fence Ordinance" was enacted and the Oakies were forced to install a chain link fence around the pool. Victoria later wrote that, "The narrow area on the north side was no longer comfortable for our side-by-side habit" so their yearly celebration came to an end.

In 1949, Shirley Temple blew out the candles on her 21st birthday cake at a party held in Jack Oakie's barn. Shirley was starring in *The Story of Seabiscuit* which was being shot at Northridge Farms under the working title of *Always Sweethearts*. The occasion marked the third time Jack joined in on the fun. He had celebrated Shirley's 11th birthday during the making of their film *Young People* (1939) and had been a guest at a RKO Studio party when a miniature schoolhouse decoration on her cake was ceremoniously burned in honor of her 18th. Needless to say, he kept a watchful eye as those 21 candles blazed in close proximity to the hay. *Watch Shirley celebrate her birthday on location at Northridge Farms here:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hns8bVT0o2w>

However you celebrate your holidays this year, Friends of Oakridge wishes you all the best for a very safe, healthy and happy New Year.

Stories content courtesy of: Victoria Wilson, "A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907-1940", Simon & Schuster, 2013 and Victoria Home Oakie, "Jack Oakie's Oakridge" and

Dumbwaiters - Still a Smart Idea

Tour visitors to the Oakridge Estate are fascinated when they see the dumbwaiter that is located in the butler's pantry. Let's travel back in time to see how this ingenious pulley system got started. The simple concept of the dumbwaiter can be traced back to the Romans. Throughout history there is evidence that many cultures continued to redesign the dumbwaiter's form and shape in an effort to move goods more efficiently.



Dumbwaiter in Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Estate

During the 18th century, after visiting Europe, Thomas Jefferson brought back many innovations to the United States, including a form of the dumbwaiter. Jefferson's original dumbwaiter was more like spinning shelves. During his dinner parties at Monticello, staff would place the food on the revolving shelves spinning them into the dining room. After the meal, dishes were cleared in the same manner. As the U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson installed a revolving dumbwaiter in the White

House between the wall of the Porter's Lodge (currently the Chief Usher's Office) and the Public Dining Room (currently the Family Dining Room). President Jefferson wanted to reduce the number of servants near the dining rooms ensuring more privacy during sensitive conversations to avoid information leaking outside the official residence. The White House dumbwaiters were small tables, equipped with shelves placed at varying heights to hold cutlery, food, and wine. The White House now has a series of lifting dumbwaiters to move food and other goods between the kitchen and various dining rooms. The 2013 movie *White House Down* featured the President escaping the bad guys by shimmying down the dumbwaiter shaft hidden inside the walls.

The term dumbwaiter was popularized in the United States in the 1840's, after the earlier models became known as serving trays and lazy Susans. The mechanical dumbwaiter was invented by George W. Cannon from New York, who filed for the patent of a brake system that could be used for a dumbwaiter inside a shaft. He later filed for the patent on the mechanical design that introduced a counterbalance weight to help the car move vertically.

Thomas Edison's home Glenmont was designed with dumbwaiters coming up from the cellar which remained until 1944 when the Edison family converted the space into a passenger elevator as a convenience for Mrs. Edison.

By the early 1900's, the manual dumbwaiter was standard in large mansions that were two or more stories high. The dumbwaiters were used to move food, dry goods, and laundry from floor to floor. Beginning in the late 1930's, there was an electric dumbwaiter developed for residential use which slowly became an option for home builders. So, it is surprising that Barbara Stanwyck had her state-of-the-art house designed with a manual dumbwaiter. The dumbwaiter is located in the butler's pantry and rises into the master bedroom. It is conveniently placed next to the door leading into the bar. One can imagine Barbara lounging in her bedroom requesting her staff to send up her morning coffee or a night cap cocktail. There are reports that Jack Oakie also used the efficiency of the dumbwaiter to have his drinks delivered upstairs.



Dumbwaiter in the Master Bedroom Dressing Room

In 1959, *Popular Mechanics* magazine reported on the "return of dumbwaiters", with popular models featuring electric motors installed in new homes. By the late 1950's, dumbwaiters were installed in ordinary residences -- for a price. However, by the 1970's, dumbwaiters were thought to be a waste of space that could be better used for much needed closets.

Today, there has been a resurgence of the dumbwaiter concept to transport groceries or supplies upstairs, especially in multi-level homes and converted high-rise townhouses. A quick search of the internet will yield many builders/contractors who currently specialize in installing dumbwaiters. It is understandable that any invention that can make life's tasks easier is a welcome addition to any home.

Friends of Oakridge Goes Virtual



The Oakridge Estate has been closed since March and all of the Friends of Oakridge volunteers miss sharing this wonderful historic property with the public. When the house was built over 80 years ago, no one could have ever imagined sharing the rich history of the estate through the magic of the internet. A determined group of docents did just that, creating a detailed overview of the history of the Oakridge Estate from its inception in 1936 as Barbara Stanwyck's Marwyck Ranch to its present status as City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument #484. Through a deep dive into historical documents, this narrated presentation utilized archival photographs, aerial images and vintage maps, as well as newspaper clippings, brochures, advertisements and magazine covers from the period. Our first virtual event, *The Oakridge Story*, aired on Saturday, October 3rd, with a great response from an enthusiastic audience. We continue to plan additional virtual events in the upcoming months, so stay tuned for more information. Thank you to all who participated in our inaugural venture. We hope to rebroadcast *The Oakridge Story* in 2021.

Volunteer Spotlight

Friends of Oakridge is fortunate to have a group of dedicated volunteers who make our tours and events possible. Starting with this Fall Newsletter, we will be sharing the profile of one of our exemplary members. If you attended our virtual event, you would have had the pleasure of hearing the narration of our first honoree, Dana Amann, who has been with Friends for over 10 years.



1. How did you first learn about the Oakridge Estate and what made you want to volunteer?

I grew up in the San Fernando Valley during the 1960's and I was aware of the house up on the hill but didn't know what it was or who it belonged to. This was before the internet and you couldn't just Google an address to find out what it was. Eventually, I was able to research the mystery house online and discovered it was originally the home of actress Barbara Stanwyck. I was a fan of Stanwyck from her television show *The Big Valley* and her old movies, which made it all the more interesting to me. In 2010, the city of Northridge was celebrating its 100th Anniversary and I took a bus tour of several historical Northridge locations. The last stop on the tour was the Oakridge Estate! We were driven up the curved driveway to the home where we were greeted by David Sonne, Trustee of the Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie Charitable Foundation. He talked about the home, showed us the grounds and let us peek inside the front door of the house.

2. What made you interested in volunteering at Oakridge?

After visiting the house during the Northridge tour, I knew I wanted to know more about the Stanwyck property and be part of opening the house to the public. I was contacted by Richard Hilton and Pat Lo Presti about becoming a volunteer and working the first public tours. I was provided with a tour script and after my first experience I was hooked.

3. What do you enjoy most about volunteering at Oakridge?

I enjoy history and the Oakridge Estate was the perfect volunteer opportunity to learn more about the house, the ranch, and all of the people associated with the property as well as San Fernando Valley history in general. As a docent, I like sharing the story of Oakridge with our tour guests and seeing their enthusiasm! I have made friends with the other docents and we are always exploring new ideas for events and other ways to share Oakridge with the community.

4. What thing/information were you most surprised to learn about the Oakridge Estate and what is your favorite room or place in the house?

I was most surprised to learn about the number of famous people that were associated with the property. Digging deeper into the history of the house we discovered that Gilbert Adrian and Janet Gaynor lived next door and celebrities like Ronald Reagan boarded their horses at the ranch. I guess my favorite room is the large living room with the mural on the walls. It has a beautiful fireplace, a leatherette bar, an entertainment closet, and is the most spectacular space in the home! I love comparing the room to the photographs of how it looked when Barbara Stanwyck lived there and noting changes the Oakies made during their occupancy.

5. Do you have a favorite event at the house and why?

My favorite event was when we showed the 1953 film *Titanic*. That was a movie I watched when I was a kid and I became a big fan of Barbara Stanwyck and developed a fascination with the history of that tragic ship. After some internet research, I was able to locate the actor, William Harper Carter, who played Stanwyck's son in the film. He graciously agreed to join Friends for the screening of the movie 66 years after it was made. It was a special experience sitting next to Mr. Carter while we watched the film in Stanwyck's living room and listened to him share his memories of working with her!

6. What other activities are you interested in outside of Oakridge?

With my love of history, I also volunteer and docent at the Heritage Square Museum in Los Angeles and the Glendale Historical Society's Doctor's House. I also enjoy attending historic reenactments of the Civil War, tracing my family genealogy, and exploring local estate sales.



The Friends of Oakridge is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization and we are always looking for enthusiastic people to join us. We offer our volunteers a unique opportunity to showcase their talents, utilize their skills, and express their interests. Our volunteer team is comprised of individuals from a variety of professions, all sharing the common goal of preserving the Oakridge Estate. During the current closure of the property, volunteer opportunities include assisting with virtual events, social media, community outreach, and research. Volunteers are provided with training and are matched with assignments based on their availability and interests. Please visit our website www.theoakridgeestate.org to complete a Volunteer Application. An organization member will contact you soon and we look forward to speaking with you.



A Special Message to Our Subscribers

Friends of Oakridge appreciates your continuing interest and support for the historic Oakridge Estate. To ensure the health and safety of our visitors and volunteers during the current public health concerns related to the transmission of COVID-19 (Coronavirus), Friends has suspended all tours and programs at the Estate in alignment with the City of Los Angeles' guidelines. In an effort to keep the community involved, we will continue to offer virtual events focusing on the cast of characters associated with this historical property. Everyone at Friends of Oakridge looks forward to resuming our tour and event schedule in the future. Please check for updates at our website: www.theoakridgeestate.org.





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