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History of the Hotel Del Monte's Arizona Garden

By LCDR Sheri L. Smith, USN (Ret.), Friends of the Arizona Garden, December 1995

In the late 1870's, the Southern and Central Pacific Railroad's "Big Four": Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, and Mark Hopkins, were determined to increase usage of their railroad services in the San Francisco bay area. Their long range plans included a boardwalk at Santa Cruz, which was an easy return day trip by railroad from San Francisco, with activities geared to the "common people." In addition, they scouted around for a location that would serve as the focus of a first class resort for the titled and wealthy of the world. They chose the sleepy seaside town of Monterey for its elegant natural setting and clement weather, and purchased thousands of acres of land in Monterey, Pebble Beach, and Carmel Valley to kick the project off on a grand scale. Railroad service to Monterey was not in place, and negotiation for right of way and plans for track construction began immediately.

Hopkins died in 1878, but the railroad expansion plans continued, and Charles Crocker took on the Monterey resort as his special project. Throughout the summer of 1880, Crocker later liked to say, he sat under a spreading coast live oak in front of the construction site and "observed every nail being driven in." The original hotel had 500 rooms set on 125 acres planned for formal grounds and gardens. It was built using Chinese railroad crews as labor, and was completed in 100 days, at a cost of one million dollars.

In 1878-1879, Crocker had been impressed by the workmanship of German-born master gardener and landscape designer Rudolph Ulrich, who had constructed extremely formal and elaborate gardens for several great estates in the San Francisco bay area. Crocker hired Ulrich to design and oversee the installation of the grounds and gardens of the Hotel Del Monte, with a goal of creating the same sort of garden design guests would find at a great hotel in Europe, but, where appropriate, incorporating exotic American plants with traditional favorites. Originally, features included topiary, rose, tropical, and formal walled and parterre gardens, an English yew maze with a half-mile of paths, several glasshouses, and cutting and vegetable gardens supplying the needs of the guests. Over 500 specimen trees, representing every country in the world, highlighted the panoramic vistas of the grounds. The hotel's gardening staff ranged from 50 to 100 personnel, depending on the season.

Apparently fascinated by desert plants, Ulrich's hallmark design was the formal "Arizona Garden," of which he installed around a dozen on the grounds of great hotels and estates along the California coast. Today, only two remain: the Naval Postgraduate School's, and a smaller one at Stanford University, now virtually invisible beneath encroaching eucalyptus trees and pampas grass.

With the resources and backing of the railroad barons, Ulrich was free to experiment with desert plants on a much grander scale than ever before. The *Salinas Weekly Index* reported in November 1881 that Ulrich had "recently returned from a collecting trip to the Sonora Desert with one boxcar load of plants; three more to follow." Letters in the Library of Congress from Ulrich to his contemporary, Frederick Olmstead (with whom he collaborated on the Stanford Ranch garden design), provide insight into Ulrich's philosophy of formal landscape design and details of his desert adventures. In August 1882, the *Index* reported that "the Hotel Del Monte's Arizona Garden, recently completed, was pronounced a success."

Unfortunately, many of the plants Ulrich collected, such as saguaro cactus, were entirely unsuited to the Monterey climate, and survived only a few years. With the hardships of the Depression Era and the two World Wars, the gardens and grounds began a slow, genteel decline. The maze, a replica of the one at Hampton Court in England, was removed due to disease in the late 1930's. Many of the older glasshouses were also torn down, and the number of formal gardens and gardening staff was reduced. The focus of the Pacific Improvement Company, later the Pebble Beach Corporation, was changing to development of the Lodge and forests at Pebble Beach, and the era of the grand hotel was fading as the automobile and the expanding network of roads changed American vacation and travel habits irrevocably.

After several years of increasing financial difficulties, the owners of the Hotel Del Monte began searching for a possible buyer. During WW II, the hotel was leased with option to buy by the U.S. Navy, and used as an aviation cadet training facility. The hotel was purchased outright in 1951 as the new site for the Naval Postgraduate School, which relocated to Monterey from Annapolis in 1952. Under Navy ownership, the Arizona Garden was kept up until changes in military funding and contracting regulations in the 1970s reduced the gardening staff from 24 to 4 personnel. Groundskeeping emphasis became focused on the formal areas around the historic buildings, and maintenance of the park-like vistas. The Arizona Garden, its history and significance forgotten, and located in a somewhat isolated area of the grounds, suffered from lack of trained personnel and funding to properly care for it.

The lengthy drought and hard freeze of 1985-1992 wrought havoc throughout the Monterey Peninsula, and the grounds of the Naval Postgraduate School proved no exception. Two attempts (1986 and 1990) to restore the Arizona Garden were abandoned due to the drought and insufficient funds. Finally, in July 1993, Mrs. Kishie Bushnell and LCDR Sheri Smith began weeding in the overgrown, sadly neglected garden. Soon, a core group of enthusiastic cactus tyros met and formed the nascent "Friends of the Arizona Garden," with a goal of restoring the dilapidated site. Advice was sought from several local nurseries, all of whom recommended Larry Lucero of Corral Nursery in Salinas as the best individual in the area to assist in the project. Larry was persuaded to stop by the garden for a look in September 1993, and was impressed with Ulrich's vision and the garden's potential. He volunteered his services as Restoration Advisor, and full-scale work began under his guidance in October 1993.

In the fall of 1993, the Naval Postgraduate School approved seed money from the school's budget for plant materials, special tools, and soil amendments for the Arizona Garden restoration project. The school asked Elmer Lagorio and Elena Lagorio, Historians at the Pebble Beach Corporation, and Barbara Pitschel, Head Librarian of the Strybing Arboretum Society, to research the history of the garden, and for the first time, the university became aware of the site's significance. Subsequently, the Arizona Garden was added to the Navy's nomination of the Hotel Del Monte, and its guest cottages and grounds, for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. At the same time, the school wrote two successful grant requests to the Department of Defense Legacy Fund, which provides for preservation and restoration of historic property on military facilities. The awarding of the grants made full restoration of the garden possible, although the vast majority of the work still had to be accomplished using volunteer labor. In addition, the Huntington Botanical Garden and the Ruth Bancroft Garden graciously donated many unusual desert plants not generally available to the public.

The Arizona Garden today is not exactly as it was when completed in 1882. While a surprising number of the original plants did manage to survive the years of drought and neglect, there are no saguaros or Joshua trees, no herbaceous borders, no English ivy twining around yucca trunks, all of which are visible in historic photographs on display in the NPS museum. Rather, we selected replacement plants which would be hardy in the Monterey climate, and grouped them together with plants of similar water requirements. The original rock bordered beds, however, are the same, although each and every rock was raised and reset with an underlying French-drain system of gravel and lava fragments. This inspired precaution was directly responsible for only 12 plants succumbing during the unprecedented rains of the winter of 1994-95.

Today, word of the Arizona Garden's restored beauty, rare plants, and unique vistas draws delighted visitors, confirmed desert plant lovers, and awestruck schoolchildren from an ever greater radius. Their admiring comments, and the sheer pleasure reflected on their faces, is a reward beyond measure to the innumerable volunteers and plant donors who have given their time, labor, materials, and love of public gardens to achieve the results before you.

We feel certain Rudolph Ulrich and Charles Crocker would approve.

Note: For safety reasons, please keep small children in hand when exploring the Garden.