

Friends of Oakridge History

Dozens of dedicated volunteers have donated thousands of research hours, taken hundreds of photos, provided guided house tours, and enthusiastically energized the preservation efforts for the historic Oakridge Estate, a City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument owned and managed by the Department of Recreation and Parks.

Beginning with the 2009 purchase of the historic residence and grounds, built in 1937, a series of events have morphed into a viable, and community based non-profit organization that is dedicated to researching, educating and engaging residents of the San Fernando Valley. When the Department of Recreation and Parks completes the Treatment Plan (a guide for restoration/rehabilitation of the Oakie House) based upon the National Park Standards for restoration of historic structures, Friends of Oakridge can then begin to raise funds to rehabilitate and upgrade the house and grounds. This is the story of Friends.

In January of 2010, the Los Angeles Times published an article entitled “Oakie House saved from Destruction”. Former LA City Councilmember Greig Smith stated, “This is amazing – as much luck as determination. It’s a treasure.” Researching deep into Valley history, the story unfolds beginning with the 29 year-old Barbara Stanwyck and her young son, Dion, moving into a large ranch home overlooking a Thoroughbred horse breeding operation named Marwyck Ranch – a combination of Stanwyck and Marx surnames. In the early 1940s, Jack and Victoria Oakie purchased and then resided in the house for over six decades until Victoria, in 2000, donated the house to USC. Nine years later, the 9.5-acre property was listed for sale. With the help of then Councilmember Smith, Quimby funds were successfully used by the City to secure the mansion, oversized tennis court, pool and open space. Instead of 28 high-end residences built by private developers, 8.5 of the ten acres would become a beautiful, unique city park. The house and grounds have been retained as a historic resource for the entire San Fernando Valley.

Shortly following the purchase of the property, a Recreation and Parks Advisory Board (PAB) was established to hold public meetings encouraging community input regarding usage of the Oakie house and grounds. After several years of meetings, the advisory board disbanded and Friends of Oakridge, a non-profit 501(c)3 Public Benefit Corporation, was formed by a six-member board. Friends was established to raise funds to rehabilitate and preserve the house and grounds while working in partnership with the Los Angeles City Department of Recreation and Parks. The Friends mission statement: Preserve and enhance our unique cultural landmark through tours, community events, educational programs, and the protection of open space.

Since 2012 Friends of Oakridge has:

- established a close working relationship with Council District 12
- provided docent led tours to more than 2,000 guests
- connected with the Barbara Stanwyck family, Karen Hudson (Paul R. Williams family), Robert Finkelhor family (architect who assisted Williams), J.H. Ryan family (owners of Northridge Farms originally Marwyck Ranch), and the California Thoroughbred Breeders

Association (CTBA). Numerous attempts were made to connect with the Zeppo Marx family.

- established a dialogue with the Jack and Victoria Horne Oakie Foundation
- created a website which documents the history of this property and its owners
- assembled and designed a vintage photo collection including large portable display boards
- designed a power point presentation to educate interested community groups
- conducted presentations at local libraries and public meetings
- researched and created tour scripts which included the Marwyck Ranch story
- recruited and trained a group of dedicated volunteers and docents
- researched the Hollywood stars/Thoroughbred horse owners who resided on the Marwyck Ranch property
- purchased and installed black-out shades and park benches for the house
- collaborated with Recreation and Parks Department to install an above ground tree watering irrigation system
- screened classic Oakie and Stanwyck movies inside the residence
- created an oral history video and slide show presentation based on Marwyck Ranch history
- cooperated with other San Fernando Valley historic societies to promote Valley history
- raised funds to promote and educate the community about this historic piece of property

Prop K funds of \$1.3 M were obtained in 2013 to design and construct a unique, passive recreation park on 8.5 of the 9.5 acres to the west of the house near Wilbur Creek. Two Friends board members actively participated in a series of public Local Volunteer Neighborhood Oversight Committee (LVNOC) meetings held prior to the approval of Prop K funding. Following the approval of funds, the LA Bureau of Engineering has designed and is currently managing this park project.

In 2014, the Recreation and Parks Commission and Friends entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which has been renewed annually. This memorandum allows Friends of Oakridge access to the house for specific public/community based events.

Friends of Oakridge continue to work with Councilmember Mitch Englander of Council District 12, the Office of Historic Resources and the Department of Recreation and Parks. Friends of Oakridge and the City of LA remain committed to preserving the property as a historic community asset that will be accessible to the public. The Oakridge Estate is a Los Angeles City Historic-Cultural Monument (#484) that is a jeweled treasure to be enjoyed by the community and preserved for future generations.