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The Orinda Chamber of Commerce Meets at Historic De Laveaga Estate

By Sophie Braccini



Martha deLaveaga Stewart in front of the family house Photo Sohie Braccini

A very serene Martha de Laveaga Stewart greets her guests in front of the beautiful mansion that was built by her great grand-father in the late 1880. Her poise and charming demeanor is in perfect harmony with the beauty of the historical estate. A member of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce, the Marriage and Family Therapist was happy to host the September Orinda Chamber reunion on her property. The house was designated as an historical landmark by the City of Orinda some years ago; it is a testimony of the dream of a family who came to Orinda, fell in love with its comeliness and became significant actors in what it was to become.

Jose Vincente de Laveaga emigrated from the Spanish Basque country to Mexico where he was very successful in silver mining and banking . He had six children; one of the boys was Miguel de Laveaga, Martha's great grand-father. During a trip, he landed in San Francisco and liked it so much that the family decided to stay there. Their banking and financial investments met with great success and their wealth increased. In San Francisco Miguel met Marie De Bretton, they married and had three children. They owned a lot of property in San Francisco, Santa Cruz (which today is deLaveaga Park and golf course), San Mateo and San Benito County.

They also owned the property on the north side of the "Crossroads" in Orinda. Miguel and his wife liked it so much that they decided to build a summer home there. Marie built the first catholic Santa Maria church. Their 3 children were Vicente, Julia and Edward, who was to become a significant developer of the city of Orinda.

Edward and his wife Delight lived there mostly in the summer months. The house was completely destroyed by a fire at the beginning of the century, but rebuilt exactly the same. The couple moved permanently into their Orinda home in the early 1920's when Edward decided to develop the property. He started to subdivide the land and established the village where it is now. He built Perreti's, the first general store, and riding stables. His big dream was to construct the country club, the lake and San Pablo road. Edward lost everything in the 1929 depression. He took lots back from people who couldn't pay anymore and he was left owing the bank great sums of money. The bank took everything but he was able to salvage the old home on Bien Venida ("welcome" in Spanish).

The family has kept the property since. When Edward's wife Delight died in the early 60's the family

got together to decide what to do with it. There were 5 living children and their families. One of his sons, Ned and his wife Alyson, had young children and Ned had his business in town. So they moved in. "It's been wonderful for our children to have the privilege of the heritage, and to work out in the garden and to live in the house," wrote Alyson in October of 1971. Martha remembers how on Sunday mornings, after church and pancake breakfast, they had to work two hours in the garden before they could do anything else.

As she shows her guests the original furniture, stain glasses, hunting trophies, and pictures, Martha is aware of the honor she enjoys, but weights the challenges that the maintenance of the place presents for its owners. When her parents, Ned and Alyson, died, once again the family gathered to decide the faith of the property.

The four children made each other the promise that the estate would stay in the family, whatever the cost. "It is a blessing to have this beautiful place for all of us," says Martha, "last year we had a big de Laveaga reunion with cousins coming from Mexico. All our marriages are celebrated here, the children and grand-children come for the summer, they know it is their place, and what it means."

Keith Miller, President of the Chamber of Commerce, was delighted to be there, "It is such an historic estate, it is very generous of Martha to have opened her house for us, it is a great venue to meet and network." As they enjoyed the buffet prepared by Barbara Llewellyn some of the more senior guests talked about Ned de Laveaga who was the owner of the downtown Chevron station and long time President of the Rotary Club. "Ned was quietly behind anything that was happening in town," remembered Ken Woznack. "The town should do something for that family," he added, "like a de Laveaga Boulevard in one of the new developments."



Chamber members tour the grounds Photo Andy Scheck



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