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Old yellow house opens to public for fourth Fandango for Moraga Adobe

By Sora O'Doherty



Architect James Wright in the upstairs hall of the Old Yellow House, which he has renovated to be a net-zero energy use building. The "wallpaper" is old newspapers found under the flooring dated back to pre-WWII days. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Supporters of the historic structure, the Joaquin Moraga Adobe in Orinda, will be treated to tours of another historic building, known as the Old Yellow House in Orinda on Moraga Road. The Yellow House will be the site of the fourth annual Fandango at 5 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 26.

Ticketholders will be offered 20-minute tours of the renovated 1890 structure, a gourmet barbecue dinner and an evening of music including a historical musical, staged on the surprisingly extensive grounds of the house. Although no parking is available at the house, shuttle vans will be provided from St. Mark's United Methodist Church at 451 Moraga Way, and will run continuously from 4:45 to 9:30 p.m.

Architect James Phillip Wright embarked on a labor of love when he rebuilt this 19th century structure, originally constructed as a railroad bunkhouse in 1890. Wright will give the tours of his historic home, which blends history with green energy technology and amazingly creative reuse.

Residents of Lamorinda watched with interest as the restoration of the old building moved forward, so this is a rare opportunity to see the inside. Probably most people have never noticed that the old house has two front doors, which mystified Wright until one day in 2014 while laying brick on the front porch, Orinda resident Janis Milstead, whose father was an engineer for the railroad, stopped by and told him how as a young child she would go with her father on business excursions, staying in railroad overnight housing just like the Old Yellow House. She explained that the two entrances were a remnant of the caste system: the main door was for whites and the other for the Chinese and other laborers who worked on the railroad.

Although built for the California Nevada Railroad, the structure was never occupied by the company, owing to its bankruptcy at the end of the railroad era. The Charles Nelson family lived on the property from 1918 through 1966, after which the property was left vacant and unaltered until purchased by Wright in 2012. Wright decided to make the building a showcase for his skills at developing geo-solar passive houses, a technology which he passionately advocates.

Tickets to the Fandango cost \$100, and are available online <http://www.moragaadobe.org/fjma-fandango.html> or checks to the Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe can be mailed to: Fandango Tickets/FJMA, P.O. Box 872, Orinda, CA 94563. No tickets will be available at the door. For information, email events@MoragaAdobe.org or contact Bobbie Landers at (925) 254-8260. An estimated \$80 of each ticket is expected to be tax-deductible.

The plan is that the Moraga Adobe will be rehabilitated and open for public use in conjunction with the construction of a housing development surrounding the site. All proceeds raised by the Fandangos go toward the restoration of the Adobe. FJMA is far from its goal of raising \$1 million to rehabilitate and run the Adobe. The FJMA will contribute \$500,000 toward the rehabilitation of the structure, which the developer will match, and will also cover any unexpected excess. FJMA is also seeking grant funding and additional sponsors and donors.

For information on the "Old Yellow House," see green.jpwarch.com.

You can also read stories about the Old Yellow House and the Moraga Adobe in the Lamorinda Weekly archives at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0901/Orindas-Old-Yellow-House-Everything-old-is-new.html> and <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1012/At-175-Years-Old-Moraga-Adobe-is-Slated-for-Restoration.html>.

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