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80 years growing, an Orinda garden hosted generations of one family

By Sora O'Doherty



Pool and gazebo in upper garden. Photos Sora O'Doherty

in Ft. Stockton, Texas when she was pregnant with Rowe, but came home on the train to give birth in California so Rowe wouldn't be a Texan, Rowe said. Their house in Orinda was built in 1940; Rowe was born in 1942, and the family returned to Orinda and moved into their new home around 1943 or 1944.

At the time, the property was a little over one acre, but over the years the family acquired two additional adjoining lots from the East Bay Municipal Utility District, each about one-half acre, bringing the property up to its current size of a little over two acres.

Nancy Miller did not work, but volunteered a great deal, along with her sister, who at the time lived on Miner Road. As cars were scarce then, the two sisters made their way around in a motorcycle with a side-car. Miller was a member of the Orinda Garden Club, and many garden club tours included the property at Las Cascadas. According to Rowe, her mother didn't want to live in Piedmont, because she didn't have enough room to garden there. She was assisted in the garden by Santos, who was hired when he was 17 years old and is still working in the garden. Miller also worked with Magic Gardens in Berkeley.

The garden is graced with mature trees and large flowering shrubs, in addition to architectural features such as a gazebo and a moon bridge over an artificial creek. The creek now fills only when there is a lot of rain, but Rowe noted that in the old days, it was filled from a tank and fed the sprinklers. Rather than a large expanse, the garden comprises smaller, discreet areas, connected by winding paths, such as the croquet lawn, where the family played. The vegetable garden has a fountain where just picked vegetables could be rinsed off before their short trip to the house.

There are several ponds, and two stone lions guard the upper garden where the gazebo is located.

One part of the garden features a large rectangular swimming pool. Rowe recalls that it was one of the first pools in Orinda, and would be filled with all their friends. "Mom would beg us to get out of the pool so she could [go inside and] do the laundry!"

Rowe's second daughter was married in the garden. Courtney has now been married for 20 years. Rowe also remembers huge Christmas Day parties each year. Her mother held a Deb Tea for every daughter and granddaughter in the garden in the spring when the dogwoods were blooming. Rowe recalled that her mother had very close relationships with all her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. "She knew everything about every grandchild," Rowe said. "She texted, they sent her photos, there wasn't one who didn't have a fabulous relationship with her." They respected her and loved her, Rowe added.

A beautiful two-acre garden tucked away near Lake Cascade was the joy and work of its original owner for 80 years, and during her life, Nancy Shurtleff Miller enjoyed hosting events for her four children, eight grandchildren and 24 great grandchildren in the garden.

She married George Williard Miller, and the couple were gifted a parcel of land in Orinda. They sold it, bought a parcel more to their liking, and in 1940 built their home at 30 Las Cascadas. The land came with a membership to the nearby Orinda Country Club. Nancy Miller died last September at age 101, and the property is now on the market, but daughter Sandra Rowe gave the Lamorinda Weekly a tour of the garden and chatted about her family history there.

Rowe's father, who died in 1982, was in the military during World War II and later president of Dean Witter, which became Morgan Stanley. Her mother was with him



Sandra Rowe in the garden her mother nurtured for 80 years Photos Sora O'Doherty

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