



The Eaton House
1898



The Old Main House
1988

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF EL MIRADOR—
THE ARMOUR/MITCHELL ESTATE OF MONTECITO**

By Lolita "Tita" Mitchell Lanning ©1997

Hello! Welcome to El Mirador, a magic garden place that has been in my family since 1916. It was bought in several parcels, one part was called Rivo Risa or laughing brook and another named El Mirador which loosely translates to "to see in all directions."

The stone ruins that you see at the top of the driveway was a large stone mansion known as The Eaton House and built in the early 1880s by Frederick Eaton. It was three stories tall and had two towers with a widow's walk in between. Eaton was horticulturist and he would stand on this walk with a spy glass to watch until a freighter would put in at the Santa Barbara Wharf. Then he would send down his foreman and a team of horses and an invitation would be issued to come up to Eaton House for fiesta, good food and grog. The foreman was careful to invite only the ship's captain and officers. As this captain made ready to depart Eaton House he would invariably say: "And what can I do to thank you for your hospitality?"

Out would come the list Eaton would like: 17 Gum Trees from Australia and 4 Totara trees from New Zealand and on and on. It might take a year or so but eventually the ship would return bearing the rare trees Eaton had ordered. Almost all of the large trees that you will find at El Mirador came to us in this manner.

Charles Stevens bought most of the land Eaton held when he came to Santa Barbara in the 1900s. And he sold it to my grandparents, Lolita and Jonathan Ogden Armour, in 1916. A year later they gave the land now called El Mirador to my mother, Lolita Armour and a single lady as a gift for her twenty-first birthday.

In 1917, my grandparents hired the well-known architect, Arthur Hoen (pronounced Hoyne) to begin construction on the Gate House and the Farm Building. It was my grandmother Armour's intent to create a model French Provincial farm on young Lolita's 72 acres and so the architecture of those two buildings is what you find the South of France. Work was begun on the chauffeur's cottage that is no longer standing but was located midway up the driveway on your left. It was actually two separate buildings built around a very large motor court with an entrance directly from Palm Drive, now known as Cold Spring Road.

My mother married John J. Mitchell in 1921. He was the son of a wealthy banking family in Chicago and they would spend their time between Chicago and Santa Barbara where they planned to build a main house at El Mirador. But shortly after their marriage, Grandfather Armour suffered disastrous financial reverses and lost his money as well as Armour & Company. Holdings in Illinois were liquidated but Grandmother Armour found a patent that had been given to Jonathan as collateral for a loan. She asked the bankers and lawyers, who were deciding which of Armour's assets to hold and what to sell, if she might have this patent as it was written on such lovely parchment paper. Her advisors said that indeed she may keep it, as it was not worth anything.

It was the patent for the cracking process for oil. Mrs. Armour (Grandmother) sold it to Humboldt Oil in 1930 for eighteen million dollars. She was back in the land of the rich and now she turned her attention to El Mirador and to helping my father and mother create a showplace. The chauffeur's cottage was rebuilt, the courtyard closed in with a lawn and reflecting pool in the center, and this became the Main House. In 1933, a nursery cottage was built within the courtyard, and my brother and I were adopted and tucked into this little home with nannies and a body guard standing by.

The layout and planting of the gardens was executed by a landscape architect, Elmer Awl. The Japanese gardens, three acres large, were planted and maintained by eleven Japanese gardeners up until 1942 when they were taken to internment camps, never to return to us.

More . . .

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A Brief History of El Mirador

In 1941 my parents divorced and my mother retained control of El Mirador as it had been her property before she married John Mitchell. A recreation house with tennis court had been built in 1931 as had a two bedroom cottage at the top of the driveway (and no longer on this land); that was built for my mother's longtime companion, Beatrice Biller, who lived in this Daisy Cottage until she died.

Before leaving El Mirador, however, John Mitchell and Elmer Awl decided that the basement or wine cellar of the old Eaton House, which was destroyed by a fire in 1924, needed some sprucing up and they created The Grotto complete with iron stalactites. So watch your heads and if you get a bump you can blame it on the sense of humor of my father and his sidekick Elmer Awl!

My mother was to take three more husbands after she divorced my father and there were times when we came perilously close to losing El Mirador. My brother, John, and I were raised here as were my four children. We loved the land and were afraid it might go to one of the husbands, two of whom tried every way they could to wrest the property from my mother.

In 1965 my mother finally built the "Main House" she had always wanted and placed it at the very top of the formal gardens and a bit to the left. It was a hideous piece of work, once described in the *Los Angeles Times* as "several trailers pulled together around an entry court." My mother lived there until her death in 1976 at which time my brother and I sold it to the Princess Shams, sister to the Shah of Iran. My mother had outlasted all of her last three husbands and did indeed leave El Mirador to her two children.

John inherited seventeen acres at the top of the gardens but sold fourteen of them right after our mother's death. He lives in a vastly remodeled Daisy Cottage on 2.9 acres in the top corner of the estate. The acreage he sold is now owned by movie producer Ivan Reitman and begins just at the top of our wedding garden.

I held onto the Main House, the Adobe or recreation house, the Gate House and Farm Building as well as 31 acres including the Japanese gardens, the Eaton House ruins and the wedding lawn. My family and I lived in the Main House until 1988 when I sold it and five acres to Bobby Webb of Montecito. He bulldozed the Main House to the ground and built the house you see to the left of the driveway. He sold it to Stefan Hahn who lives there now. At the present time, I have the Gate House, the Farm Building and 25.5 acres.

There have been many changes at El Mirador since I grew up here. Where once we had thirty gardeners and maintenance men we now have only three. Under the expert guidance of Joe Gonzales who has been with the family for 39 years, two more "wonder workers" maintain and create the beauty you walk in today. We don't feel that scaling down has in any way diminished the magic of these gardens.

Guests staying at El Mirador in the old days were many and some were household names like Wrigley, Disney and Lindbergh. One morning before breakfast my father and Lindbergh were taking a stroll through these gardens in their bathrobes. As they walked through the Japanese gardens, Lindbergh dipped the tassel of his bathrobe into one of the fish ponds. At once a brightly colored koi grabbed on and Lindbergh lifted the fish. "Good Lord," chuckled my father. "No wonder they call you Lucky Lindy!"

I hope you enjoy your visit to El Mirador. We are happy to have you spend some time in our beloved gardens.

