

STORY 4

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 Headline: Lilian Rice set Rancho Santa Fe's architectural style
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 Caption: 1. This is a sketch of a design Rice made for a Rancho Santa Fe couple. Believing that a structure should blend into the landscape, Rice often designed houses with several levels. Rice's work was influenced by Mexican and Spanish colonial styles. 2. One landmark Rice designed in Rancho Santa Fe was the village gas station. It had adobe columns connected by a Spanish tile roof, sheltering a single red pump. 3. This home was originally designed in 1928 by Rice and eventually moved in three sections to Lomas Santa Fe Drive and Puerto del Sol (F-13) 4. A colonnade and series of arches characterized the remodeled Santa Fe home originally designed by Lilian Rice, who ought a long battle to receive her architecture license. Writing in her Journal in 1928, she stated that architecture must be as beautiful and simple as the natural landscape. (F-17) 5. Architect Lilian Rice
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"With the thought early implanted in my mind that true beauty lies in simplicity rather than ornateness, I found real joy at Rancho Santa Fe," Lilian Rice wrote in an architectural Journal in 1928.

"Every environment there," she continued, "calls for simplicity and beauty -- the gorgeous natural landscape, gently broken topography, the nearby mountains. No one with a sense of fitness, it seems to me, could violate these material factors by creating anything that lacked simplicity in line and form and color."

Working as the architect in charge of the Santa Fe Land Improvement development group in the '20s and through the late '30s, Rice virtually set the style for architecture in the rolling hills of eucalyptus groves that now contain multimillion-dollar estates. She designed the venerable Rancho Santa Fe Inn, with its inviting courtyard and patios, as well as the engaging cluster of adobe buildings that mark the community center. She also designed many residences -- some outside the Rancho Santa Fe area, but the majority amid the eucalyptus and gentle rolling hills she grew to love after establishing an office at

Paseo Delicias and La Granada.

Rice was the only prominent woman architect in the San Diego area to have her own office and be licensed in these early years.

In Rancho Santa Fe especially, Rice created an architecture of true Southern California tradition steeped in California Spanish colonial heritage. Rice's buildings here are marked by thick adobe-wall construction and red-tile roofs with colonnades and grand verandas on which bougainvillea can run wonderfully wild. She created places of grace and serenity, giving rise to the sensation that one is looking at something that has already vanished into the past.

With the passage of time, some of the architecture that Rice created in Rancho Santa Fe houses has, in fact, vanished. It has often been bastardized through poorly designed remodels, passages of property ownerships and subdivision of large ranch acreage into smaller plots.

When one wealthy couple purchased a Rice house recently in Rancho Santa Fe, it had become as overbearing as Goya. The house, a two-story dwelling of about 6,000 square feet on three acres lushly overgrown with trees and flora, had been moved some years ago from its original site not far away. Surviving the move in three sections, it was resurrected in the second location with the front and back switched. The long colonnade and series of arches that Rice had created as the graceful entry at the front of the house was turned to the rear. An attempt had been made to create a new front entrance by installing a pair of doors in a small alcove. In proportion to the large-scale facade, the new front entry looked like it had been designed for the estate mouse.

Obviously, then, none of this juxtaposition had worked very well, but when the Del Mar architectural firm of Architura was called upon to make improvements on the house, they knew they couldn't start by proposing the whole residence be jacked up and wheeled around.

"We were aware," said Architura architect Victor James Dominelli, "that the colonnade at the rear of the house would remain as it was. It led to a door and interior that was a very dark, low and heavy kind of space. We wanted to manipulate light into this space and create a feeling for transparency of access through the house."

The solution was to cut an interior wall, which faced the front entry, down halfway to let light filter into the entrance area from the upstairs windows.

Overall, the project involved a major remodel; the house was entirely gutted and debris filled six dumpsters. Double French doors with fixed side lights were installed in several rooms. New windows, replicating the paned glass windows in the original, were added.

Essentially, Dominelli explained, "we didn't remodel from old plans in an attempt to restore everything as Miss Rice had designed it. The plans we did have access to were actually not accurate enough to go off of. Our

aims were to re-space plan the house to the client's requests and make the best response at all possible to the given architecture."

Rice designed the house in 1928 for H.G. Larrick, the North County lumber king. It originally was built on La Flecha at the north end of the civic center. Carl Cato, a real estate entrepreneur in Rancho Santa Fe who for a while bought, built and moved houses in the area like pieces in a chess game, situated it on the present site several miles west of Puerto del Sol. Like many Rice houses, the Larrick home was rectangular, long and rambling rather than wide or square. Rice believed that a structure should blend in the landscape and to accomplish that she often designed houses with several levels.

An early environmentalist and naturalist, Rice followed the ideas of the "organic" architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Rumor has it that she encountered the renowned architect in the summer of 1928 when he lived briefly in a La Jolla beach cottage and visited Rancho Santa Fe, where he and his last wife were married at the Inn.

Whatever, Rice faithfully displayed a gift from Wright in her office -- a plaque stating one of the architect's beloved aphorisms: "A doctor can bury his mistakes; an architect can only advise planting vines." The plaque now sits on a fireplace mantle in the Rancho Santa Fe home of Marion Lindburg, who arrived when the inn had the only electricity in the area and the only telephone was to be found in the Land Improvement office.

"Very few houses had been built when I came out (from the East) in 1926," recalled Lindburg, who was then a young woman recently married. "There were no paved roads and only the inn and a row of buildings in the village. Lilian had her office there. I had one baby and she became like mother, confessor and friend to me because I could so push the baby buggy to her office and sit and talk for hours ... San Diego was a long drive over dirt roads two hours away."

Of the more than a dozen Rice-designed Rancho Santa Fe residences built in 1927, one is the house that Lindquist and her late husband, Arthur Lindburg, moved into on Paseo Delicias.

"She had love for art and beauty and wanted to share it," Lindquist continued. "Our house was beautifully planned, sitting on top of a hill with three doors and large windows on the scenic side."

This particular Rice house burned in 1943 as a huge fire swept through the ranch. Others lost entirely to posterity include the C. Everette Smith residence at Mimosa and Laso Lindo that became the Wishing Well Motel and was torn down in 1971; the Briggs Keck residence on La Flecha (also torn down) and the Frank Burnaby residence on Fremontia (torn down as well). The Rancho Santa Fe Elementary School that Rice designed was built in the

village in 1931 and also has been obliterated. Another landmark by Rice and no longer in operation, of course, is the memorable village gas station. The station consisted of two stalwart adobe columns connected by a Spanish-tile roof and flanked by large built-in planters cascading with vines. A single red pump stood under the tile roof between the columns.

Of the many residences that Rice designed in Rancho Santa Fe only two, the George Christman house on El Mirador and the Charles Pease home on Las Cuestas, have remained in the same family. And consequently, neither has seen as much alteration.

"Some of the houses have changed so much that you can scarcely recognize them," observed Resinald Clotfelter, longtime Rancho Santa Fe realtor who lived in three Rice-designed houses through the years and with his son, Tom, came to own two of them as part of the continuing passing parade of property ownerships. Clotfelter has resided and worked in Rancho Santa Fe since 1931, when he became the resident realty representative of the Santa Fe Land Improvement Co. He recalls Rice as a very businesslike person who mixed little with the community.

But, he continues, "there was a nice feeling in all of the houses she created. They had loving work put into them."

One of the major projects Rice undertook in Rancho Santa Fe was a remodel of the historic 1830 adobe built by Juan Maria Osuna, the alcalde to whom the Mexican government granted the vast San Dieguito Rancho that became Rancho Santa Fe. It was owned at the time by Bing Crosby. Rice redid the house with a red-tile roof patterned after the Early Mission style.

In all her work, recalled Sam Hamill, who worked in Rice's office as an apprentice early on before establishing himself as an architect in San Diego, "Lilian avoided architectural styles of the time, particularly the Spanish architecture being done in Los Angeles and Pasadena. She was not doing Spanish architecture, but architecture influenced by the Mexican and Spanish colonial styles."

"The houses followed the Southern California tradition derived from the Mission period of California and the Southwest. They used adobe-wall construction reinforced with concrete lintels and belt courses -- good buildings, but not ballyhoo types of buildings."

Rice was born in National City in 1888. Her father, Julius Rice, was a leading educator in National City and San Diego. Her mother had artistic talent and did paintings. Lilian Jenette Rice grew up in a multistoried Victorian house at 740 E. Second St., her father encouraging her education and her mother her artistic sense. She enrolled at UC Berkeley and became one of the first women to graduate from its newly established School of Architecture. The year was 1910 -- not exactly a great one for women intent upon careers in architecture. But Lilian was persistent. She had studied at Berkeley under an impressive group of architects associated

with the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Their impact of ideas upon her was great, along with that of the then-developing Bay Area style of rustic wood architecture beginning to predominate in the San Francisco area as well as the Pacific Northwest.

Rice returned to San Diego to work somewhat obscurely as a draftsman and teacher for several years. In 1922, she landed a job as a draftsman in the office of Regue and Jackson, then the prominent firm in San Diego. Regue and Jackson put their new employee in charge of their operation in Rancho Santa Fe, turning a 14-mile tract of eucalyptus-covered land into a series of small "gentleman's ranchos" for the developer, namely, Santa Fe Land Improvement, a division of the Santa Fe Railroad.

When Rice arrived in Rancho Santa Fe there were few buildings beyond a couple of real estate offices. But there was lots of landscape. Much of it was filled with 3 million eucalyptus trees that had been planted by the railway in hopes of a crop for railroad ties. But the trees didn't work out for ties and the railway had made the decision to open a development office and subdivide the land. A number of Rice's first clients were people from the East who had come to California to oversee the development for the railway. The houses she designed for them, now part of huge estates in Rancho Santa Fe selling for millions of dollars, were built for less than \$20,000 each.

Rice promptly brought a number of talented young apprentices into the office, among them, Hamill and Lloyd Ruocco, both who later moved into their own prominence as San Diego-area architects.

Rice knew a lot of people socially, but moved mostly in a small circle of close friends. She never married.

Rice is recalled by Elinor Frazer, one of her friends and at one time a very young draftsman herself in the Rice office. Now retiring from her own architectural design work and residing in a small house in Mission Hills, Frazer was a student at San Diego High School in the early '20s when she first became enthused about architecture. Her inspiration was Lilian Rice, then teaching at San Diego High and cutting quite a figure in town despite her generally quiet nature.

"She'd drive down Highland Avenue on the way to her parents' home in National City in a great white roadster with the top down and her scarf flying in the breeze," Frazer said. "She wasn't really pretty, but she was blonde and attractive and you could tell immediately she was a person of character. I would dream, 'Oh, to be an architect!' She always looked like she'd stepped out of a bandbox. She dressed for each occasion, but in the office almost always wore a long, simple, shirt type of dress made of striped silk."

Rice invited Frazer as a student apprentice into the Rancho Santa Fe office in 1924.

Rice actually fought a long battle to get her own architectural license,

reportedly encountering difficulty because a member of the state board approving licensees opposed the notion of women in architecture. Finally, in 1931, she received a license. It was issued, ironically, after the bulk of her work marking her many contributions to San Diego-area architecture already was finished.

As in most architectural firms, Rice's work dropped off during the Depression. She continued to design some homes in Rancho Santa Fe as well as in La Jolla and other areas of San Diego, accumulating a repertoire of at least 60 extraordinary buildings. A major one is the Rice Elementary School in Chula Vista, named after her. And, of course, the Zlac Rowing Club of which she was a veteran member. Rice completed the design for the Zlac clubhouse in 1932; as a tribute her portrait has been hung in the clubhouse since, showing Lilian in one of a few poses taken during her life in which she looks entirely vampy; she wears a black lace dress and holds a white fan in a coquettish pose.

On Dec. 22, 1938, a mysterious tragedy struck Lilian Rice just as she could have been moving toward new heights in her architectural career at the age of 50. For some time, Rice had suffered from stomach problems and had taken medication, always carefully watching her diet. She was convinced she was dying of stomach cancer although there was no medical evidence to support it. On the night of Dec. 21, she had dinner with friends and dined on a steak, one of the foods she normally avoided. That night and early the next day, she had severe stomach pains and thought the cancer was finally taking its toll. She put her papers in order in her Rancho Santa Fe office and residence and died that late December day. When doctors diagnosed the cause of her death they found it was due to a ruptured appendix -- something that could have been treated if Rice had only sought it.

Many of Rice's papers, sketches and drawings are now in the archives of the San Diego Historical Society. Lucinda Eddy, head of the historical archives at the Villa Montezuma, recently used the early San Diego architect as the subject for a major master's thesis at the University of San Diego. Not long ago Rice was among a select number of architects featured in Susana Torre's book, "Women in American Architecture: A History and Contemporary Perspective." Gradually, the vernacular expression that she made for the California Mission or Spanish colonial heritage in Southern California is becoming more and more acknowledged, particularly as it was reflected in her Rancho Santa Fe buildings of the '20s. But while the legacy lingers, it also is all too unfortunately becoming lost.

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