

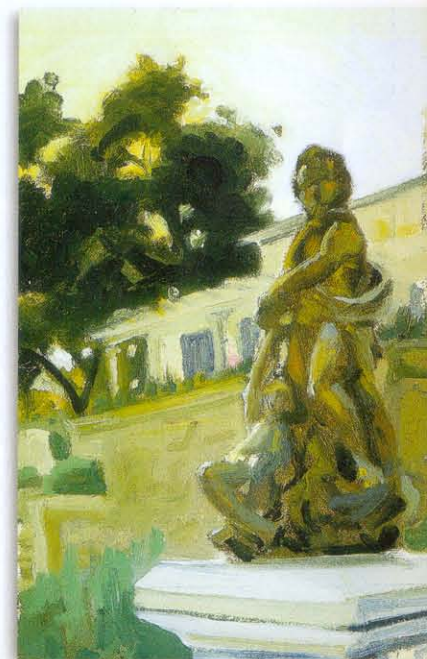


*A heavenly paradise rediscovered
at Westmont College*

LOUISE LOWRY DAVIS FRIENDSHIP GARDEN



*M*ontecito is legendary for its historic estates with their lush, grand gardens. Today, most of those gardens have either been lost to modern building practices or lie hidden behind imposing gates and thick hedges. For the historic gardens that remain on estates from Montecito's early years, the general public is generally denied access to their spectacular shows of flower, scent, and design. That's really what makes the recently renovated Louise Lowry Davis Friendship Garden at Westmont College so special—the public now has access to a beautiful historic garden that was originally part of one of Montecito's grand estates, *El Tejado*.



This bronze statue was moved and given a place of honor next to the stone-paved circle at the entrance to the new garden.

BY ~ SHARON CRAWFORD

ILLUSTRATIONS ~ ARTURO TELLO

"We had two wonderful outcomes from the renovation of the garden," says Randy Jones, director of campus planning for Westmont College. "The first was the rediscovery of the original stone walls, which were hidden by years of overgrowth. The second was that we now have a garden in a public space for many people to enjoy—and we love it when our neighbors and visitors walk through the gardens."

Indeed, alumni and community members familiar with Westmont may not immediately recognize the terraced garden below Kerrwood Hall. The area many recall as an impenetrable thicket of trees and shrubs has been cleared of invading vegetation and completely replanted. The resulting garden is reminiscent of the original planted almost a century ago. This major garden renovation was made possible by a gift to the college from Louise Lowry Davis. Davis is widely known for her generosity and civic involvement, including her role as the driving force behind the dolphin fountain at the foot of Santa Barbara's Stearns Wharf.

At its inception, the terraced garden was laid out to enhance the massive, winged mansion that Peter H. and Jennie Murphy built on their 125-acre estate in 1907—*El Tejado*. Unfortunately, Murphy had only a decade to enjoy his estate before he died in 1917. His widow remarried eight years later. In 1929, as Mrs. Robert J. Baldwin, Jennie had the original Murphy house demolished and replaced with a somewhat similar dwelling designed by Pasadena architect Reginald Johnson. She retained the name *El Tejado* for the new house, which also overlooked the terraced garden in which she took great pride. Calling herself the "head gardener," she managed it all with a staff of five gardeners and occasional guidance from Ralph Stevens, a highly respected landscape designer and Santa Barbara's first paid superintendent of parks.

When Jennie Murphy Baldwin died in 1933, her son Dwight inherited the estate. He lived there until 1943, when wartime



shortages made it more practical to live in Santa Barbara. According to David Myrick's historical account in *Montecito and Santa Barbara, The Days of the Great Estates, Volume II*, Dwight accepted a low offer from Charles Holland after having the house on the market for a year. Then in 1945, Holland sold the estate to Westmont College for \$125,000—a good price at the time.

Westmont College is a four-year liberal arts college, born of a merger of two Los Angeles institutions, the Bible Missionary Institute and Western Bible College. Established in 1940 with 85 students, enrollment increased to 204 by 1944, and the college outgrew its Los Angeles campus. The move to the Montecito site was accomplished in time for the 1945 fall term. *El Tejado* was renamed Kerrwood Hall to honor the late husband of Ruth

Above: The lowest garden terrace affords a delightful view of Kerrwood Hall. During restoration some of the original hand-cut stone walls and stone columns were uncovered.

Right: This 1945 photo shows the main house and upper garden terraces of the grand estate *El Tejado*. Soon after, Westmont College purchased the property from Charles Holland and renamed the main residence Kerrwood Hall.



PHOTO COURTESY WESTMONT COLLEGE

Kerr, a founder and financial supporter of the college. Ruth Kerr, who had been active in the search for a new campus, enthusiastically encouraged the board of trustees to purchase the estate. She called the house "the most beautiful home we had ever seen," and noted that, in addition to the extensive gardens, there were "building sites galore."

Throughout the years, Westmont grew steadily, and Kerrwood Hall remained the heart of the campus. The rapid growth of the campus took its toll on the formal gardens, however, since the college budget could not justify an estate-sized grounds staff.

By 1995, Westmont administrators ac-

knowledgeed the urgent need for an individual to manage the grounds and campus growth. That summer, Westmont hired Randy Jones as director of campus planning. Immediately upon joining the Westmont staff, he was charged with two major projects: to superintend the construction of new faculty housing and to develop and implement a master plan for the campus, which ultimately included renovating the long-neglected garden in front of Kerrwood Hall.

Early in the planning process, it became clear that rehabilitation of the historic garden was a high priority. While it was still possible to perceive the original garden concept through the dense, overgrown vegetation, Jones knew that a complete garden renovation would be an overwhelming task for Westmont's seven-member grounds staff.

Then came the fortuitous gift (the amount described only as "generous" by Westmont staff) from Louise Lowry Davis. A seemingly impossible job suddenly became possible.

"The first thing we did was try to find the original plans for the garden, but there were none," Jones says. "So then we took a look at other gardens in the community that were designed by Ralph Stevens. We also investigated which plants might remain of the original garden. We looked at old photographs, too, to try and find, as best we could, what the original garden looked like."

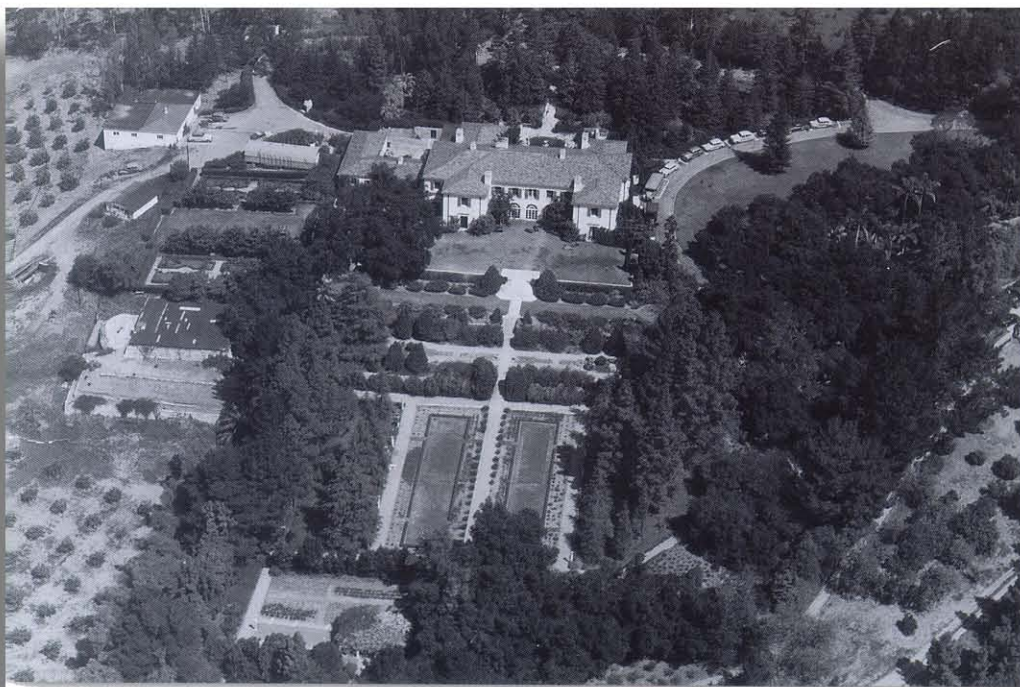
The Santa Barbara design firm of Van Atta Associates was selected, in part because of its reputation for sensitivity to historic appropriateness. The landscape architect was Susan Van Atta. In an ideal situation, the first step for a historic landscape designer is to study the original landscape plan, not only to determine what was planted, but to gain insight into the first designer's intentions. Lacking the original garden plan, Van Atta began with an inventory of existing vegetation, relying on a few undated aerial photographs and her experience in as-



Above: New stone steps provide access to the terrace and the West Garden, in front of the library.

Right: To enhance the transition between Kerrwood Hall and the newly restored garden, a new stone-paved terrace with wooden arbor was added.



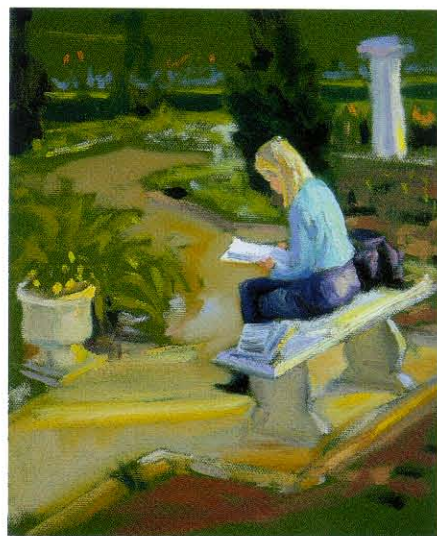


sessing plants to determine which were intended and which had crept in on their own. Rather than allow grotesquely overgrown plants to dominate the renovated gardens, it was decided to remove the existing Oriental arborvitae, juniper, and sweet bay trees. The new landscape plan, which retains the original layout of paths and steps, was completed in March 1997 and the renovation project was finished during the spring of 1998.

"In the beginning it was really exciting to see the 'poodle-pruned' junipers and overgrown plant materials weeded out and discover how very spacious the garden is," Van Atta recalls.

Landscape installation was by Cold Springs Irrigations & Landscape, under the direction of Steve Gowler. The contract was meaningful for Gowler, a Westmont alumnus. Steve fondly recalls childhood occasions when he accompanied his father to his job as director of grounds for the college and played on the garden's terrace. "My dad could watch us from the window of his office, which was right up there," he recalls, pointing to the southwestern corner of Kerrwood Hall.

The original gardens were laid out in a classic Italianate style, with a series of four



Above: Stone benches were added along the pathways for people watching or just relaxing between classes. Here Susan Van Atta sits enjoying the garden almost a year after completion.

Top: A 1947 aerial view shows vestiges of the original garden laid out in a classic Italianate style. Bilateral symmetry was established by the strong axis of a central path perpendicular to the house.



terraces parallel with the long side of the house, stepping down to the south. The level nearest the house was planted in grass, with informal masses of shrubbery near the house walls. The next three levels were dominated by juniper, sweet bay, and Oriental arborvitae. The lowest level appeared much like it does today, as a lawn with a row of eight stone columns on either side. Just past the lawn, 10 columns support the broad metal arches of a wisteria arbor, where they march single file, their only apparent purpose to separate the formality of the lawn from the informal wall of tall cedars and pines beyond.

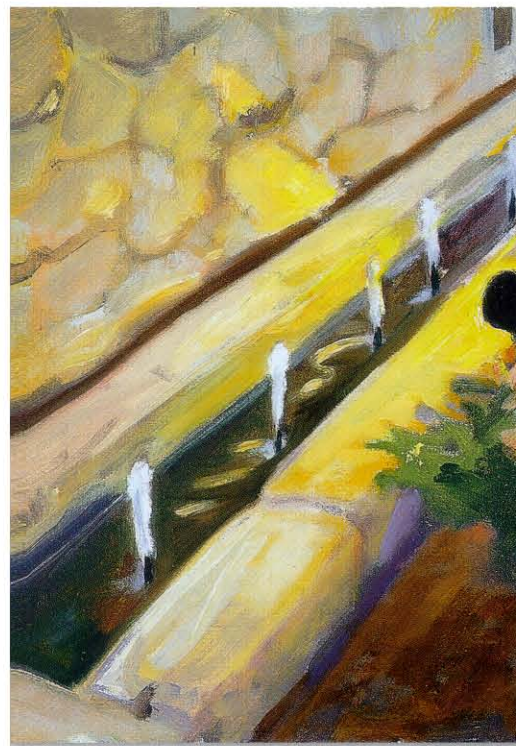
An essential component of the garden restoration project was to create a more pleasing transition between the 1953 garden-side addition to Kerrwood Hall and the garden terraces. A new, stone-paved

terrace connected to the building serves that purpose well. A handsome wooden arbor, supported by cement columns that match those below, effectively tempers the contrast between old and new construction. In time, the arbor will be covered by a fragrant trumpet vine that will shape the terrace and the south-facing windows of the addition. New sandstone steps from the terrace align with the central path of the original garden. As before, the garden terrace nearest the house features grass; now camellias soften the back wall, with the gentle curve of daylilies at the outer edge.

During the 1960s, at about the time the library was built, the pathways leading to the library had been covered in asphalt. This treatment made a durable surface for the major walkways, but it was out of keeping with the historic garden. Following Van Atta's plan, the asphalt from the 60s has been replaced with aggregate concrete on the library path.

Large, stone-paved circles define the entrance to the formal garden at each end of this major thoroughway between the student center and the library. The original garden lacked seating for relaxation and contemplation. Van Atta saw the potential for such spots along this wide path. "People enjoy sitting and watching people go by," Van Atta says. To this end, the circle nearest the library is edged with four curved stone benches, which are shaded by overhanging oak branches.

Along the length of the walkway, four more pairs of Italianate stone benches are set just off the path, slightly removed from foot traffic. To make these resting places even more inviting to future generations of students, Nagami kumquats planted at the ends of each bench will provide shade, scented blossoms, and even fruit in season. Van Atta said she selected many of the other plants on this level for their evocative scents, a notion that captured the imagination of the college committee. Randy Jones agreed. "Scent is a powerful memory maker," he says. "We want people to be reminded of Westmont when they smell these fragrances in other places." The plants include saucer magnolias, ca-



A garden delight...these bubbling fountain heads are part of a water feature designed by landscape architect Susan Van Atta.

