

Neighbors: Three Adobes



ORTEGA ADOBE

LEONIS ADOBE

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Introduction
by Mary Goldberg

In this article in the “Neighbors” series, we explore three historic adobes, two in Ventura and one in Calabasas. Before you visit any of these sites be sure to check their websites for reopening information and activities.

How many have YOU visited? Please send us your memories of places that you recommend. I’ll include them in a future article.



Olivas Adobe

By Gína Reyes

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4200 Olivas Park Drive • Ventura, CA

www.cityofventura.ca.gov/olivasadobe

Take a relaxing break and visit the historic Olivas Adobe, the family home of Don Raymundo and Doña Teodora Olivas. Named "El Reposo" the place of rest, it doesn't take much to imagine back when California was still a dream and all thoughts of great cities and freeways only shadows.



Perhaps as you wander, you will catch the fragrant smell of blooming roses, enjoy the shade under the century old grapevine and wonder at the 160-year-old Schiller fuchsia planted by Rebecca Olivas the youngest of Raymundo's daughters.



Rebecca de la Riva, their 21st child,
playing guitar



Rebecca & William de la Riva

Marvel at the sense of time that exists here at this home, as you look into the house as it was in that time, the artifacts left as they were, almost as if the occupants had just, for a moment, stepped away and would return to greet you. Pause at the Sala or parlor, where guests came and examine the many photographs of this large family that adorn the walls. They were known in that time as having perhaps the largest in the county, a total of **twenty-one children!**

Perhaps if you are lucky enough, a costumed interpreter will play for you the restored music box, really a cylinder piano, (Called El Cinlendo by the family). Listen to the tunes that were once common in this chamber and imagine, if you will, the children learning to dance to the music of "Oh Susanna " and "Old Dan Tucker" for in that day dancing was an important skill everyone must master if

they wished to become socially actable. These are the same songs that were heard in in that distant time.



Walk up the stairs to the private residence of the family, the bedrooms of adults and children as well as their own private chapel where the deeply religious family began and ended each day with devotions. In the chapel, a parade of saints greet you, each one with its own story to convey and lessons to teach for these were not just works of art but the reflections of the beliefs of the people who first came to this land and settled in this corner of the Golden State. Perhaps this spot will cause you to pause, in quiet meditation on this chamber where so many prayers were spoken, where weddings were held and even funerals for lost loved ones conducted. The chapel was the spiritual heart of the Olivas Adobe.

As you walk the long balcony of the second floor, now peaceful and quiet, long ago it would be filled with people, women sewing, men talking and the sounds of the guitar for the people of old California were an outdoors people who only retreated indoors when the weather was not pleasant, and that was rare indeed.

From the balcony you could see the acres of land that made up this successful ranch where cattle, sheep, oxen, horses and other livestock brought in a continuous income. Even though beef was a prized item Don Raymundo diversified, raising many different animals, as well as planting acres of apricot trees to be turned into brandy, and vineyards of grapes for wine.

The glory days of the Gold Rush didn't last, and the depression disrupted the California economy, many landowners lost everything, but Don Raymundo's business skills saved the ranch and he was able to expand his holdings by focusing on sheep grazing.

Visitors can enter the old kitchen of the house, then the place where lavish meals were cooked with a small army of cooks, and kitchen helpers. Here the meals were prepared, the tortillas cooked and, for some special events, Doña Teodora Olivas herself would take over the kitchen, send away the staff, to cook her secret enchiladas that were known far and wide. Sadly, her recipe for this treat is now lost. This was a place of constant work with a swinging chair for the cook's infant.



One of the head cooks was a Chumash Native American named Candelaria Valenzuela, a medicine woman who shared much of the tribal knowledge of the Chumash language, culture and crafts at the end of the 19th Century. Without her information much of the important Chumash lore might have been lost forever, but here she worked, hired for her skills as a great cook, who is said to have sang as she ground corn on the stone metate and she made dolls for the Olivas children,

using scraps of cloth. The kitchen, like many today, was a busy place. As you look over the many tools and cooking items you can almost smell the herbs and spices from those many meals served so long ago.



Before you leave the site please enjoy the Exhibit Hall where large paintings done by local artist Marguerite Hardeman depict the parties and ranching that made this place so special.

Marguerite Hardeman Painting
Fiesta

Visit the small gift shop where unique items are offered for sale and, if so inclined, purchase a token to remind you of your stay at the historic Olivas Adobe Park. And as the family would say to visitors long ago, "Buenos Dias, Mi Amigos, Via Con Dios!"

The Olivas family were known for their celebrations and parties. Keeping with tradition this beautiful historic site has many events to share its history with the public. See our website for details as we reopen. Visitors must follow all posted COVID-safety guidelines.

- On **Sunday, May 9, 2021**, the historic Olivas Adobe reopened to visitors. You can stop by the second Sunday of each month from 11am - 3pm.
- The Owl Festival held in April celebrates the Owl known as Olivia that comes to nest in the eucalyptus tree located in the courtyard. Her babies that grow in the crook of the tree are photographed by many photographers or just curious visitors. Vendors and nonprofit organizations sell or display merchandise or have hands-on crafts for the families to enjoy. Admission is free. Presented by the Olivas Adobe Historical Interpreters and the City of Ventura.
- On Mother's Day, Marguerite Hardeman and local artists display painted works of art throughout the adobe courtyard and grounds for one day on the second Sunday of May, 11 am to 3 pm. Visitors may view the murals and learn the history they depict from costumed docents during the event. Walk the grounds and enjoy the herb garden, historic plants, and the rose garden in full bloom. Admission is free. Presented by the Olivas Adobe Historical Interpreters and the City of Ventura.
- The last Sunday of September the Olivas Adobe Historical Interpreters and the City of Ventura present the Rancho Days event. Enjoy hands-on activities, mariachi music, folkloric dance, food, storytelling and tours of the historic Olivas Adobe. Slight entrance fee that goes back into the Olivas adobe for repairs.



- The Candlelight Tours were created by the Olivas Adobe Historical Interpreters as a gift to the community. This event held the second Sunday of December, has a tour in the large adobe home with each room with actors presenting a scene of how the holidays were celebrated in the Olivas house. Event is free but reservations are required as space is limited.
- Music Under the Stars Summer concert series- THE best summer party in Ventura! The City of Ventura Parks, Recreation & Community Partnerships proudly presents this popular concert series from 7:30- 9:30 pm, outdoors at the historic Olivas Adobe. Get ready to dance eight Saturday nights during the summer months of July and August in the courtyard of the historic Olivas Adobe! Fees and schedules are announced as early as April.
- Interpretive Outreach Programs are offered for school field trips during the school year. Two programs are offered at the site, Olivas Program where the students learn the history of the adobe and the family that lived in the home. Hands on projects include roping a steer, making mud bricks and tortilla making. The second program is the Gold Rush! Program where the history of the gold rush effected the locals in the area and the Olivas family. Learn how to pan for gold and the outcome of the new mineral.
- Docent led tours are available on weekends 11-3 pm except on Christmas, New Years and Easter.

Questions or additional information on the Olivas Adobe or the Ortega Adobe, please contact Gina Reyes at 805-658-4728 or greyes@cityofventura.ca.gov.



Ortega Adobe

215 West Main Street Ventura, CA
<https://www.cityofventura.ca.gov/1750/Ortega-Adobe>

Spanish and Mexican adobes once lined Main Street on both sides of the San Buenaventura Mission but only the Ortega Adobe survives today due to its continuous occupation as a residence or business. It was within this adobe that Emilio C. Ortega began fire-roasting chiles, believed to be the first commercial food operation of its kind in California.

Emigdio Miguel Ortega (1813-1893) married Maria Concepcion Jacinta Dominguez in 1836 at the Santa Barbara Mission. They moved their large family to San Buenaventura. Around 1857 Emigdio built his adobe on a 200' x 200' lot that was once mission property. He used rafters and beams possibly taken from the Carlos Carrillo Adobe of Rancho Sespe, an old abandoned ranch house near Fillmore. They were hauled to the building site in two-wheeled ox carts (carretas). Over the rafters was laid a mat of bamboo canes, squeezed closely together and tied with rawhide. Then came a layer of grass and then a covering of mud. The roof tiles were added in later years.



Their home was the last adobe just east of the San Buenaventura River. A flood in 1866 nearly destroyed it, washing away the western half and also the land between the house and the river. Soon after two new rooms were added on the east side for use by the family. They raised their 13 children in this small home.



Emilio Carlos Ortega, (1857-1942)
 Founder of the Ortega Chile
 Packing Company

Ortega Chiles <https://ortega.com/about/>

Emilio Carlos Ortega, their eleventh child, moved to New Mexico in 1890 and became fascinated with chiles and their flavors. He enjoyed the popular big red chile when it was still young and green because it was tender and mild in flavor.

He returned home a few years later with chile pepper seeds that he planted at his family's home. Ventura provided the ideal climate for growing these peppers, and Emilio had so many chiles he had to give them away. He learned how to roast, peel, seed and wash the chiles to preserve and package them. In 1897, he began fire-roasting the chiles in his mother's kitchen to make his Spanish Ortega Chili Sauce. They built a wood shed next to the adobe which was demolished by 1928.

After great success Emilio moved his business to Los Angeles into bigger quarters. In 1946, the Ortega family sold the business. The brand was purchased by B & G Foods in 2003 who continue the rich heritage of the Ortega family.

Ortega Adobe Today

By the turn of the century, a small Chinese community was established near the adobe. The adobe remained in the Ortega Family until 1905 when it was purchased by Ung Hing.

In 1921, it became the property of the City of Ventura who leased it to various tenants as a restaurant, saloon, gas station, VFW Hall, Shell Oil Co, temporary police headquarters and a meeting place for the Ventura Boys and Girls Club. A group of volunteers with the help of the City of Ventura Department of Parks, Recreation & Community Partnerships, restored and refurbished the adobe which opened to the public in April 1971. In 1974, it was designated as the City of Ventura's Historic Landmark No. 2. In July 2015, interpretive panels were placed inside the Ortega Adobe that give visitors the history of the adobe and it's residents.

It is currently owned by the City of Ventura and operated as a self-guided historical site. The three rooms on display are a kitchen, a bedroom, and a living room. The front room is original 1857 construction; the two rooms at the back of the adobe are additions dating from the years between 1867 and 1890. This site is currently closed to public access due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visit their website for updates on reopening <https://www.cityofventura.ca.gov/1750/Ortega-Adobe>



The Leonis Adobe

By Dinna Rivera-Pitt, Historian and Curator
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<http://www.leonisadobemuseum.org/>



Miguel Leonis,
 Early 1870s

The Leonis Adobe is Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument #1 and the Calabasas home of Miguel Leonis, one of the most intriguing figures in 19th century Los Angeles. Standing six feet four inches tall with striking blue eyes, Don Miguel was a wealthy French Basque rancho owner and land baron. Born in 1822 in Cambo-les-Bain, a small province in southwest France, he arrived in the San Fernando Valley in 1854, part of the often-forgotten French-speaking enclave who settled in Los Angeles in the 1800s. Although illiterate, he was gifted with an exceptional memory and natural business savvy, ultimately amassing almost 18,400 acres of land throughout southern California during his lifetime.



Leonis started out as a shepherd on Rancho El Escorpion where he met Espiritu Chijulla, a Chumash-Tongva woman who would become his common-law wife; the union was completely against Basque custom and uncommon for the period. Espiritu's father, Odon, was one of the three original Native American land grant recipients of Rancho El Escorpion—present day West Hills and Woodland Hills. The land grant was awarded in 1845 when California was still under Mexican rule.

Espiritu Chijulla Leonis, ca. 1905

In 1872, Leonis persuaded his father-in-law to sign over his shares of El Escorpion as a temporary measure of protection against new American land laws. However, Odon never regained ownership of his shares, even after suing Leonis in court. Leonis was eventually able to gain total ownership of Rancho El Escorpion, propelling his remarkable career as a Los Angeles real estate mogul. Using his Calabasas home—today's Leonis Adobe Museum—as his headquarters, he began his shrewd land buying and came to be known as the "King of Calabasas."

Leonis owned a city home and dozens of parcels in an area then called the Leonis Tract, today it is the neighborhood of Boyle Heights. He owned significant parcels in Whittier, Burbank, Santa Monica, Hollywood, West Hollywood, San Pedro as well as property right next to the Plaza Church in today's Los Angeles Plaza Historic District. His portfolio included vast tracts of rancho land in Ventura County and prime real estate in Santa Barbara. He also owned 6,200 acres in the Elizabeth Lake region, present day Leona Valley, named after Miguel Leonis, which includes the cities of Palmdale and Lancaster.

Before its 1870s transformation, Miguel and Espiritu's Calabasas home was an abandoned adobe structure built in 1844. Leonis constructed a traditional two-story adobe dwelling with a wrap-around veranda known today as California Monterey Style. The last family member to live in the home was Juan Menendez, Espiritu's son from her first marriage.

Menendez sold the home in 1922 to Lester Agoure, a descendant of Pierre Agoure for whom the City of Agoura Hills is named. By the 1950s, after multiple owners and years of neglect and vandalism, the house fell into disrepair.



Leonis Adobe masked by overgrown landscape, ca. late 1920s

The house and property were eventually sold to commercial developer Milton Katz who immediately planned to bulldoze the adobe home and build a shopping center. Historic preservation organizations were essentially non-existent in Los Angeles at the time so efforts to save the home rested solely on community activism, spearheaded by Kathleen “Kay” Beachy, a midwestern transplant turned local philanthropist. Mrs. Beachy applied for park designation for the historic adobe and grounds but was unilaterally denied by the city, county, and state. Undeterred, a larger group of activists was formed that included noted historians, curators, architects, and other experts, resulting in the formation of the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board on August 6, 1962. The Leonis Adobe was immediately designated Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument # 1 and saved from demolition.

The history of the house and family is an extraordinary one. Miguel and Espiritu had one daughter, Marcelina, who lived a privileged life, especially in comparison to other Native Americans during the period; and unlike her father, Marcelina received a formal education. Unfortunately, she passed away at the age of 19 of unknown causes. Miguel Leonis died in 1889 in a wagon accident while traveling over the Cahuenga Pass. Leonis left the bulk of his estate to French relatives, only allocating a small amount to his common-law wife of 30 years. Espiritu took the highly unusual step of challenging the estate. After a 16-year-long protracted legal battle, Espiritu won her case just 7 months before her death in 1906. As a Spanish-speaking Native American woman in the 19th century, her legal victory was groundbreaking.

Since 1966, the Leonis Adobe has been proudly serving the community as a non-profit museum dedicated to sharing and preserving the history of an extraordinary family, 19th century rancho life, Native Chumash culture, and our historic adobe structure. We serve almost 12,000 elementary school students annually with our award-winning living history Rancho Tour, as well as our recently added Chumash Tour. We also have four, fun-filled special family events per year.

At the Leonis Adobe Museum our animals are part of the museum experience, representing an authentic ranch yard of the 1880s. We offer programs throughout the year where visitors can meet, feed, and learn about the ranch animals that were so important to the people who settled the West. For Fun Facts on the different animals visit: <http://www.leonisadobemuseum.org/facts-animals.asp>

Please visit our website to view our virtual tours, check for re-opening updates, and learn about becoming a member or sponsor.
<http://www.leonisadobemuseum.org/>

Do you have a comment, story or photo you'd like to share?

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