MONTECITO JOURNAL PRESENTS

the RIVIERA

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BLUEPRINT FOR RIVIERA LIVING



ELLE gets real about real estate & design

• NARCOTECTURE •

• FLYING MANSIONS •

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more than a little inside >>>

GREAT ESTATES

IF YOUR HOME HAS A STORIED HISTORY (OR HERSTORY), DAVID SILVERMAN WILL CREATE A BESPOKE COFFEE TABLE BOOK ABOUT YOUR HOUSE IN AN EDITION OF ONE. (MAYBE TWO IF YOU'RE NICE.)

Story by Joe Donnelly



David Silverman of LA House Histories at a Beverly Hills home he wrote about.

If your house has a story – a deep, rich, possibly haunted story and, in some cases, a Hollywood story – you might want to get in touch with David Silverman. He's the guy who's going to make those walls talk.

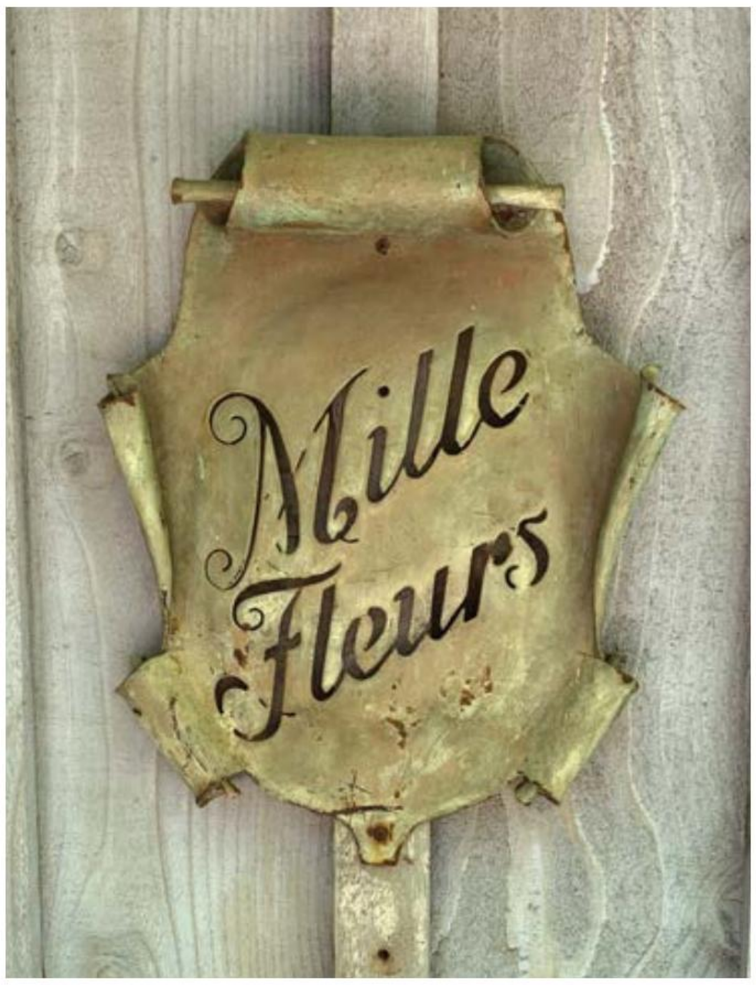
LA House Histories started with Silverman's sister's house, a 1920s French Normandy-style mansion in Holmby Hills – the L.A. neighborhood sandwiched between Bel Air and Beverly Hills. Together, those neighborhoods form the so-called Platinum Triangle. Visiting one day about 10 years ago, Silverman noticed a partially concealed plaque at the entrance to the greenhouse that read *Mille Fleurs*. Curiosity (Silverman's driving force) took hold.

Soon, he was poring over property records, digging through newspaper archives, scanning microfiche, and following the trail of the *Thousand fleurs,* aka flowers. By the time Silverman was done, he had a birthday gift for his sister and her husband – the 157-page story of their home, the erstwhile residence of a Francophile gardening enthusiast and later the home of Barrie Chase, who danced with Fred Astaire in *Daddy Long Legs* and other films of the era.

Since then, Silverman's been quietly conducting seances with some of Southern California's most storied addresses, rendering the architecture, folklore, and fingerprints of past occupants and iterations into bespoke, coffee table books that simultaneously preserve and provide a sense of place. These high-end one-offs are usually commissioned by new owners who are aware that their homes aren't just hot properties but part of the region's cultural history.

"This isn't something I thought up," says Silverman, an affable former entertainment lawyer whose square jaw, investigative tenacity, and local knowledge would otherwise fit the bill for a noir detective series. "It grew out of my love for my sister, because my first book was a gift for her, and I just fell in love with the process."

The process turned out to be a godsend for Silverman, who was burning out on the bare-knuckled legal side of the movie business. After doing the book for his sister, the proverbial lightbulb turned on. "It combined everything I love – writing, research, and old Los Angeles," says

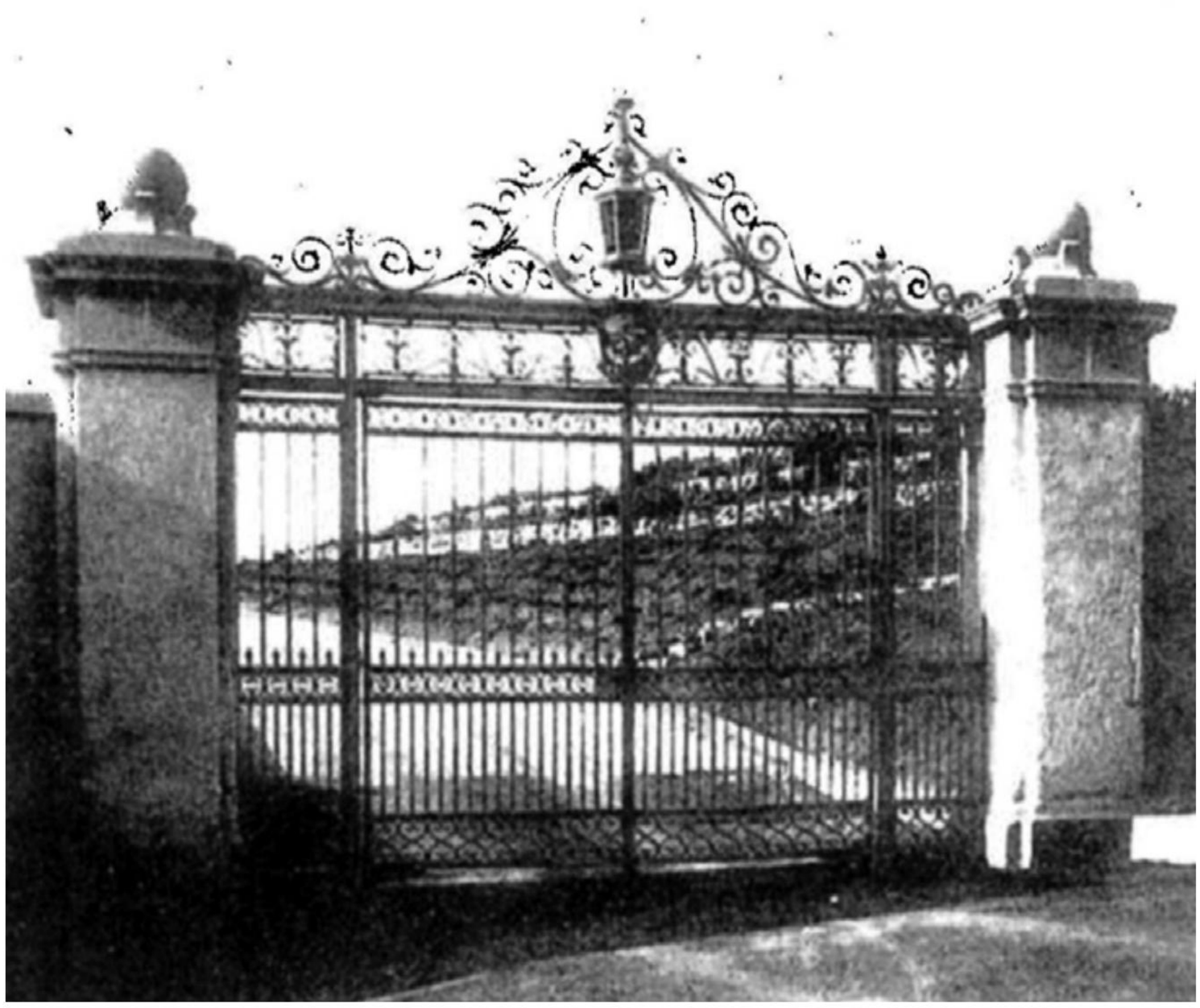


The greenhouse plaque at his sister's former Holmby Hills home began Silverman's journey into house histories. This sign was originally mounted on the gate to the right.

Silverman, who graduated from NYU law school in 1994 and spent the next 24 years climbing to the rank of VP of Legal Affairs for Sony Pictures Entertainment. Now, he says, he gets to spend his time "making people happy and not fighting as a lawyer."

Silverman's "coffee table books about your house" are privately commissioned for a rarefied crowd, and his work is in demand. We're sorry to blow his cover. (Pun intended.) After all, who wouldn't want to peek deep inside the Italian Riviera redux palazzo banker Milton Getz built near the Beverly Hills Hotel in 1926, the place Marion Davies later bought for herself and William Randolph Hearst? German American investor, philanthropist, and publisher of *Noema* magazine Nicolas Berggruen did.

Aware that the so-called *Beverly Estate* was a slice of history as well as his future residence, Berggruen retained Silverman to lay it all out (on the coffee table) for him. The book will come complete with archival photos, a history of previous ownership, original designs and their modifications through time, and some intriguing dish on the characters who gave the place its character. By the time he's done – big projects can take six months to two years – Silverman will have transcribed everything from the foundation to the fables into a cogent narrative. Call it historiography by





The imposing entrance gates of Silverman's sister's house, as seen in 1927 and 2013.

way of house. For the house obsessed, Silverman's house histories are like a CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) report with the addition of glamor and sometimes even intrigue.

Along with Davies's former digs, Silverman is also working on a book about *Falcon Lair*, the erstwhile and rumored to be haunted den of Rudy Valentino and, later, tobacco heiress Doris Duke. The current owner is endeavoring to return *Falcon Lair* to its former glory, sans paranormal activity, and Silverman's book will provide a sort of blueprint for the blueprints.

Most recently, Silverman completed a book on the Holmby Hills residence built by Constance Bennett, one of the first and most interesting icons of Hollywood's Golden Age. Bennett – the biggest female box-office draw of the 1930s – may be best known for starring alongside Cary Grant in *Topper,* but the oft-married leading lady is also remembered for audacious displays of agency during a period when the patriarchy was in no danger of collapsing.

At her Holmby Hills home on Carolwood Drive, she bought the parcel, hired the architects, oversaw the developers, and contracted the interior design to William "Billy" Haines – her pal and former costar. Haines had only recently given up the studio system to become an interior designer and, more indelibly, one half of the first openly gay couple in Hollywood.

Although he says he's in no danger of earning what he used to as an entertainment lawyer anytime soon, Silverman has slowly built his passion into a business. Slow was really the only way to go; the books are painstakingly researched and meticulously produced, embodying the craftsmanship of the properties they document. Over the past five years, Silverman has been able to dive into these investigations full-time. And by now, he's walked through the foyers and digested the legends of, among others, Tyrone Power, Shirley Temple, Frank Sinatra, and Marlene Dietrich.







Because Marion Davies was a longtime friend of Joe Kennedy, she invited John and Jacqueline Kennedy to stay at her Beverly Hills home for their 1953 honeymoon. The eight-acre estate is seen here in 1936. Joe and Rose Kennedy stayed at the house during the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.







It might be tempting to dismiss these commissions as trivial pursuits for the über rich, but the artisanal grace of both the books and their subject matter has the effect, on this reader anyway, of acting like a tonic against the crassness of temporary contemporary life and real estate. Being mad at these would be like being mad at the English countryside.

"I think the stories are so rich and fascinating that they paint a picture of the house, giving someone a view of what the house was like and who lived there and what happened," says Silverman. "I would love it if I had a house with that kind of history."

His work, though SoCal-centered, is expanding with commissions for houses in New York and Houston on tap. Silverman also provides archival research, supporting photos, documents, and narrative overviews for realtors showing properties for which an intriguing history adds extra value to the sometimes stratospheric price tags.

Speaking of intriguing histories. One of Silverman's recent projects is inextricably linked to Montecito. The fabled *Quelindo* ("How Beautiful") estate, originally built on 11 Pacific Palisades acres overlooking the ocean from Palos Verdes to Point Dume, was purchased for Mary Virginia McCormick, the eldest daughter of Cyrus McCormick, of the International Harvester Company and Riven Rock McCormicks.



Hollywood fan magazines from the 1920s and '30s are one of Silverman's favorite sources for articles and photographs of the homes of former stars, such as Rudolph Valentino's *Falcon Lair,* seen here in 1926, when it was sold at auction. Valentino died one year after buying the Benedict Canyon house.


By Order of the Court

Rudolph Valentino Estate

PUBLIC AUCTION

COMMENCING

TOMORROW, 10 A. M., DEC. 10th

—SCHEDULE OF SALE—

(ON RESPECTIVE PREMISES)

(1) UNIMPROVED PROPERTY, 6 8-10 ACRES, BEVERLY TERRACE . . . . . Friday, 10 A. M., DEC. 10th

(2) NO. 2—BELLA DRIVE, BEVERLY TERRACE. HOUSE AND 8.3 ACRES IMPROVED PROPERTY. AUTOMOBILES, DOGS, HORSES, SADDLES AND HARNESS. (SOLD BY PIECE.) . . . . . Friday, 1 P. M., DEC. 10th

(3) 6776—WEDGEWOOD PLACE, HOUSE AND 4 LOTS. WHITLEY HEIGHTS, HOLLYWOOD, Saturday, 2 P. M., DEC. 13th

NOTE: Sale of PERSONAL EFFECTS, FURNITURE, ART OBJECTS, YACHT and STUDIO PROPERTIES will be conducted commencing Tuesday, December 14th, on the premises of the Hall of Art Studios, 1743 North Highland Avenue, Hollywood. FULL DETAILS WILL BE ANNOUNCED NEXT SUNDAY.

For the convenience of those unable to attend the preview of Mr. Valentino's Properties a large, completely illustrated catalogue containing over fifty photographs has been prepared. These catalogues may be had by request direct to Mr. A. H. Weil, 304 Bartlett Building, or at the offices of the Hall of Art Studios, 1743 North Highland, for the nominal price of two dollars each.

DIRECTIONS to home and unimproved acreage—Drive to first street west of Beverly Hills Hotel, Benedict Canyon Drive, then one mile north on Benedict Canyon Drive, passing Harold Lloyd and Thomas Ince estates, then left, following signs directing to property, "Falcon Lair," No. 2 Bella Drive.

"FALCON LAIR"
No. 2 Bella Drive, Beverly Terrace
AUCTION, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10th, 1 P. M.

No. 2 Bella Drive

(a) The Improved Acreage

(b) The Landscaping

(c) Outside Improvements

(d) The House

(e) Garage Building

(f) Stable Building

(CUT THIS ADVERTISEMENT OUT FOR REFERENCE)

S. George Ullman, Executor.

"FALCON LAIR"
View of Entrance from Courtyard

Whitley Heights Home, 6776 Wedgewood Place, Hollywood
AUCTION, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2 P. M.

No. 6776 Wedgewood Place

Four Lots

The House

BEVERLY HILLS UNIMPROVED ACREAGE AUCTION, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10TH, 10 A. M.

AUTOMOBILES, HORSES, DOGS AND STABLE EQUIPMENT—AUCTION FRIDAY, DEC. 10TH, 1 P. M.

Saddle Horse "Remedee"

Saddle Horse "Harmon"

Stellon Sextia Franchini Automobile

Avion Victoir Automobile (French)

Franklin Coupe Automobile 1926 Model

Chevrolet Roadster Automobile 1925 Model

Ford Truck Automobile, 1922 Model

Saddle Horse "Toni"

Saddle Horse "Firefly"

Three Great Dane Dogs

Two Italian Mastiffs

One Spanish Greyhound

One Irish Setter

Saddles, Harness, Stable Equipment, Dog Harness and Trappings

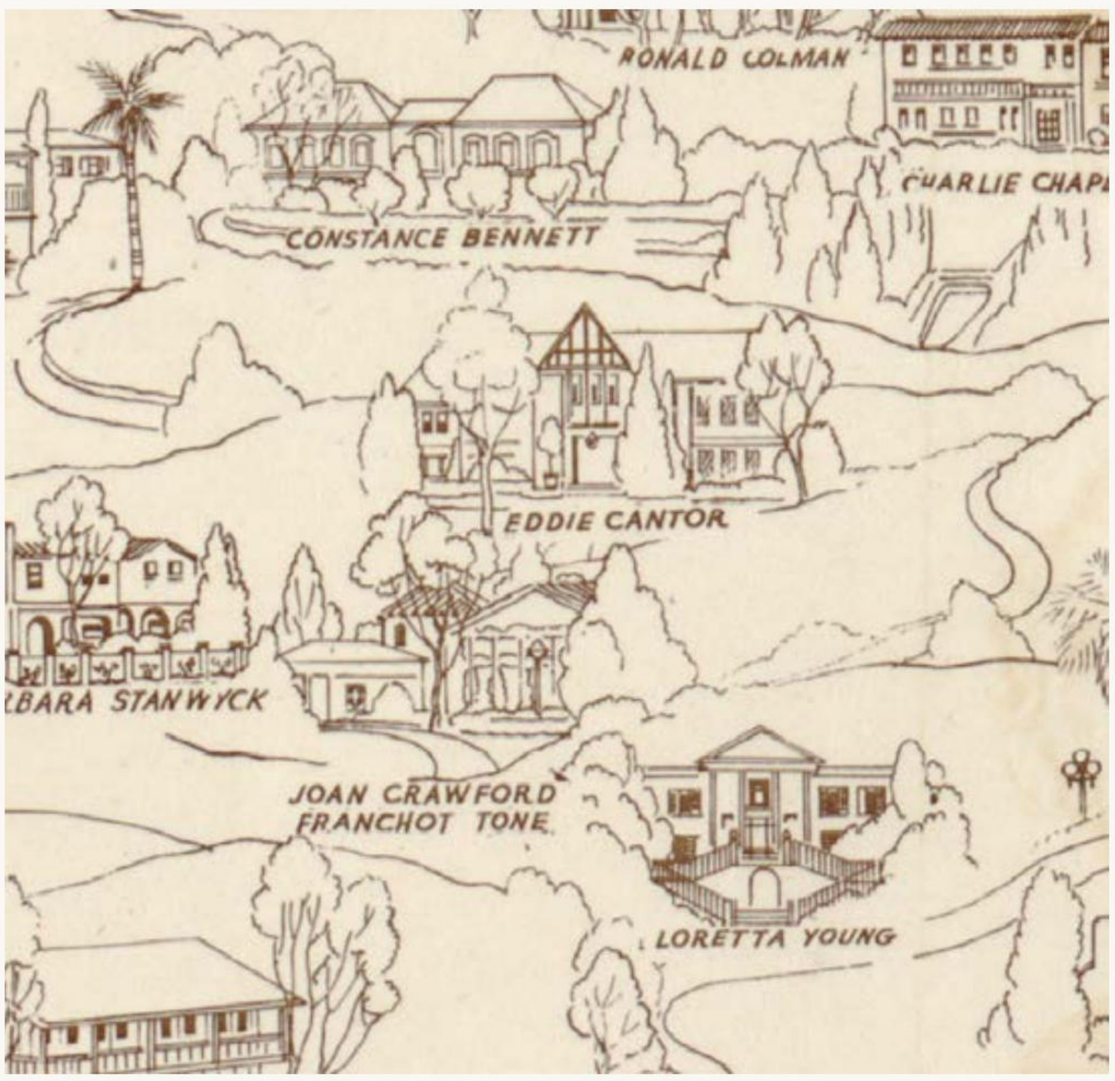
A. H. WEIL will personally conduct this sale.
304 Bartlett Building, Phone VAndike 5127





MAPS TO THE STARS' HOMES

The Carolwood house appeared on maps to the stars' homes when it was owned by both Constance Bennett and Loretta Young.



1930s. The Constance Bennett house is at the top, with Loretta Young's home on Sunset near Hilgard in the lower right.

Silverman's most recent book chronicled the 1935 Holmby Hills house built by Constance Bennett, seen here at her sunken tennis court. She sold the French-Normandy house in 1944 to Loretta Young for $70,000 – both of their homes are depicted in this page from Silverman's book. Bennett's sister, actress Joan Bennett, said "She was like some silvery comet who streaked through life with daring speed." The home was across the street from the future home of Frank Sinatra and his family, the subject of one of Silverman's earlier books.





Before Riven Rock was best known as the title of a T.C. Boyle novel and as a subdivision in the Montecito foothills, it was a California getaway for Cyrus's troubled offspring. Mary Virginia, who was diagnosed with what we now call schizophrenia, lived there from around 1897 to 1904, when she was in her late 30s to early 40s. Her brother Stanley supervised the building of the sprawling estate and moved in full-time around 1908. He could be spotted riding around in a limo with a chimpanzee named Julius. And you thought Michael Jackson was the first to chauffeur his chimpanzee. Julius beat "Bubbles" by three-quarters of a century.

As for Mary Virginia, late in her life she returned to Southern California, where she wintered at a 26-acre Pasadena estate and spent her summers overlooking the Pacific at *Quelindo*. There, she retained a house symphony to play a soundtrack to accompany the ocean breezes and her final days.

Wouldn't you want to read all about it?

In addition to his books, Silverman creates custom-made clamshell boxes and portfolios that hold books, photographs, and architectural drawings. These are commissioned by the homeowner, or as a gift from a friend or realtor.

