

MOUNT CARMEL RANCH
3621 Carmel Valley Road
San Diego
San Diego County
California

HABS No. CA-2894

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
Pacific West Region
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

MOUNT CARMEL RANCH

HABS No. CA-2894

- Location:** 3621 Carmel Valley Road
San Diego, CA 92130
- Present Owner:** Multiple owners- property now subdivided
3621 Carmel Valley Road
San Diego, CA 92130
- Present Use:** Residential/Agricultural
- Significance:** The Mount Carmel Ranch represents a highly unusual attempt by a California religious organization to manage a working farm. It was operated by nuns of the Religious Sisters of Mercy and was directly linked with the organization's eleemosynary activities. The ranch is a symbol of the Sisters of Mercy's importance in the secular and sacred life of San Diego, and is the only extant property in the area that is directly associated with the early years of the Religious Sister of Mercy's presence in San Diego. The Ranch is also important in the area of vernacular architecture as a distinctive late example of Greek Revival residential architecture.
- Historians:** Margo Nayyar, Research Associate
California Department of Transportation
Division of Environmental Analysis, Cultural Studies Office
1120 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814
- Project Information:** The Mount Carmel Ranch recordation was completed as one of the mitigation measures for the Carmel Valley Restoration and Enhancement Project (Caltrans #11-SD-56-P.M. 0.3/2.4), and was prepared as stipulated in the Memorandum of Agreement submitted to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. Photographs were taken by Don Tateishi in June 1992. The Mount Carmel Ranch was determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places in 1989 under Criterion A for its association with the early eleemosynary activities of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, and under Criterion C for its vernacular, Greek Revival inspired architecture. It is listed as Historical Landmark #391 by the San Diego Historical Resources Board.
- Date:** March 2013

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: ca. 1905- 1915

In ca. 1905, the Religious Sisters of Mercy (Sisters of Mercy) commissioned the building of the main residence. Ancillary buildings on the property were built intermittently until ca. 1945.

2. Architect: Unknown

3. Original owner: Sisters of Mercy

The Religious Sisters of Mercy are a Catholic organization of women founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1831 by Catherine Elizabeth McAuley. They commit their lives and resources to act in solidarity with, “the economically poor of the world, especially women and children.”¹

The first Sisters of Mercy arrived in the United States from Ireland in 1843. They ministered to the sick and economically poor. By 1854, sisters came from Ireland to settle in New York and San Francisco, California, and continued to spread throughout the country, establishing schools and hospitals.² They reached San Diego in 1890 and worked to establish a small hospital in downtown San Diego. The hospital was located on the Reed Block at Sixth Avenue and Market Street, but within a year was replaced with a new hospital.

In 1891, the Sisters of Mercy purchased a site near University Avenue and began constructing St. Joseph’s Hospital (now called Mercy Hospital), under the leadership of Mother M. Michael. Michael quickly established a prominent role in the medical and religious life of San Diego. The initial wing of the hospital was opened in 1891, and the hospital was incorporated in 1893. A convent and novitiate were constructed on the hospital grounds in 1900. The Sisters of Mercy established a school of nursing at the hospital grounds in 1903. By the time of her death in 1922, Mother M. Michael had clearly established Mercy Hospital as among the key religious and medical institutions in San Diego.³

¹ “Mission,” Sisters of Mercy, <http://www.sistersofmercy.org>, accessed January 7, 2013.

² “Mercy Comes to America,” Sisters of Mercy, <http://www.sistersofmercy.org>, accessed January 7, 2013.

³ Sister Mary Athanasius Sheridan, And Some Fell on Good Ground: A History of the Sisters of Mercy of California and Arizona, New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1982, 210-220; Mercy Hospital, “The Story of Your City and Your Hospital,” No Date, ca. 1965.

4. Builder, contractor: Unknown

The main residence was built by two young carpenters from San Diego using a general plan developed by Mother M. Michael.⁴ The carpenter's names are unknown. Mother M. Michael was active in the design of buildings at the original Mercy Hospital in San Diego.

5. Original plans and construction: The building reflects its combined original uses as the headquarters for a large working farm as well as a retreat for the Sisters of Mercy in San Diego. The basement originally contained the kitchen and two dining areas: one for the Sisters, one for hired hands. The first story included the common areas for the community, including a small chapel. The second story and attic contained a large number of small bedrooms.

6. Alterations and additions: The main residence has a large two-story, hipped-roof extension located at the west façade. The addition apparently functioned to provide office space for visiting priests and the sister superior.

The most visible changes are modifications to the front and rear porches. The original porches were supported on plain squared posts with plain balusters. The existing porches are supported on round columns and feature turned banisters. The back porch also is partially enclosed to create a small breakfast nook area. The porches and the dining area enclosure were built in ca. 1970-1980.

B. Historic Context⁵

The land in and around the Mt. Carmel Ranch was settled in the nineteenth century by the McGonigle family, for whom nearby McGonigle Canyon is named. The McGonigles, Irish immigrants, owned several thousand acres in the vicinity.⁶

In the late 1890s, the McGonigles sold approximately 1000 acres to the Sisters of Mercy, forming the basis for the Mount Carmel Ranch. The circumstances behind the sale are not clear. One account suggests that the McGonigles were unable to meet the mortgage payment on the land and, rather than go through foreclosure, sold it to the Sisters of Mercy for payment of the balance. In another account, the Sisters of Mercy were thought to have treated ill members of the McGonigle family, and the favorable term of sale was in gratitude for their successful care. It is possible that both accounts are correct, if the family illness also

⁴ Interview with Frank Knechtel, November 8, 1988, by Steve Mikesell.

⁵ This historic context has been slightly modified from the original Mt. Carmel Ranch DPR form found in: Stephen Mikesell, "Historical Architectural Survey Report: Carmel Valley Creek Restoration and Enhancement," Unpublished report, Cultural Studies Office files, California Department of Transportation, Division of Environmental Analysis, Sacramento, California, December 1988.

⁶ Sister Catherine Louise LaCoste, CSJ, "Carmel Valley Cemetery Described," *Southern Cross*, Vol. 74, No. 13, April 4, 1985.

caused financial hardships. In any event, the property was sold to the Sisters of Mercy on January 17, 1899.⁷

While the Roman Catholic Church maintained a presence in San Diego beginning in the early 1760s, the Sisters of Mercy first appeared in 1890. That year, two Sisters of Mercy from St. Louis – Mother M. Michael and Sister M. Alphonsa – established a small hospital in downtown San Diego. It was located in the Reed Block at Sixth Avenue and Market (it has since been demolished). Within a year, the organization purchased a site near University Avenue and began constructing St. Joseph’s Hospital, now known as Mercy Hospital.

The Sisters’ intent in acquiring the McGonigle property is unknown. One explanation is that they were offered the land at a very attractive price and accepted McGonigle’s generous offer without a clear plan for its use. It is also possible that Mother M. Michael felt a special affinity for McGonigle and agrarian life. She was the daughter of Irish immigrants herself and was raised on a farm in Illinois.⁸

Whatever the motivation, the Sisters of Mercy acquired this property in the formative years of their involvement with the City of San Diego and developed the property consistent with their primary mission of operating Mercy Hospital.

The following timeline of events at the Mt. Carmel Ranch was pieced together using information received during interviews with the Sisters of Mercy, Frank Knechtel, a lifetime resident of the valley, and the current owners (as of 1988), Ann and Robert Stephens.

The Sisters apparently did little with the property the first five or six years they owned the land.

In ca. 1905, the Sisters commissioned the building of the main residence. According to Knechtel, two young carpenters from San Diego built the house using a general plan developed by Mother M. Michael. This explanation is plausible since it is documented that Mother M. Michael was active in the design of buildings at the original Mercy Hospital, especially in designing the Motherhouse. Other buildings on the property were built quickly after the main residence. Among the fifteen structures found within the complex, several date to the first decade after construction of the main residence, including the hay barn, the wash house, the reservoir, one or both of the silos, and the bungalow.⁹

The Mount Carmel Ranch was operated to fulfill three objectives: to provide dairy products and produce for use at Mercy Hospital; to provide a retreat for the Sisters of Mercy who worked at Mercy Hospital; and to provide a home for the homeless. At various times, one or another of these goals gained precedence over the others. Over most of this period, a small number of Sisters lived permanently at the ranch to supervise the agricultural operation and care for the homeless. Frank Knechtel recalls that the permanent residents numbered between

⁷ “Carmel Valley Ranch,” from Annals of Sisters of Mercy, Archives, Sisters of Mercy, Burlingame, No date.

⁸ Sheridan, p. 217.

⁹ Sheridan, p. 205.

four to six Sisters, with Sister M. Patricia supervising the operation for the longest period of time. Other Sisters of Mercy resided at the main residence on a rotating basis and would perform occasional chores involved with the farm operation, as well as, in the care of the homeless.

Prior to 1916, the main residence was used as a residence for the aged who were too poor to stay for extended period at St. Joseph's (Mercy) Hospital. During World War I and for a short period afterward, the residence was used as an orphanage. According to Sister M. Athanasius Sheridan, as many as twenty-two orphans lived there.¹⁰

Throughout the period, 1905-45, the most consistent focus of the operation was to provide milk and vegetables for patients at Mercy Hospital. The productivity of the ranch changed over time as agricultural practice improved. In the early years, a large portion of the ranch acreage was used for cultivating grain and alfalfa, which was used to feed the cattle and mules. Frank Knechtel, who worked at the ranch as a teenager in the early 1930s, recalls that the Sisters kept twelve mules along with forty to fifty head of cattle. The vegetable garden was maintained by a Chinese gardener who lived on the ranch, in a building that no longer exists. In addition to cattle and mules, the Sisters kept hogs at the ranch maintaining between ten to fifteen breeding sows. The hog operation laid the basis for another cooperative relationship between Mercy Hospital and the Mount Carmel Ranch. The trucks that hauled milk and vegetables to Mercy Hospital also hauled back garbage from the hospital that was used to feed to the hogs.

The farm operation changed dramatically in the mid-1930s. Prior to that time, cattle were milked by hand inside an earthen-floored barn. A deadly outbreak of botulism in Mercy Hospital, traced to tainted milk from Mount Carmel Ranch, forced the Sisters to change their agricultural practices.

Beginning in 1934, the Sisters began modernizing the farm while divesting themselves of operational responsibility. In 1934 and 1935, for example, the Sisters leased much of the flat farm land to Frank Knechtel. About the same time, they constructed the large milk barn, still extant on the property (as of 1988), which was a modern facility for its time, with a clean concrete milking floor, a refrigerated cooler, and a boiler for steaming the milk as it passed from the milk room to the cooler.¹¹

By 1936, the Sisters had vacated the property altogether and turned its management over to a skilled dairyman, Albert M. Foersch. Foersch leased and later attempted to buy the property from the Sisters. A June 2, 1936 article in the *San Diego Union* identifies Foersch as a "ranch manager" for the Sisters of Mercy, and indicates that the full productive capacity of the farm was dedicated for use in Mercy Hospital. This article gives a clear indication of the magnitude of the operation. Foersch was watching over a herd of 75 Guernsey and Holstein

¹⁰ Sheridan, p. 214.

¹¹ Interview with Sister Petronilla Gaul, Sisters of Mercy, Burlingame, California, September 15, 1988. Interviewer Steve Mikesell.

cattle and delivering over 100 gallons of milk a day to the hospital, along with various vegetables in season.¹²

By 1943, the Sisters had leased the property to Foersch, with an option to buy. In a September 1, 1943 memorandum, the Sisters gave an accounting of Foersch's operation, listing 97 cattle, 39 of which were used for milking, and 880 hogs, indicating that Foersch had begun to shift the operation substantially away from dairy to hogs, probably indicating as well that he was no longer tied exclusively to selling products to Mercy Hospital.

Finally, in 1945, the Sisters sold the property to George Gress. As indicated in a 1944 memorandum, the Sisters wearied of the task of dealing with the farm. This memo notes:

The prospects for selling the Mt. Carmel Ranch are not good, Mr. Morrison says, as the man who was to buy it was depending upon disposing of another piece of property, which he has not been able to do. It would be a blessing to be rid of it, as they [sic] have been so many accidents out there, besides other complications too numerous to mention.¹³

Gress operated the ranch for two years before he sold it to Ann and Robert Stephens, the owners and occupants of the property as of 1988.

Since the 1990s, it appears that the property was subdivided into two parcels. The smaller parcel (Assessors Parcel Number 307-040-74-00) has been owned by the Chabad Jewish Center Del Mar Inc. since 2004, and contains the main residence and the wash house. The larger parcel (Assessors Parcel Number 307-040-77-00) containing the remaining outbuildings is owned by Clews Land and Livestock LLC, and has been a horse ranch since 2005. In the years since the freeway construction project, the address for the parcel containing the main house was changed to 11410 Carmel Country Road, and for the larger parcel, 11500 Clews Ranch Road. A trail, known as State Route 56 Bike Trail borders the Mount Carmel Ranch on the north and east sides of the ranch.

¹² *San Diego Union*, June 2, 1936.

¹³ Unsigned letter to Mother M. Thomasine, September 1, 1943. From Archives, Sisters of Mercy, Burlingame.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement:

- 1. Architectural Character:** The main residence is a distinctive example of Greek Revival traditions in its massing and detail (gable returns, boxed cornice, window surrounds). The building is a late example of this building type found throughout the United States, particularly in rural areas. It is also unusual for its large proportions and plan, as it was designed to serve as both a farm house and dormitory. It is distinctive, as a typical example of a style and a highly atypical example in its plan and function.
- 2. Condition of fabric:** The house is in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

- 1. Overall dimensions:** The residence is a large three-and-a-half-story residence with a partial basement and full attic. The structure measures approximately 42 x 36 feet.
- 2. Foundation:** The house is situated on a hillside and rests on a raised concrete foundation on the north side. On the south side, the house rests on a timber sill set directly on the ground.
- 3. Walls:** The building is clad with horizontal, flush, wood board siding with narrow endboards. The west façade addition is clad with vertical, flush wood board siding.
- 4. Structural System/framing:** The building is wood framed.
- 5. Porches:** The original porches were supported on plain squared posts with plain balusters. The existing porches are supported on round columns and feature turned banisters. The south façade porch is partially enclosed to create a small breakfast nook area.
- 6. Chimney:** One internal brick chimney is centered on the east slope of the roof.
- 7. Openings**
 - a. Doors:** There are two doors located on the south façade; one on the first and second stories. Details of the doors are indiscernible as they are covered by security screens. The second-story wood and screen door was added in ca. 1950, judging by the scalloped wood decorative features. The doors are wood framed with simple wood surrounds and a simple decorative crown.

The north façade has four doors; three on the basement level, and one on the first story. Details of the doors are indiscernible as they are covered by security screens. Two doors lead into the basement. The screen doors are made of wood

and metal screening. The doors have simple wood board surrounds with a single-light transom. The first-story door has a wood and screen door with a single-light transom. The door has simple wood surrounds and a decorative crown. A simple paneled wood door leads to a storage closet.

- b. **Windows:** Most of the windows throughout the house are one-over-one, double-hung, wood sash windows. Windows at the basement level are a mixture of multi-light, double-hung windows and six-over-one double-hung windows. All windows are wood framed with simple wood board surrounds and decorative wood sills and crowns.

8. Roof

- a. **Shape, covering:** The moderately pitched, front gable roof is clad with composite shingles. The west façade addition has a half-hipped roof.
- b. **Cornice, eaves:** The eaves have a slight overhang. A decorative entablature features a discontinuous frieze across the gables, and the cornice is emphasized with a wide, divided band of trim, typical in Greek Revival houses.
- c. **Dormers:** A dormer is centered on the west and east slopes of the roof, at the ridge line. The dormers have a shed roof clad with composite shingles. The windows details for each dormer were indiscernible at the time of this survey.

C. Description of Interior

No interior details were available at the time of this survey.

D. Site

1. **Historic Landscape design:** The north side of the driveway leading from Carmel Valley Road to the main residence is lined with eleven old-growth “Trees of Heaven,”(Latin name: Ailanthus Altissima). These are arranged in a formal row, fondly known as the “Avenue of the Trees of Heaven.” It is likely that this formal landscaping feature dates to as early as ca. 1905.
2. **Outbuildings:** There are eleven ancillary buildings and structures that are contributors to the Mount Carmel Ranch complex.
 - a. **Washhouse:** The washhouse is a small wood-frame structure, measuring approximately 12 x 27 feet. It was likely built at the same time as the main residence and features beveled wood-board wall cladding, multi-light, double-hung, wood-sash windows, and a wood and multi-light glass door on the west façade. The front-gable roof has slight eave overhang and is clad with composition shingles. There are no known modifications to the building.

- b. Reservoir:** The reservoir measures approximately 80 x 30 feet, and is approximately six feet deep. It is lined in concrete; no reinforcement bars are visible. According to Frank Knechtel, the reservoir was built early in the ranch operation in ca. 1915. It held irrigation water that used gravity flow to flood alfalfa and vegetable crops. There are no noticeable modifications to the reservoir. As of 1988, the reservoir was unused.
- c. Small Silo:** This small structure is located east of the reservoir and appears to have been abandoned for many years. According to Knechtel, it was used for grains and corn silage storage until the larger silo was built in the mid-1930s. The silo is cylindrical with corrugated-metal cladding.
- d. Shed #1:** This small structure is located east of the reservoir and appears to have been abandoned for many years. According to Knechtel, it was used for grain and corn silage storage until the larger silo was built in the mid-1930s. Shed #1 is wood framed with wood board siding, and a gable roof clad with corrugated metal.
- e. Hay Barn:** The hay barn has a wood frame, wood-board wall cladding, and a gable roof with a shed-roofed extension on south façade. The roof is clad with corrugated metal. The hay barn has a central crib, double aisles lay-out, and is largely unmodified, except for the installation of horse stalls along the aisles. The stalls date to the post-1945 period. The barn measures approximately 70 x 80 feet, and was built at an unknown date.
- f. Big Silo:** This structure is a large cylindrical redwood-stave silo, measuring approximately fifteen feet in height with a diameter of approximately ten feet. Contradictory oral history accounts estimate the construction date as 1905, contemporary with the main residence, and 1933, contemporary with the modernization of the dairy operation.
- g. Milk Barn:** The milk barn is a one-story wood-frame structure that measures approximately 24 x 42 feet. It has a concrete foundation, wood-board and stucco wall cladding, and a monitor gable roof clad with corrugated metal. Two smaller buildings are connected to the milk barn. A stucco-sided building originally housed a milk cooler. A second corrugated-metal sided building served as a boiler used to generate steam for heating milk prior to refrigeration. It was built in ca. 1935.
- h. Shed #2:** This small wood-frame shed has is clad in wood board-and-batten siding. The slightly-pitched, front-gable roof is clad with corrugated metal. A multi-light awning window is located on the south façade along with a wood panel door. It was built in ca. 1915.
- i. Bungalow** The wood-frame, one-story cottage measures approximately 33 x 24 feet, has wood board-and-batten siding, six-over-six-light, double-hung wood sash windows, and a moderately-pitched, gable roof clad with composition shingles. A shed-roofed enclosed sitting porch is located on the north façade, and a shed-roofed

small room addition is located on the west façade. The cottage was used as a residence for hired ranch workers, and was built in ca. 1915.

- j. Shed #3:** This small wood-frame storage shed measures approximately 10 x 20 feet and has wood board-and-batten siding, and a gable roof clad with corrugated metal. It was built in ca. 1925.
- k. Garage #2:** The wood-frame garage has replacement corrugated-metal cladding, and a front-gable roof clad with corrugated metal. Only a portion of the original sliding timber doors remain.

Part III. Sources

Primary Sources

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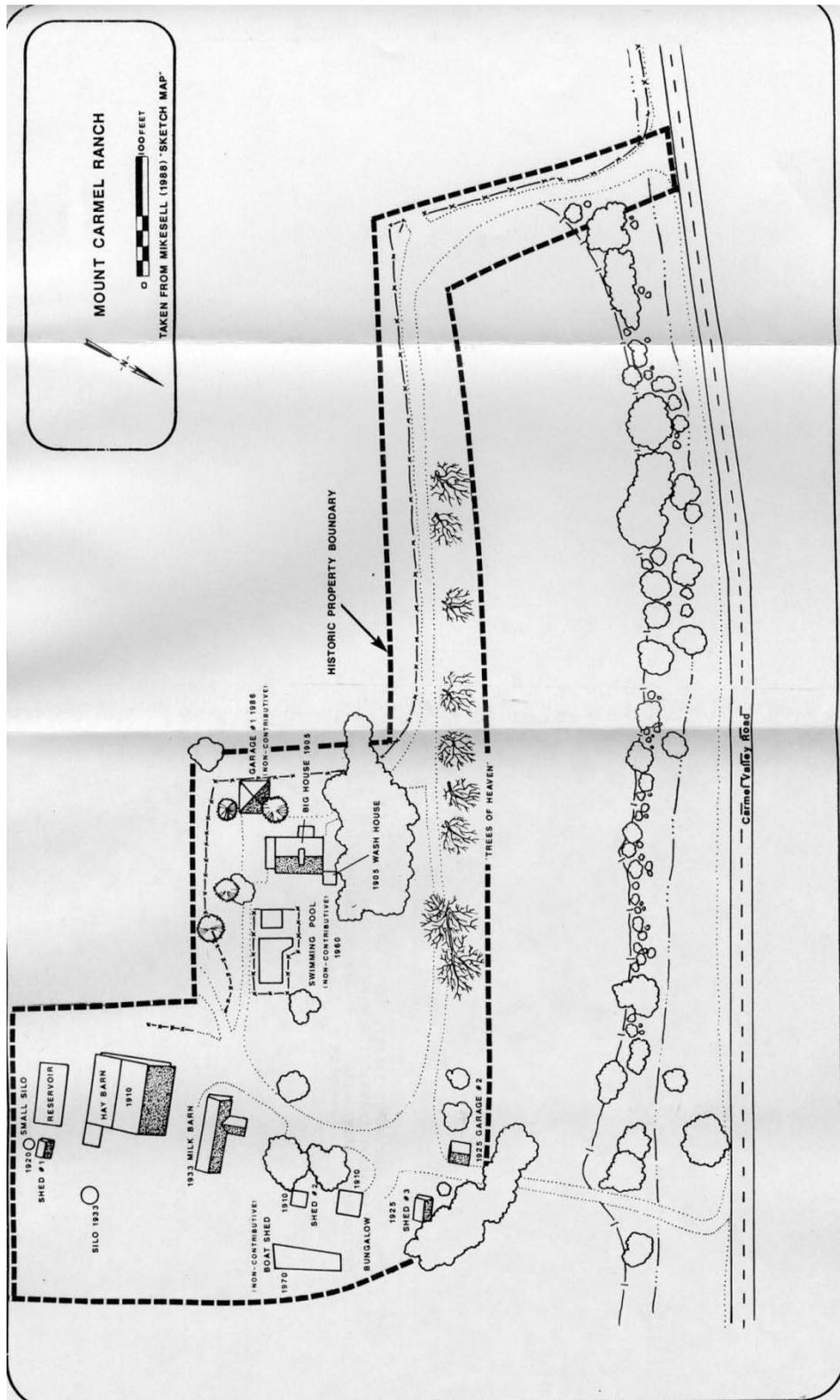
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Sketch map taken from: Stephen Mikesell, "Historical Architectural Survey Report: Carmel Valley Creek Restoration and Enhancement." Unpublished report, Cultural Studies Office files, California Department of Transportation, Division of Environmental Analysis, Sacramento, California, December 1988.

