



Alee Barbee Sanford:

FOUNDING PATRON OF THE OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL AND GREY GABLES

BY CRAIG WALKER

During its early years, the Ojai Music Festival put itself on the map by featuring international classical and contemporary music superstars such as Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland. But the venture would never have succeeded without the enthusiastic early support of local Ojai residents such as Alee Barbee Sanford, a founding patron of the festival who also founded Grey Gables.

SANFORD, A RETIRED CONCERT SINGER, first came to the Ojai Valley from Connecticut in 1941 to study Theosophy at the Krotona Institute. The next year she returned with her daughter, Louise, and two close friends — Maria Redfield and Jennie Webster — to continue her studies at Krotona and find a way to contribute to the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual evolution of mankind. With an inheritance from her husband's family (Sanford Ink Company of Chicago), she bought a house on West Eucalyptus Street where she and her small entourage began their Ojai adventure

Born in 1890, Alee Barbee Sanford spent her youth performing in concert halls throughout America and Europe. Her voice was a lyric soprano with a range of two and half octaves. A New York critic once wrote that her coloratura singing was “like a string of pearls,” and her diction “was superb — whether in English, French, German, Spanish, or Italian.” She was a highly cultured woman — well-read and dignified — who collected fine art and rare books.

She was not only an accomplished musician; she was a scholar who studied the philosophers and religions of the world — both ancient and modern. In her later years she studied Theosophy, dabbling in spiritualism and working to bring about Theosophy's main goal—the brotherhood of man.

She was especially fascinated by the occult, and considered herself to be a mystic with visionary powers. She occasionally hosted séances at her home, which led many in the small town of Ojai to view her as an eccentric.

Sanford had always been grateful to her own teachers for the wonderful gifts of knowledge they bestowed on her. She decided to create a place where teachers could live, enrich their knowledge and skills, and devote themselves to their teaching duties without the drudgery of daily chores.

She wanted to surround them with fine art, music, literature, philosophy, and cultural events. Sanford decided to create a resident teacher's club where she, her daughter, and her friends would provide rooms, meals, cleaning services, and cultural events at no cost to the teachers. She also wanted it to serve as a community cultural center, with a fully stocked library and performance hall.

In 1944, Sanford was drawn to an old, gabled house for sale on the corner of Montgomery and Grand, at that time owned by prominent Oxnard businessman Harry Staples. She saw in the old house an opportunity to fulfill her dream. She hired local builder Sam Hudiberg to help her renovate the old house. Sam Hudiberg was one of Ojai's most reputable builders; he built the Ojai Library, San Antonio School, Frost Hall at Ojai Valley School, and the Ojai Masonic Lodge. Sanford paid him \$50 a day, an unheard-of sum at the time.

Building materials were scarce and expensive during World War II, but Sanford purchased everything without concern for the cost. She directed Hudiberg to divide the large house into several apartment units and expand the structure to include a professional kitchen, dining room, salon, music room, and library.

The project did not proceed smoothly. Sanford was not only eccentric; she was controlling and frequently changed her mind. Late local historian David Mason's father, Pete Mason, assisted Hudiberg on

the project. “My father came home frustrated nearly every night with another story about Mrs. Sanford's eccentric designs and endless do-overs,” Mason recalled. “He said that walls were added and later moved or eliminated entirely! At the last minute she changed the color of several rooms from blue-green to green-blue, an imperceptible difference to everyone but Mrs. Sanford.”

Once completed, Alee Sanford furnished Grey Gables with expensive draperies, chandeliers, and antiques. She stocked the library with her personal collection of rare books and first editions, books from 1492 to the latest biographies — including Shakespeare's “Second Folio.” She covered the walls with paintings from the 16th Century to the modern period, and filled the rooms with objects d'art she had collected during her travels. She named the new music room Coleman Hall after her friend, Alice Coleman (Batchelder), a pioneer in the world of Chamber Music.

The first teachers moved in during the summer of 1946. They appreciated Mrs. Sanford's warmth and generosity, but they discovered that her eccentric and controlling personality made life difficult for them. They were required to eat their meals in the dining room, and dress up for dinner.

Sanford began orchestrating the lives of the residents to fit her vision of culture and style. Most of them found her benevolent control too restrictive; in spite of the free room and board, they soon moved out. Many of the apartments she built were never occupied.

It was Sanford's intention that Grey Gables also offer cultural benefits for the people of Ojai. She hosted public lectures, philosophical discussions, and dramatic readings in the salon. She invited musicians and singers to perform at Grey Gables, including young California artists whose interests and careers she promoted.

Sanford began the process of incorporating a foundation — The Ojai Foundation for the Advancement of Learning — to raise funds and expand her operation. She hoped her new foundation would become a nationally recognized organization so she could create more resident teacher clubs across the country. A fundraising letter from the group stated: “We hope here in Ventura County to prove the need and practicality of such resident clubs so that throughout the United States it can be used as a pattern and through this course to encourage more men and women of high ideals to join the teaching profession and to establish a greater dignity of appreciation in the hearts and minds of the citizens of the United States for individuals as teachers and a deeper meaning of those in the profession of their high responsibility.”

In 1948, her friend and partner Maria Redfield died. With Miss Redfield gone, Sanford dropped her ambitious plan to take Grey Gables national. By then, however, she was already involved in a new project.

When John Bauer founded the Ojai Music Festival in 1947, Alee Sanford became a major supporter. She not only donated much of the festival's start-up funds, she housed its musicians, hosted patrons' concerts, and even opened a festival office at Grey Gables.

Sanford began constructing a large, three-story building behind Coleman Hall. The first two floors were to be apartments for housing a



performance hall. It would boast Ojai's first elevator. Construction on this building did not go smoothly, either. According to Freda Dunning, one of Grey Gables early resident teachers, "Her building plans were really strange. She built rooms around existing rooms. Of course, this led to the inside rooms having no windows! When the elevator was placed in the location she wanted, she then changed her mind and ordered it put in a different location."

According to Freda's daughter Karin (Hays) Crilly, who was twelve at the time, Mr. Hudiberg quit several times but always returned. In spite of all the delays, the new building was completed in 1948.

In October of 1948, Alee Sanford held the Ojai Music Festival's first patrons' concert at Grey Gables. Performing were the acclaimed American soprano Regina Resnik and Swedish tenor Set Svanholm, both stars of the San Francisco and Metropolitan Opera companies. Mrs. Sanford hosted several other Music Festival fundraisers at Grey Gables, and continued to be a patron every year until 1964. Grey Gables housed the offices of the Ojai Music Festival during the late 1940s.

Although Alee Barbee Sanford arrived in Ojai with a large inheritance, cost overruns and excessive spending on her overly ambitious and ill-conceived project quickly depleted her financial resources. By 1953 she was under water and sinking fast. The few teachers who still lived at Grey Gables offered to contribute toward the expenses, but Mrs. Sanford would not hear of it. In late 1953, Grey Gables was closed by the bank and placed into foreclosure.

As fate would have it, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, the eventual founder of AARP, was on a speaking tour of California in late 1953. She was raising money for her own dream — to build a national home for retired teachers. She was also searching for the ideal location to establish this home. On her way out of town after making a fundraising appeal to the teachers at Nordhoff High School, she spied Grey Gables and knew immediately that it would be the perfect location for her retirement home. Sanford, in creating a vibrant cultural center and residence for working teachers, had created the ideal residence for retired teachers as envisioned by Dr. Andrus. Andrus saw in Grey Gables not only a model for modern retirement homes, but also a new model for retirement

living based on independence, dignity, and purpose. (See "The Age of Reformation: The Founding of AARP in Ojai," *Ojai Quarterly*, Spring 2012)

Ethel Percy Andrus purchased Grey Gables in early 1954 on behalf of the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA), which she founded in 1947. Because Dr. Andrus stressed the importance of a dynamic retirement lifestyle, including service to one's community, Grey Gables continued to be an important Ojai community center. Dr. Andrus promoted Grey Gables nationally as "the future of retirement living in America."

In 1959, Bertha Adkins, the Undersecretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, proclaimed Grey Gables to be the finest retirement home in the nation and an example for others. A scale model of Grey Gables was a featured exhibit in AARP's Dynamic Maturity Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair.

As part of the Grey Gables lifestyle, the retired teachers who lived there assisted Dr. Andrus in running her two national organizations: the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA) and later the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) — which Dr. Andrus founded at Grey Gables in 1958.

After selling Grey Gables, Alee Sanford moved to Missouri, where she and her daughter lived on a farm. According to Freda Dunning, "It was near a large tribe of Indians who made Mrs. Sanford an Indian princess, which seemed to delight her." Sanford also took much satisfaction from her role in creating Grey Gables, that it continued to serve teachers, and that it had become a national model for retirement living. Alee Barbee Sanford died peacefully at her home in Missouri on December 22, 1965.

Today, Grey Gables is owned by The Parsons Group, a Santa Barbara company that manages several retirement homes in California and Texas. The Gables, as it is now known, is still one of the most beautiful and gracious retirement homes in America, thanks in part to the vision and creative abilities of Alee Barbee Sanford.

One of Mrs. Sanford's favorite poems, which she quoted often, is a fitting tribute to her legacy:

Grey Gables postcard



Purpose,

by R.H. Grenville:

Hold high the steady lantern
of your faith.
And bank love's fire securely in
the night.
For there are those, far off,
Who look with hope and strength
renewed
Because of this same
light.

Think it not unimportant how
you blaze the trail ahead
Or hold the guiding flame,
For always someone follows
where you go
And always someone comes
because you came.

Not for yourself alone, O Pioneer,
were ways made safe and shining,
And the stone rolled from the
path,
But to prepare a way for countless
journeys
Other than your own.

Not for yourself alone, O Pioneer,
The inner light, and faith
inspired of God,
But that all nations may be led
To seek the clean swept places
That your feet have trod.

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