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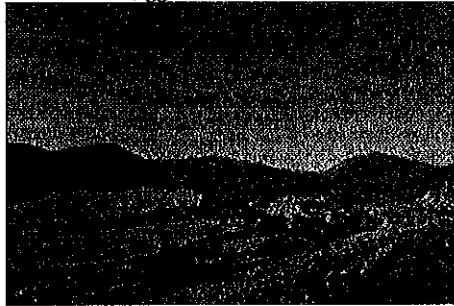
The Norbertine Code

Monks and canyon dwellers go mano a mano in Silverado Canyon

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Not in our back yard

The roads into Silverado Canyon's rustic, tucked-away Eden crawl east, away from the foothills of Orange and into the Santa Ana Mountains. The canyon people know each turn and can name the ghosts of those who once walked their dusty curves—and, along the way, built a little paradise among the oak trees, California poppies and Mariposa lilies.

Canyon people are stoked by a hand-me-down pride, the kind that burns like a mule-headed sun on an August afternoon. And whether one is warmed by their pride or scorched by the fire depends on where one stands along the roads.

Do you stand in God's country, a vast but vulnerable tract of dirt and wood, crawling with wildlife, and dappled with native plants and ancient creek beds, all desperate for man's protection? Or do you stand in eternal fields ripe for the harvest of 21st-century homes and a patch of land that God's priests believe He has given them to build a sanctuary away from the heavy footstep of modernity and its ever-deafening roar?

Ed Amador—the 57-year-old president of the Canyon Land Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group of about 400 members dedicated to preserving the wildlands of the Santa Ana

Mountains and canyons—knows where he stands. The Silverado Canyon resident's pride burns hot for the history and heritage of the place he has called home for nearly 20 years. And it has been rekindled by what one group of canyon residents says is the latest incursion of outsiders.

In January, the Norbertine Fathers of Orange, an order of Catholic priests that has long practiced the monastic life at St. Michael's Abbey on El Toro Road near Cook's Corner in unincorporated Silverado Canyon, bought the property commonly known as Holtz Ranch, where, in the early 1900s, Joseph Holtz built his home near the old Carbondale mine, and where his family, over the course of 80 years, grew fruits, nuts, corn and barley; tended 160 bee colonies; and raised turkeys.

The sparse remains of the ranch, including an old storage building and stacked-stone pillars, stand among desolate fields and woodlands, where the Norbertines want to build a new abbey and high school, complete with athletic fields, guest houses and a cemetery for monastery members, a sacred space carved from the serene landscape at 27977 Silverado Canyon Rd. They believe they have a sacramental connection to the property, as priests used to say Mass on Sundays in a mission chapel that was on the Holtz land, a mission that was a part of St. Cecilia's parish in Tustin.

Amador, a barrel-chested man with brown eyes often hidden by sunglasses, speaks with a canyon man's passion as he says a faux-rustic abbey bustling with believers would bring a curse on the land instead of a blessing from heaven.

"It's real simple," he says. "It's a severe injury and fatality, a cancer the county's been put on alert about."

Indeed, it has. The Canyon Land Conservation Fund and other vocal, anti-development canyon groups are raising awareness at public meetings, putting civic officials on notice that they've won other wars against development along Silverado Canyon Road, and they're ready to tangle again.

In 1977, anti-development groups beat back developers seeking to stick more than 400 mobile homes on the site. A developer in 1989 dropped roughly \$1.25 million into plans for 167 homes before turning tail and running.

In 1999, Las Vegas developer Marnell Corrao, which developed the Wynn and Bellagio resorts, bought 320 acres at a reported \$5 million, with designs to build 12 mansions on about 70 acres. Court battles ensued when Trabuco Canyon resident Ray Chandos, who, at 62 years old, has lived in the canyons for nearly 30 years, led his Rural Canyon Conservation Fund in filing a successful civil complaint, saying the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) did not properly address impacts on water quality and coastal sage scrub mitigation. A supplemental EIR was drafted, but soon afterward, anti-development residents cited a letter from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that said there was evidence of the federally endangered Southwestern Arroyo Toad, a three-inch, brown-and-cream-colored critter that breeds in water and was thought to be extinct in the region.

What dust-up over development would be complete without critters getting caught up in the crosshairs? The developer said earlier studies showed only the toad's larvae in the area. They had a friend in Bill Campbell, supervisor for the county's Third District, which includes the Holtz Ranch, who reportedly said he heard that critics of the development may have planted the larvae.

The county pushed ahead, as the Board of Supervisors, with Campbell presiding, approved the project in 2007. The canyon people lost an appeal in San Diego Superior Court. The developers eventually pulled up stakes and sold more than 120 acres to the Norbertines. According to the most recent figures from the Orange County's Assessor Department, the patch of land is valued at more than \$6.1 million.

It's a fight for one of the last remaining pieces of Orange County's wildlands. Developers have bludgeoned anti-development activists recently—Dana Point approved the desecration of oceanfront land in 2004 so that developer Headlands Reserve LLC could erect a gated tract of multimillion-dollar homes—who, though bloodied, punch with as much strength as they can muster. In the highlands surrounding Fullerton, the vocal Friends of Coyote Hills group has for years tried to stop Chevron's Pacific Coast Homes from building the controversial West Coyote Hills estate-homes project. The Fullerton City Council's most recent action on the matter was to send the development agreement to voters in November. But this time, the canyon people insist they're ready.

* * *

Saint Norbert was born in 1080 near the banks of the Rhine in Xanten, near Wesel, Germany. A man who found his heavenly calling relatively late in life, St. Norbert gave up lustful pursuits at age 30 while riding to a village near his hometown. That's when he was thrown from his horse, which was struck by a thunderbolt. He remained prone in a near-dead state for about an hour, so the story goes. Having decided to consecrate himself to the penitent life, St. Norbert became a priest at 35.

Later, he founded a religious order in the diocese of Laon, in France. The order was established in the forest of Coucy and was little more than a handful of disciples living in wood-and-clay huts. The priest eventually rose to become the Bishop of Magdeburg in Germany, where he died at the age of 53. According to St. Michael's, its priests were vaunted teachers in secular and religious schools alike in

Hungary until, in the aftermath of World War II, as the communists suffocated Eastern Europe, private schools were nationalized in 1948. The priests faced imprisonment.

The Norbertine Abbey of Csorna saw two small groups of monks flee for the United States on different nights in July 1950, leaving the religious community to languish under communist suppression. In 1957, Cardinal James McIntyre invited the monks to teach at Santa Ana's Mater Dei High School, which was then part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. About a year later, McIntyre allowed the priests to start a new foundation, one that would continue to practice their religious traditions.

In 1961, they bought their first property and opened St. Michael's Junior Seminary and Novitiate. Later, the school would start a college-preparatory program for lay students, and by the 1970s, St. Michael's thrived as a small high school, rather than a seminary, according to abbey history. By 1995, St. Michael's Abbey Preparatory School touted itself as the only one in the American west to provide an all-male residential study program for Catholics seeking a secondary education.

At the same time, St. Michael's Abbey sought to blend the traditions of old-school Catholicism with the best of modern teaching. St. Michael's became fully autonomous as an independent priory of the order in 1976, and in 1984, Rome elevated the community to abbatial status, according to the abbey.

It grew its community from a handful of members in 1961 to several dozen today. In its effort to expand over the past several years, St. Michael's scouted the county for a new location, including land off Ortega Highway. The new location keeps it in the neighborhood and is already zoned for a church and school. The priests say the hunt for a new home was brought on by the "geological instability of our present site in Trabuco Canyon." According to the abbey, a piece of its school building was lost in the El Niño downpour of 1998, and the school bled enrollment.

But the peaceful abbey has also been squeezed by housing tracts, and another proposed development, called Saddle Creek-Saddle Crest, loomed over it for years. The monks vow to keep half of the Holtz Ranch land as undeveloped open space, integrating gardens, orchards and gravel pathways among buildings made of wood, stone and other natural materials. They plan to keep the existing Holtz Ranch stacked-stone entry pillars and believe the project will complement the character of the canyon and become an area landmark.

Father Gregory Dick says canyon residents can expect "nothing different than what they've experienced from us in 50 years. It's not like we're blowing our horns by any means, [but] we've been [here] longer than most of the people in the canyons. It's also true that many people didn't even know we were up on the mountaintop, which speaks to itself."

The monks also say they have God on their side. The Reverend Eugene J. Hayes, the abbot at St. Michael's, wrote in a newsletter posted on their website that the Lord is leading the Norbertines to the land flowing with creeks and honeybees. "The Lord has a plan, and He knows what it is and how He will bring it about," he wrote. "All we must do is cooperate and receive the things He wills to give us. Ultimately, this is what our lives come down to: being generous in opening ourselves to receive the things the Lord wishes to give us, in being unstinting in our cooperation even when we don't see the larger picture, even when things don't make immediate sense to us. Because our Lord wants to give us more than we can fathom, and in preparing us to receive, He must often stretch our capacities—and stretching is challenging, painful and requires cooperation."

He—God, that is, and Hayes, for good measure—isn't getting much cooperation from many of the canyon people, though.

"It's completely out of place with a teeny, little, already-dangerous, very-busy road with lots of bicycles on the weekend," says Chay Peterson, a 25-year canyon resident and co-founder of the Canyon Land Conservation Fund. Peterson, 51, would like to see Holtz Ranch return to its natural state. She recalls the days when the Holtz family still visited the property on weekends, when there were remnants of old turkey cages and canyon residents would take photos with the family.

Over time, the family stopped visiting, the old buildings were abandoned, and local kids would make mischief in the historic structures. Perhaps the property can be preserved for an open-air museum, Peterson says. She could see bees and turkeys back on the plot of land, a place that could become a cultural center where kids would learn about old America and settler ranches. Anything but steeples in the sky, she reasons.

"I always felt peaceful looking at it," she says. "Here's a piece of old ranching America right here at the entrance of our little town. It was perfect. And then when they removed the buildings, it was kind of shocking. I had to look at the land differently."

Peterson is also looking to heaven. While the monks believe God has given them the land, Peterson, a Christian, is seeking divine intervention against what she and other canyon residents see as an intrusion. They may forgive the abbey's sins, but they won't forgive its trespasses.

"There are other Christians who call me now, and they feel really disturbed by this, and they're praying the land gets preserved," she says. "The [abbey's monks are] not looking out for the interests of the community. They're looking out for their own interests. To a lot of Christians in the community, it's considered a selfish move on their part, and I feel strongly in that direction."

But Dick says the monks, like most canyon people, are also looking for solitude. They welcome anyone to visit their monastery on El Toro Road to get a glimpse of what can be expected at their new home.

Whether the Norbertine priests will love their neighbors as they love themselves remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: They preach the gospel of property rights.

In a May 3 letter to Phil McWilliams, president of the Inter-Canyon League, Susan K. Hori, an attorney for the Norbertines, said the abbey was aware his group had used a portion of its property for parking on the area commonly referred to as "The Riviera" during special events at nearby Silverado Community Center. Hori said St. Michael's, as a gesture of goodwill and support for the group's goals, would like to "discuss arrangements to accommodate your group's occasional use of the site."

In a letter to naturalist Joel Robinson, Hori warned that the abbey was aware of a tour he leads along the Riviera. "We trust and hope you will confirm that 'along the Riviera' means that you and your event participants will be walking along Silverado Canyon Road, adjacent to the Riviera, and not venture onto the Riviera or the remainder of the property and that any examination of the creek be outside of the boundaries of the property," Hori wrote.

Hori went on to write that the Holtz Ranch property is not a refuge for local wildlife, as stated on a website promoting the event, "but rather a private landholding designated for development in the Silverado-Modjeska Specific Plan" and that the Riviera itself is private property, where trespassing is prohibited, and not an accessible piece of old California, as also was stated on the event website.

Robinson replied by email to Hori, saying the area is a historic public right of way, that it's dangerous to walk on the road, and that his description of the area is accurate. "Wildlife do occur throughout the property, and the proposed development is not within the guidelines of the Silverado-Modjeska Specific Plan," Robinson wrote. "It is a historic piece of old California and totally visible for anyone to see."

Not all canyon residents are rabidly anti-development. Among them is Tom Smisek, a canyon man since 1970 who fondly recalls when the area had little bars and restaurants, even a shooting range. Documents such as the Silverado-Modjeska Specific Plan, which many canyon folks cite to stop new construction, are actually not intended to kill all development in the canyons, but rather give officials guidelines for the balancing act of honoring property rights and keeping the rural character of the area intact, he says.

In recent years, Smisek says, "environmental wackos" have cherry-picked the Silverado-Modjeska Specific Plan whenever they wanted to kill proposed buildings, and they've stubbornly fought projects as minute as a new barn. They have a hypocritical attitude, he argues, in wanting the wild trails and hills for themselves and no one else, even opposing new parks because restrooms, trash cans and parking lots would supposedly scar the land.

According to Smisek, these wackos have complained about traffic from development, but they have no problem with the caravans of cars and bicycles that accompany their Earth-first fund-raising booze-fests. Canyon residents who hate development won't think twice about cutting fences and tearing down no-trespassing signs, slashing tires on tractors, or dumping sugar into gas tanks on construction equipment.

The monks bear witness. "We're very disappointed," Dick says. "There's been vandalism of signs we've put up. We're in it for the long [haul] . . . and willing as possible to be good neighbors."

If environmentalists want to set a good example, Smisek reasons, they should raze their houses, let their properties return to their natural states, and leave.

But not all canyon folks are wild-eyed natives with a flower in one hand and a pitchfork in the other. Smisek says there are three groups of people in the canyons, the largest being the kind who have a live-and-let-live attitude and had moved there to get away from city life and its politics. That group is flanked on one side by a small but vocal association of environmentalists, and on the other by what Smisek believes are "reasonable thinkers," those who would fight against the likes of Starbucks and Wal-Mart, but have no problem with new homes that fit the landscape or businesses that could bring life back to the quaint downtowns.

An owner of 15 acres himself, Smisek says he's neither anti-environment nor pro-development. He just wants a return to the old days, when the canyons were bustling with community-oriented businesses and new neighbors who moved in for the same reason—country living in Orange County's back yard.

And the Norbertines will likely make great neighbors, says Smisek, who has visited the abbey at El Toro Road. "It's not that they don't have a track record in this area," he says. "It's absolutely landscaped. It's quiet and serene. They're going to build some stuff a little bit bigger, but they're peaceful. They're not about raising hell. They're trying to blend in and be harmonious. . . . They're going to be good neighbors, and they want to do the right thing."

* * *

Still, while the Norbertines say their move is motivated by geological shifts to their property, many canyon residents see them playing a game of musical chairs, as the noise of Orange County chases the monks to a place of solace.

"When the Saddle Creek-Saddle Crest development threatened their area, they went out and marched and protested development around them, that they were there first and had a view and didn't want that ruined," recalls Peterson. "And we're telling them that we have a rustic community. Please listen to us. Please don't impact that. And then they send their attorney, and we get no-trespassing signs everywhere. I'm not in a position now to feel for them the way they would want a neighbor to because they're not being neighborly."

Irvine-based Rutter Development Co. wants to build 65 homes at 18514 Santiago Canyon Rd., northwest of the intersection of Live Oak Canyon and El Toro roads, a tractor drive from the abbey. The project, which is under review by the county, is now simply called Saddle Crest and would gobble nearly 114 acres, with roughly 80 acres designated as open space.

The project was originally called Saddle Crest-Saddle Creek (with a proposed 187 homes) and was part of the old 4-S Ranch owned by Erwood Edgar, an old-timer who had left his imprint on the planning documents for the canyon areas, the earliest of which was the Foothill Corridor Plan. After Edgar died, the ranch was passed on to his son, who sold it to Texas-based land speculator Asset Recovery Fund in 1999.

The speculator proposed developing a project known as "Santiago Land Holdings" but fled when the canyon people squared up to fight, ultimately selling to Rutter Development, which ambled in with a 187-unit project, including 46 homes set for Saddle Crest along Santiago Canyon Road and the remainder, known as Saddle Creek, located along both sides of Live Oak Canyon Road. More than 1,000 mature oak trees would have been destroyed, Rural Canyon Conservation Fund's Chandos says, some with 6-foot-thick trunks.

The county's planning commission approved the project in December 2002, when there was a vacancy on the Board of Supervisors—specifically, the Third District seat that oversees the area where the project is located. Todd Spitzer had left the seat open following his successful election to the state Assembly.

Rutter Development's project went to the Board of Supervisors and was approved in January 2003 without a representative from the district in which the project sits. Chandos and a gang of environmentalist groups, including the Endangered Habitats League, challenged the board's decision and lost in Orange County Superior Court, but they later won in the 4th District Court of Appeals; the judges there agreed that approval of the project was flawed because both it and a proposed amendment to the Foothill-Trabuco Specific Plan were inconsistent with the county's General Plan.

The judges found that the project would cause an unpermissible increase in traffic on Santiago Canyon Road, that the specific plan amendment would've relaxed regulations otherwise applicable to the project, and that the EIR failed to properly mitigate the "significant impact" of construction interference from noise, supply depots and vehicle staging areas. So Rutter Development sold the Saddle Creek portion of the project to the Land Conservancy and the Orange County Transit Authority.

Was it another victory for the anti-development canyon people? Yes, but in Dave Eadie, the president of Rutter Development who has more than 40 years in planning and land-development experience, they may have run up against someone just as stubborn as they are.

Suited, booted and speaking with the calm cadence of an executive who wasn't at his first planning rodeo, the syrupy-voiced Eadie attempted on May 23 to charm the planning commission into seeing that a series of proposed amendments to the Foothill-Trabuco Specific Plan and the county's General Plan would help public officials balance development and environmental preservation. The most controversial amendment may be one that deletes the word "natural" in relation to the determination of the 66 percent open-space requirement and allows for development grading in areas designed as open space.

Following Eadie's lead, Mike Huff, a certified arborist and forester, attempted to quell concerns that Rutter Development's project ties a yellow noose around 151 oak trees. Huff told the commission that most of the trees in the area were damaged in recent fires and not good candidates for relocation. "Oaks can be relocated, but it's not an ecological or really a very humane thing to do to the oak, to be honest," he argued. The developer's proposal includes preserving 75 percent of the current oaks and planting 281 replacement trees, so that in 10 years, the area would boast 2,000 healthy trees.

Planting trees isn't the only way Rutter Development has offered to help county officials. According to the county Registrar of Voters, the developer pitched in \$1,700 to Patricia Bates' 2010 campaign for election in the Fourth District, as well as \$1,800 each—the maximum allowed under law—to Supervisors Shawn Nelson and Janet Nguyen in their most recent campaigns and Spitzer, who rolled

over Deborah Pauly to take the Third District seat on the heels of his 2010 firing as a senior prosecutor in the Orange County district attorney's office.

Spitzer, whose oversight will include the proposed project site, did not return phone messages seeking comment about development in the canyons. But a canyon man who has been more than willing to speak out about Rutter Development's project was at the Planning Commission meeting to rebuke Eadie and Saddle Crest.

Chandos also appeared at the commission meeting, as though he were a legendary prizefighter, and delivered several haymakers on behalf of his group, which first petitioned the county to establish what became the Foothill-Trabuco Specific Plan. "The proposal before you is a case of the tail wagging the dog, the tail being a single development project and the dog being the entire Foothill-Trabuco Specific Plan and the Orange County General Plan," Chandos said.

Speaking for many canyon residents, Chandos argued that Rutter Development's proposal is a radical, far-reaching overhaul of these longstanding policies. They fear such amendments would open the door for developers to run roughshod over the rest of the county's open spaces. "I can't imagine a better recipe for widespread planning anarchy and confusion," Chandos told the commission.

Shortly after the meeting, Chandos admitted that the long battle against development in the canyons has wearied him and others who continue to fight. "It's very time-consuming," he says. "We're all paying for it in time taken from work, the lawyer bills. We've got lawsuits going. We have to sue the county all the time. We have made progress in getting around 1,000 acres since the plan was passed, so that's been encouraging."

* * *

The canyon roads are busy now, as summer invites visitors to cycle, hike or drive along the same routes laid down long ago by those who shared the same love for the land, with its faithful landscapes and surprising treasures. The long days awake to songs of native birds and the rustlings of predators and prey. Broiling afternoons buzz and moan with the sound of motorcycles and a steady stream of cars.

Smisek says canyon people are a unique breed. Sure, they scrap as though they're wildcats when it comes to development issues, but when a disaster such as flooding or fire hits, they come together quicker than anyone else he knows. But anti-development folks have a Chicken Little attitude about any talk of development, he says. "It's the old 'not in my back yard' attitude," he explains. "Now that we're here, we don't want anybody else here."

As evening falls on the canyons, their visitors, renewed by the life-giving panoramas and discovered-again landmarks, head home, perhaps to the coast or the sprawl of their native cities. The tired sun drowns in the west as the canyons flicker with headlights, until the footfall of man quiets and the night creatures live again.

Then Smisek asks a question that can be answered a thousand ways—or no way at all.

"Save the canyons?" he asks. "What are we saving them from?"

This article appeared in print as "The Great Monk Invasion: Does a Norbertine monastery in Silverado Canyon spell doom for God's country?"

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