

Before LA: Cliff May's Beginnings in San Diego

By Mary A. van Balgooy

In 1931, Cliff May left San Diego State College and returned to his old calling—music. If someone had told him he would become the “father of the ranch house” and build thousands of homes, he would have laughed. “I never ever thought of building houses. Never. Even when I was in college it never occurred to me.”¹ Rather, May seemed destined to play music and only the hot, popular jazz of the time. A promising saxophonist, May led his own band and played in San Diego’s finest hotels, on the radio, and even for aviator Charles Lindbergh. As May’s reputation grew so did the possibilities—playing at the Cocoanut Grove in Los Angeles, on the Pantages circuit, and for a cruise ship touring Asia. But when these opportunities fell through, May, on the advice of his father, enrolled in college to study business. In college, May continued to play music and for amusement, started to make furniture. Little did he know that his new hobby would lead him to designing houses and change the course of his life and suburban California architecture.

Clifford Magee May was born to Beatrice Magee and Charles Clifford May on August 29, 1908 in San Diego. Always proud of his family background, May was a sixth-generation Californian through his mother’s family, a descendent of José María Estudillo. A Spanish soldier, Estudillo rose through the ranks from a lieutenant in charge of Monterey for over twenty years to captain overseeing San Diego in 1827. When Estudillo took command of San Diego, his son José Antonio was granted a lot in the newly surveyed lands outside the presidio walls and it is here the family settled down and built an adobe house that overlooked the plaza.²

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Cliff May and his dance orchestra at the Hotel del Coronado, ca. 1927. May is seated at the far left behind the saxophones. Photo courtesy of Hillary Jessup.

The Estudillo family grew and married into other prominent *Californio* families. Consequently, the family continued to serve in a number of important military, political, economic, and social positions under Mexican and American rule. They also acquired several large ranches in present-day San Diego and Riverside counties. Although they would eventually lose most of their vast lands, many descendants remained and lived in the San Diego area including Cliff May's mother, Beatrice.³

Beatrice was born about 1876 to Maria Victoria de Pedorena and Lieutenant Henry H.C. Magee. The daughter of Maria Antonia Estudillo and Miguel de Pedorena, Maria Victoria had married Henry Magee, an army officer from New York in 1859. Beatrice, the eighth of their ten children, grew up in Fallbrook and attended State Normal School.⁴

May's father, Charles, was a first-generation Californian. Charles's father, Charles E. May, had made the overland journey from Iowa to California around 1859-60 settling first in San Francisco. In 1868, he moved to San Diego and opened a store. Twelve years later, Charles married Sophie Schlageter, a recent immigrant from Germany and Charles Clifford was born in 1881. Unlike Beatrice's large family, Charles grew up in a small family with two younger sisters.⁵

As May tells the story, his parents met at the house of Dr. C.C. Valle. Charles later proposed to Beatrice in the doctor's home and they were married in 1905.⁶ Beatrice and Charles settled down on Albatross Street northwest of downtown San Diego and built a house in 1906.⁷ Soon after, Charles began working as a stenographer for the San Diego Consolidated Gas and Electric Company and two years later, Cliff was born. He remained the only child until his brother Henry (nicknamed Hank) joined the family six years later.⁸

Cliff May enjoyed his childhood. Even though San Diego's population had

reached about 46,000 and the city was rapidly changing, his parents' long-time family connections with many of the city's leading citizens as well as May's own childhood friendships with prominent families made it seem like a small town. Socially, May's parents mingled with people such as George Marston and John Spreckels, both of whom had worked towards developing the City of San Diego and restoring its historic town.⁹ At school, May's friends included Bill Cotton, son of real estate mogul O. W. Cotton; Stephen Fletcher, whose father Ed Fletcher built San Diego's major roads; and Roscoe Hazard, Jr., son of the building contractor Roscoe Hazard. At home, May played with neighbors Eli and Herbert Styris. Their father, Kole Styris, worked as architect Irving Gill's master carpenter.¹⁰ In addition, May spent time staying with his many aunts and uncles in and around San Diego, Riverside, and Orange counties. Indeed, he stayed many weekends and summers visiting his aunt Jane Magee who lived on a ranch in Oceanside.¹¹

Early in his childhood, May developed a passion for music. He bought his first instrument, a bugle, with five dollars an aunt gave him when he was a child. His father, who played the violin, made May take music lessons from a family friend and May learned how to play bugle calls. As May grew older he wanted to play the saxophone and took lessons again from the same family friend. He eventually learned to play well enough to form a dance orchestra in high school and play at Hotel del Coronado and El Cortez Hotel. The band also played for the radio station KFSD that was located in the U.S. Grant Hotel. In 1927, his orchestra played for Charles Lindbergh when a party was staged for the aviator to celebrate his return from his solo flight across the Atlantic at the Hotel del Coronado.¹²

As the band gained more experience and exposure, music seemed to be May's calling. After playing for Lindbergh, May discovered that his orchestra might fill in for Gus Arnheim at the Coconut Grove in Los Angeles while Arnheim went on a short tour with his band. Arnheim was a widely popular bandleader and the Coconut Grove was the premier nightclub for Hollywood's rich and famous at the time, so this could launch May's career as a musician. The Grove never called. Then an agent offered May and his dance band an opportunity to play music on a cruise ship touring Asia. The pay was small—only fifty dollars for the entire trip—but May felt that free food, board, and travel would make up for it. He signed the contract. Almost immediately after signing, a promoter for Alexander Pantages contacted May about auditioning for the Pantages circuit. May could not believe his luck. If selected by Alexander Pantages to play on the circuit, May and his band members would each receive one hundred dollars a week—a lot of money for young men in the music business. The band auditioned in front of Alexander Pantages at the Coronado Country Club. May never heard back from him. That was not the only disappointment. May would not be touring



The courtyard of the Estudillo adobe after its restoration by Hazel Waterman in 1910. Cliff May copied the beams, lintels, irregular paving, and outdoor corredor in constructing his houses. Postcard from author's collection.

Asia either. He had canceled the contract with the cruise ship believing that Pantages would hire his band.¹³

When these prospects fell through, May's father encouraged him to give up music, attend college, and obtain a business degree. May gave in and agreed. He tried to enroll in college but had just missed the deadline. He would have to wait another semester. To pass the time, May stayed with an aunt at her Tahquitz Lodge, a mountain resort located near Idyllwild. There he worked and honed his skills at playing the piano; he could not give up music. When he returned home he enrolled at San Diego State College as a business major in the fall of 1929. He was twenty-one years old.¹⁴

May only spent two years at college. By 1931, he had dropped out of school. The nation was in a serious economic depression. Jobs were scarce, college degree or not. Moreover, May was twenty-three years old and probably felt much older than the new students. Having directed his own band, May decided he could at least make some money playing jazz since musicians were in demand as Americans turned to entertainment to forget their cares and woes. It seemed that the musician's life was going to be his career after all. In fact, May listed himself as a musician in the 1931 *San Diego City and County Directory*.¹⁵

At the same time, Cliff May was engaged to be married to Jean Lichty, the daughter of Roy C. Lichty, a prominent San Diego real estate agent, best known for purchasing and subdividing Talmadge Park in the 1920s. They met when Jean was just eighteen

and May was nineteen years old.¹⁶ Perhaps this is another reason May had decided to go to college and try to obtain a degree—in order to provide for a family.

While he had been in college, May designed and constructed furniture in his spare time, a carpentry skill neighbor Kole Styris had taught him when he was a boy. It started out as a hobby. Jean and May had gone to Barker Brothers to look at the furniture and dream of their future home. When May said that he could build furniture better than what they saw, Jean kept a salesman busy while May measured and drew sketches. He then put his carpentry skills to work and constructed enough furniture in the popular Monterey style for a living room and dining room plus three bedrooms. But he did not stop. He continued to make furniture and soon needed a place to store it.¹⁷

Cliff May's future father-in-law helped him. Lichty, who was probably concerned about May's ability to support his daughter on a musician's salary, allowed May to place the furniture in one of his new houses for sale. When the house sold—in part because of the furniture—May installed more furniture in another new house Lichty had on the market. Again, the furniture helped to attract a buyer and the house sold. With such success at furniture making, May believed he could apply the same creative style and craftsmanship to design and construct a house. A partnership was formed with O.U. Miracle, a local contractor who had laid sidewalks and streets in Lichty's Talmadge Park subdivision and who

also owned undeveloped real estate.¹⁸ The contract between the two men was most likely Lichty's doing. Miracle, who was sixty years old, was forming a contract with May, a twenty-three-year-old man, with no architectural or building experience to design, construct and landscape a house in the midst of the Great Depression.¹⁹ Miracle's business, the Miracle Construction Company, provided the land and deeded it to May so he could take out a loan of \$3,500 to build a one-story, seven-room house with an attached garage. May drew up the plans and, under the direction of master carpenter Wilburn Hale, he built, furnished, and landscaped his first house at 4725 Norma Drive, San Diego.²⁰



Jean and Cliff May in the courtyard of Las Flores, his aunt's house, 1950s. May claimed Las Flores served as inspiration for the houses he built in San Diego as well as his later ranch houses. Photo courtesy of Hillary Jessup.

May claimed that his first house, as well as his subsequent houses, was based on his



Advertisement for 4365 Altamirano Way, San Diego. In this advertisement, a few of Cliff May's signature details appear: wooden window grille with flower pot boxes, cactus, and rustic writing. Advertisement courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

early memories of visiting places and relatives who lived in southern California adobes, specifically the family's ancestral home, Casa de Estudillo in Old Town, and his aunt's home, Las Flores on Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores. But the houses May remembered from his childhood were not necessarily the authentic California adobes that he believed them to be. The Estudillo adobe had been extensively rebuilt and restored in 1910 by Hazel Waterman. When Waterman started on the project, very little of the adobe existed. Although she took great care to employ the same methods and materials wherever she could to bring the adobe back to its original state, she also took artistic liberties in her work. She added fireplaces, relocated windows and doors, and stained wood lintels, sills, and shutters so that, in the end, José Estudillo, who originally built the U-shaped adobe, would have a hard time recognizing his own house.²¹

Las Flores had changed over the years as well. Built in 1868 in the Monterey style, the two-story adobe house went through changes as various occupants altered the home for their own use. Between 1917 and 1919, the adobe was extensively remodeled after a major earthquake in the area. The roof was replaced, new porches were added, and new doors, windows, and woodwork were introduced.²² Hence, the houses May drew upon for inspiration were not "authentic" California adobes but a combination of styles, most notably, the Spanish colonial revival style.

During the 1920s and '30s, Spanish colonial revival architecture became one of the most popular styles in the Southwest. Popularized by the 1915 Panama-

California Exposition in San Diego, the style symbolized the West's mythical Spanish past.²³ Instead of the crude adobes the *Californios* built, designers of the Spanish colonial revival style constructed houses with red tile roofs, round or square entry towers, roughly plastered walls, arched doorways and windows, window grilles, wrought-iron hardware, stained glass windows, colorful tile, and interior courtyards with arcaded walkways and fountains.²⁴

Cliff May's early houses clearly represent the Spanish colonial revival style. However, to differentiate his houses from other Spanish style homes in the area, May copied elements from the Estudillo and Las Flores adobes to give them a much more crude appearance. In addition, he created his own signature details: chimney pots; wooden window grilles with flower pot boxes; tile doorbells; painted flower decorations on wooden beams, doors, shutters, and cupboards; and landscaping with cacti, yucca, and olive trees.

May's first home, also known as the "O'Leary House," is a one-story, one-room deep structure in a U-shaped configuration around a central courtyard. To make it look like an old California adobe, May intentionally laid the red roof tiles haphazardly atop of each other, placed simple terra cotta pots on top of the chimneys, plastered exterior walls coarsely, put in rough-hewn wood lintels over windows and doors inside and out, constructed crude wooden window grilles, and paved floors irregularly with rustic terracotta tiles.²⁵ The front door does not enter into the house, but into a covered walkway and courtyard. He used this covered walkway or *corredor* as the central hallway of the house.

Inside the house, May constructed and exposed the large wooden roof trusses with king posts, built beehive fireplaces in all of the living spaces, installed wrought-iron lanterns and oversized hardware, distressed doors and wood cabinets, laid tile floors, and painted flowers on the wooden beams, doors, and



Cliff May's first house, the "O'Leary House," 1932. The O'Leary House has a roughly laid red tile roof, chimney pot, wooden window grille with flower pot box, lintel over the door, cactus, and yucca. Photo courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Interior of the O'Leary House decorated with Cliff May's furniture, 1932. May copied elements from the Estudillo adobe such as the lintel over the door, coarsely plastered walls, wrought-iron lantern and hardware, and beehive chimney. He also painted flowers on the doors and laid a tile floor. Photo courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

cupboards in the Mexican Art Deco style. He finished the interior with his Monterey furniture and Navajo rugs.

Outside, May completed the exterior by enclosing the U-shaped plan with a wall; putting in a fountain in the courtyard; installing paneled garage doors; planting cacti, yucca, and an olive tree; and placing a colorful tile doorbell by the front door.²⁶

Completed on February 27, 1932, May advertised the house as a “rambling

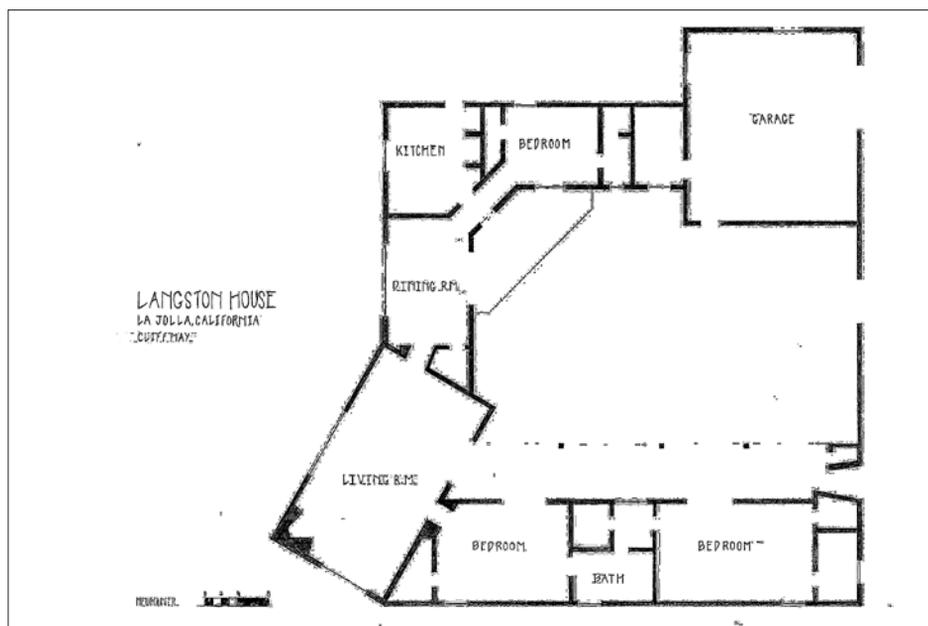
Spanish hacienda furnished with old California furniture.”²⁷ The Home and Garden Forum section of *The San Diego Union* featured the house in its May issue. Entitled “New House Idea Reminiscent of Early California,” the article emphasized the architect’s young age, lack of training and experience, and the “unique” style of the house.²⁸ Waiting for the house to sell, May was probably uncertain of his future as a builder because it was not until August that he and Miracle sold it to Frances and Arthur J. O’Leary for \$9,500.²⁹ Once the house sold, though, May’s career as a builder took off with the help of family friends and clients.

Impressed with his newly constructed house, George Marston and his wife Anna granted May and Miracle a lot to build a house in Presidio Hills at the beginning of October.³⁰ In addition, Jean’s cousin Frances and her husband Edward Bernard deeded May a lot two doors down from Roy Lichty’s house in Talmadge Park.³¹ Just as Miracle entered into a contract in early October to construct a one-story, seven-room, frame-dwelling and double garage on the Bernard lot, May obtained a loan of \$3,500 to build the house.³² A few days later, on October 19, Cliff May married Jean Lichty at the Old San Diego Mission. Featuring photographs of the bride and her bridesmaids on the front of the Society Club Section, *The San Diego Union* reported on the wedding detailing May’s ancestral ties to the mission and San Diego. Moreover, the newspaper noted May was “now associated with the home building branch of the Miracle Construction Company in San Diego.”³³ Following his wedding, May received additional work. Marston put him in charge

of the restoration of the city's old cemetery, El Campo Santo in Old Town, which mainly consisted of reconstructing an adobe wall surrounding it.³⁴

Almost a year later, on February 2, 1933, May completed his second house at 4669 East Talmadge Drive and, by the end of March, May and Miracle sold the house to Ridy and William Lindstrom for \$9,500.³⁵ Similar to the O'Leary House, May's second house is a one-story, U-shaped home entered through a heavy wooden door into the courtyard.³⁶ The "Lindstrom House" also would be included in *Architectural Digest*, a magazine that featured the work of southern California's leading architects—quite a coup for a young man with little design or construction experience.³⁷

In June, May and Miracle purchased a lot at 4365 Altamirano Way in Presidio Hills and began construction of another house to sell. Although May designed this house like his others, the property presented him with a design problem in that the lot was curved at the front. May still built the house in a U-shaped configuration, but rather than reduce the living and yard space, he turned one wing of the house at a forty-five-degree angle to follow the curve. Completed in August, it took more than a year to sell the house even though May had garnered a great deal of publicity on it, including articles in magazines.³⁸ But May did not need to worry. His business with Miracle was booming as they started to receive commission after commission.³⁹ However, there were four commissions,



House plan of the Langstons with the living room splayed at one end, 1934. Plan by Stephen Neuhauser, author's collection.



Sweetwater Woman's Club, 1940s. This structure represents the first time Cliff May designed a building other than a house and the first time he designed a structure in the ranch style with a shingle roof and board-and-batten walls. Photo courtesy of the Bonita Museum and Cultural Center.

in particular, that would affect Cliff May's future career as a successful designer and builder.

Sara and Wade Langston, a couple originally from the South, hired May and Miracle to draw up plans and construct a house for them at 6116 Avenida Cresta in La Jolla. Again, May conceived the house much the same way as his other houses but he added two new design ideas. To take advantage of the views of the Pacific Ocean, he broke the U-shaped plan by turning the living room thirty-five degrees from the rest of the rooms. Also, at the request of the Langstons, he incorporated architectural fragments and details from older buildings into the home.⁴⁰ Both of these new elements would become important features in May's future as a designer of houses.

About the same time, Violetta Horton, a member of the Sweetwater Woman's Club, commissioned May to design the organization's new clubhouse in Bonita. This marked the first time May designed a building other than a house. It was also, more importantly, the first time May designed a structure in what he named the "rancheria" style, a style that would define his career and become his legacy.

Cliff May created the Sweetwater Woman's Club as a one-story structure in an I-shaped plan with a caretaker's apartment at one end and a storage room at the other. His "rancheria" style was identical to his "hacienda" style design at this time—the illusion of thick walls, white plastered interior walls, exposed beam-and-rafter wood ceilings, protruding fireplaces, French doors—except that May replaced the red tile roof with wood shingles and clad the exterior walls in board and batten.

When the plans for the clubhouse were completed in June 1934 and the building was under construction, *The San Diego Union* ran an article describing it as “a Mexican farmhouse in a grove of eucalyptus” that, Horton claimed, “will look 100 years old in six months.”⁴¹ Horton was so pleased with the new building that she hired May to design four houses on land that she and her husband owned on Hillside Drive in La Jolla. It was the first time May did not collaborate with Miracle on a building project because Horton insisted that May exclusively work with her.⁴² May designed two haciendas and two rancherías for this street. For the rancherías, May installed white picket fences in the front yard and knotty pine paneling in the interior in areas such as the living room—perhaps to appeal to buyers looking for a more traditional American home.⁴³

While the Langston House and Sweetwater Woman’s Club were under construction, May and Miracle received their largest commission yet. Alexander Highland, a newly transplanted banker to San Diego, and his wife, Nancy, hired them to design and construct a house in Presidio Hills. It is this house that is an exemplary example of May’s work as a designer of the Spanish colonial revival style and illustrates how far he had progressed since his first house.

Located at 2400 Presidio Drive and a block away from May’s third house built for sale, the “Highland House” posed a new set of design challenges.

Cliff May-Miracle Company Haciendas
Restore the Romance and Charm of
Early California Design to Modern Living

THE established local popularity of true Early California Hacienda Homes is Credited to the inimitable designing by Cliff May and his ability to adapt this picturesque type to various surroundings.

• Through a heritage which dates back to the days of the Don, Cliff May, persistent young designer of true Haciendas, has captured the essence of distinction between the genuine simplicity and structural features of the permanent, sturdy, low-sloping, white-washed homes which are so typical of California living—calmness, sturdy and artistic proportions have never been established. Cliff May designed Haciendas as a study pertaining to the most minute detail the architectural influence which is lacking in many homes of a somewhat similar nature. A visit to our Model Hacienda at 4365 Altamirano Way, in Presidio Hills, will reveal the "distinct difference" in Cliff May Miracle Company Homes.

Every Hacienda Built and Guaranteed for Permanence by the Miracle Company

A Hacienda Home built in an exclusive, quiet, well-kept neighborhood in San Diego is a most desirable investment. Cliff May Miracle Company makes no compromise.

CLIFF MAY MIRACLE COMPANY
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DESIGNING • BUILDING • FINANCING

Visit Our Model Hacienda at 4365 Altamirano Way in Presidio Hills!

• Home Building Methods designed and used under supervision by Cliff May and the "Wife League" in Presidio La Jolla, California.

• Home Plans and Specifications designed and used under supervision by Cliff May and the "Wife League" in Presidio La Jolla, California.

The Highland House featured in an advertisement in *The San Diego Union*, July 8, 1934. The advertisement cleverly illustrates Cliff May’s recent designs and work. At the top of the advertisement is the courtyard of the Hodge House followed by a large sketch of the Highland House. Clockwise from the Highland House is an interior sketch of the Lindstrom House, exterior of the Langston House, unidentified “Hacienda Ranch House,” front elevation view of the Beardsley House, and interior sketch of the O’Leary House. Advertisement courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Cliff May's own house at 4338 Adams Avenue, which he designed in the "rancheria" style. The house is similar to his hacienda design except for the wood shingle roof and the use of board-and-batten on the exterior walls in the courtyard area. Photo courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

The house would be built on a corner lot with two facades exposed to the street and include a two-story block that could not take up a significant amount of the property. Both of these challenges would affect the arrangement of the living spaces of the house.

In dealing with these challenges, May produced an outstanding design. He conceived the house as a one-story, U-shaped configuration anchored by a two-story block at one end. But this was not one of May's typical U-shaped designs. To soften the corner of the two main wings, he curved them and designed attractive facades by carefully placing doors, windows, shutters, window grilles, chimneys, and garage doors. Moreover, May arranged the rooms individually turning them as needed to follow the street, frame a view, or maximize the courtyard, thus designing a home that functions better for its occupants.

May also added an important new element to the Highland House. In the living room, he installed a large window, almost the length of the living room wall, facing the courtyard. This was not the first time May had installed large windows in a home. He had installed them in the Langston House but for a different reason, so that the homeowners could take advantage of the views of the Pacific Ocean on the backside of the house. For the Highland House, May had the window face the courtyard to create an intimate connection with the outdoors that was also private. This design idea of using large expanses of glass to create an intimate and private connection with the outdoors would become a defining feature in May's future houses.⁴⁴

As May developed these designs, he received a commission that would eventually lead him to Los Angeles. During the time he offered his third house for sale, C. Arnholt Smith, a banker, toured the house. Impressed, Arnholt convinced his older brother, John, to see it. An oil promoter and banker, John and his wife Flossie visited the house. John agreed with his brother and, in 1934, hired May to design and construct a house on forty acres that he owned in La Habra Heights in Los Angeles County.⁴⁵ Cliff May went to work.

May also went to work on a house for himself. With his rising success, he was finally able to design and construct a home for his family, who had been living in a rented house on Vista Street. In January 1935, May and Jean purchased a lot at 4338 Adams Avenue. In February, *The San Diego Union* announced in the "Tete-a-tete" section, "Mr. and Mrs. Cliff May are building their first home on Adams Ave., Talmadge park. They call it a California Rancheria...Mr. May is taking his inspiration from the early California casas of his ancestors (he is descended from the Estudillo and de Pedrorena families)"⁴⁶ May's own house plan matches the third house he built. But, like the Sweetwater Woman's Club, May put on a wood-shingle roof and decorated part of the exterior with board-and-batten walls. He also installed a large window in the living room facing the courtyard. Completed in April 1935, the house drew praise for May and was featured in *Arts & Decoration* and *Architectural Digest*.⁴⁷



View of the Mays' living room with a large window facing the courtyard. This would become one of the most significant design elements in Cliff May's future houses. Photo courtesy of the Cliff May Collection, Architecture & Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Cliff May in front of his office at Riviera Ranch in Los Angeles, ca. 1970. Photo courtesy of Hillary Jessup.

As May worked on John Smith's house in La Habra Heights, the two men formed a partnership. May was becoming a successful designer of houses in the San Diego area; he had designed about fifty houses and even listed himself as an architect in the 1937 *San Diego City and County Directory*. However, Smith felt May would have better opportunities if he moved to Los Angeles and convinced May that if there was anywhere that the housing market would grow, Los Angeles was the place. In fact, Smith promised to provide the necessary financial backing for May to build in Los Angeles and introduced him to real estate giant Alphonzo Bell, who had developed Bel Air.⁴⁸

Cliff May took Smith's advice and financial assistance and moved to Los Angeles in 1938. Smith was right: in Los Angeles, May's career thrived. When he died in 1989, he was remembered for building over one-thousand custom homes; developing suburban tract plans that resulted in over eighteen-thousand houses for middle-class families; designing motels and commercial buildings; and producing two books in collaboration with *Sunset* magazine on the western ranch house. Most of all, Cliff May is now remembered as defining the key characteristics of the ranch house style and making the California ranch house one of the most popular styles that is still built widely today.⁴⁹ Because of growing awareness of May's work, architectural historians are studying his early designs and homes to understand how his ideas evolved into the California ranch style. May might have had a career as a professional musician had he continued to pursue his passion. But for many proud homeowners of Cliff May's houses in San Diego, they are most likely pleased that he took a chance, designed and built a house, and flourished as a "Designer of Dream Houses."⁵⁰

NOTES

1. Cliff May, interviewed by Marlene L. Laskey, 1984, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 66.
2. Sister Catherine McShane, "The Estudillo Family," *The Journal of San Diego History*, 15, no. 1 (Winter 1969).
3. R. W. Brackett, *A History of the Ranchos of San Diego County, California* (San Diego: Union Title Insurance and Trust Company, 1939), 22-25, 64-66.
4. Although Beatrice May's obituary in the newspaper states her birth year as 1881, it cannot be accurate. According to birth and census records, Beatrice had a younger brother born in August 1881. "Beatrice A. Magee," <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=calvary&id=I3135> (accessed November 23, 2006); "Beatrice May, Descendant of Dons, Dies Here," *San Diego Union*, December 7, 1942, sec. A; Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 1-2.
5. They married in 1880. Sophie had arrived the year before in 1879. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 36-40. Charles C. May's obituary states his birth date as 1882, however, birth and census records indicate 1881. "C. C. May Rites Slated Tomorrow," *San Diego Union*, July 17, 1959, sec. B; "Charles Clifford May," <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=calvary&id=I1315> (accessed November 23, 2006).
6. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 40; "C. C. Valle," <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/bio/physicians.htm> (accessed December 31, 2007).
7. In the same year, Beatrice and Charles's first child was stillborn. "Infant May," <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=calvary&id=I11161> (accessed November 23, 2006).
8. Charles May continued to move through the ranks to the position of assistant secretary. *San Diego City and County Directory*, 1907, 1908; "C. C. May," *San Diego Union*, July 17, 1959; "Henry C. May," <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=calvary&id=I7857> (accessed November 23, 2006).
9. Marston had led efforts in the City Beautiful movement of San Diego and Spreckels had invested his money into restoring the Estudillo adobe in 1910. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 58-63.
10. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 41-44, 46-47.
11. Jane Magee lived on Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, once owned by Pío Pico, the last governor of Mexican California, and his brother, Andrés. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 6-7, 14-15; David Bricker, "Cliff May," in *Toward a Simpler Way of Life: The Arts & Crafts Architects of California*, ed. Robert Winter (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 283.
12. May's dance orchestra was one of three bands that played for Lindbergh on September 21, 1927. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 67-70.
13. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 70-72. During the 1920s, Alexander Pantages owned the Pantages circuit, the largest vaudeville and motion picture theater chain west of the Mississippi. Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 864.
14. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 73-75.
15. During college May still had his orchestra and played for various people and at events. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 75-81.
16. Ronald V. May and Dale Ballou May, Legacy 106, Inc., "Historic Designations," <http://www.legacy106.com/CommanderWilburVandM.htm> (accessed December 6, 2006). Jean Lichty first attended Mills College where she took architectural classes. However, after the stock market crash, she came home and attended San Diego State College and graduated with a teaching certificate. Daniel P. Gregory, *Cliff May and The Modern Ranch House* (New York: Rizzoli

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- International, 2008), 28; "Jean May Obituary," <http://www.topangamesessenger.com/Articles.asp?SectionID=6&ArticleID=2994> (accessed July 13, 2008).
17. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 47; Gregory, *Cliff May and the Modern Ranch House*, 28-31; Bricker, "Cliff May", 285. Influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, early forms of Monterey (1929-1932) are similar to Mission-style furniture except that Monterey is finished with paint, hand-painted flowers, California tile, wrought-iron strapping, and rope decoration. Roger Renick, "Monterey Furniture: California Spanish Revival, 1929-1943," *West Coast Peddler* 31 (March 1999): 51-57; Robert L. Smith, et al., *Monterey: California Rancho Furniture, Pottery and Art*, exhibit catalogue (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Heritage Museum, 1989).
 18. In his oral history May states that he placed his furniture in the house of a friend O.U. Miracle, a realtor. It was Miracle who then introduced him to his future father-in-law, Roy Lichty and Lichty agreed to put up the land and money for May to build a house. In return, May would provide the labor and if the house sold, they would split the profits in half. However, David Bricker writes that May placed his furniture in one of Lichty's model homes and that May worked in partnership with Miracle, who was Lichty's grading contractor, to design and build the house at 4725 Norma Drive. In addition, if Cliff May was engaged to Jean then he knew Lichty and the title deed to this house confirms Bricker's statement. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 81-83; David Bricker, "Cliff May," 285; County of San Diego, Office of the Recorder, *Deed*, Deed Book no. 54, October 31, 1931, 176.
 19. Looking at the deeds of Roy C. Lichty at this time indicate that he had been hard hit by the depression. Under Roy Lichty as grantor, the deeds show foreclosure, default, and homestead. Therefore, Lichty was probably unable to provide May with property to build a house. However, to help May, Lichty arranged the contract with Miracle and, most likely, introduced May to the men who would help him construct his first house. County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 16, July 30, 1931, 250; Deed Book, no. 46, November 4, 1931, 431; Deed Book no. 46, November 7, 1931, 468.
 20. County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 54, October 31, 1931, 176; Deed Book, no. 54, November 2, 1931, 177; Deed Book no. 98, February 27, 1932, 38; "O.U. Miracle, Contractor, Succumbs," *San Diego Union*, October 10, 1949, sec. A; Gregory, *Cliff May and the Modern Ranch House*, 31; Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 90-91.
 21. Soon after completion of the project in 1910, John Spreckels, who owned the adobe, leased it to minstrel performer Tommy Getz. To the dismay of Waterman and the Estudillo family, the place was promoted as "Ramona's Marriage Place" and decorated with Native American handicrafts, wagon wheels, and other Spanish-era curios. Plays, movies, and other types of promotions added to its romantic lure into the 1930s when May completed his first house. Victor A. Walsh, "Una Casa del Pueblo — A Town House of Old San Diego," *The Journal of San Diego History* 50, nos. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2004): 1-16.
 22. In 1888, May's aunt, Jane Magee, leased 2,000 acres from the owner of the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores and raised lima beans on the property. The owner retained the Rancho Santa Margarita while he let Magee live nearby in Las Flores. Kathie Graler, "Spanish Missions and Adobe" in *Settler Communities in the West*, July 1994, <https://www.denix.osd.mil/denix/Public/ES-Programs/Conservation/Legacy/Settler/sett6.html> (accessed January 22, 2002); Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 6-8, 23; John M. Barrow, Douglas Porter, Stephen Farneth, and E. Leroy Tolles, "Evolving Methodology in Seismic Retrofit: Stabilizing the Las Flores Adobe," *Proceedings of the Getty Seismic Adobe Project 2006 Colloquium* (2009): 165-173.
 23. Living in San Diego, May might have attended the exposition as a young child. As a young man he would have been quite aware of the architecture in Balboa Park since buildings such as the California Building/Museum of Man, House of Hospitality, Spreckels Organ Pavilion, and House of Charm were never demolished.
 24. Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 417-421; Dirk Sutro, *San Diego Architecture From Missions to Modern: A Guide to the Buildings, Planning, People and Spaces that Shape the Region* (San Diego: San Diego Architectural Foundation, 2002), 95.

25. The chimney pots May used are not of the Spanish colonial revival style. They are reminiscent of the ones found at the Indian Pueblos of New Mexico. There is no evidence that May visited New Mexico and thus it is most likely that he picked up this idea from the Indian Village at the Panama-California Exposition of 1915, where a "pueblo" featured chimney pots made by the soon-to-be-famous Maria Martinez of New Mexico.
26. State of California—The Resources Agency, Department of Parks and Recreation, Primary Record, *Colonel Arthur J. and Frances O'Leary House/Garbini Residence*, July 20, 2001; "Here's a House That Youth Built," *San Diego Union*, May 29, 1932; "An Hacienda's Grandchild," *California Arts & Architecture* (April 1935): 22-23.
27. County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 98, February 27, 1932, 38; Union Classified Ads, "Homes for Sale," *The San Diego Union*, May 22, 1932.
28. "New House Idea Reminiscent of Early California," *The San Diego Union*, May 29, 1932.
29. County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 150, August 20, 1932, 313.
30. In his oral history, May claimed that the third house he built was on the Marston lot, but this is not accurate. He never built a house on this land probably due to the steep grade and odd shape of the lot. He sold it in 1945. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 122; County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 168, October 3, 1932, 98; Deed Book no. 480, March 17, 1936, 312; Deed Book no. 1862, April 26, 1945, 285.
31. The Bernards had acquired three lots in this area in August 1932. Frances was a cousin of Jean Lichty on her father's side and would serve as her matron of honor at their wedding. Edward S. Bernard was the manager of the U.S. Grant Hotel. As May stated in his oral history, many friends helped him in his early career in San Diego. Ronald V. May and Dale Ballou May, Legacy 106, Inc., "Historic Designations" <http://www.legacy106.com/CommanderWilburVandM.htm> (accessed June 29, 2011); County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 157, October 15, 1932, 255; "Historic Mission is Setting For Picturesque Wedding," *San Diego Union*, October 23, 1932; Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 103.
32. County of San Diego, Deed no. 170, October 15, 1932, 169.
33. In addition, the newspaper reported on the music program. Part of the program included a song written by Cliff for Jean during their courtship entitled 'Jean.' "Historic Mission Is Scene Of Unique October Wedding," *San Diego Union*, October 23, 1932.
34. David Bricker, "Built for Sale: Cliff May and the Low Cost California Ranch House," master's thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983, 8.
35. May completed the restoration of El Campo Santo in March. *San Diego Union*, March 26, 1933; County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 196, February 4, 1933, 97; Deed no. 202, April 3, 1933, 207.
36. State of California—The Resources Agency, Department of Parks and Recreation, Primary Record, *The Lindstrom House*, July 19, 1999. The Lindstrom House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
37. *Architectural Digest*, IX [1933]: 44-47. It is difficult to date early editions of *Architectural Digest*. The magazine was published sporadically and each issue was not dated until after the 1960s. An article in *The San Diego Union* states that the Lindstrom House was featured in the 1933 edition of *Architectural Digest* even though Cliff May took out an advertisement in a later edition of the magazine stating 1934 as the year. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain which date is correct. "Spirit of Old California Blends With New," *San Diego Union*, February 11, 1934, sect. 2, p. 3; *Architectural Digest*, IX [1937]: 160.
38. For this house, May borrowed \$2,750. May and Miracle sold the house to Helen and Sheldon Hodge in November 1934. County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 227, June 10, 1933, 74; Deed Book no. 225, June 10, 1933, 56; Deed Book no. 225, August 21, 1933, 445; Deed Book no. 357, November 20, 1934, 150. Magazines that featured the "Hodge House" include *American Home*, *Architectural Digest*, *California Arts & Architecture*, *California Pictorial Life*, and *Sunset*. The original

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house burned down due to a gas explosion. Helen and Sheldon Hodge also commissioned Cliff May to design a block of houses in the neighborhood. Although the Hodges planned for six houses, the author can only verify three houses in this neighborhood—4366 and 4369 Altamirano Way and 2440 Marilouise Way. "Block of Homes of Hacienda and Rancheria Type," *San Diego Union*, n.d., Cliff May Collection, Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara. In his oral history, May remembered the details incorrectly. He claimed that not only had Marston given him this lot, but also that he built four or five more houses in the neighborhood because of Marston's generosity. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 122-123.

39. Florence and John Beardsley first commissioned May to design and construct them a home at 3130 Shadowlawn Street in Loma Portal. Save Our Heritage Organization, *Cliff May's First Houses: 1932-1936* (March 2011): 20-27.
40. "Early-Day Home is Reproduced," *San Diego Union*, May 20, 1934, sect. 2, p. 5; Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 133-34; Bricker, "Cliff May", 288-89. The "Langston House" has since been remodeled with a second story over the garage. From this job, May would receive three more commissions to build homes in the neighborhood. They are 6004, 6117 and 6126 Avenida Cresta.
41. "New Women's Clubhouse Center of Interest," *San Diego Union*, June 3, 1934.
42. According to May, Miracle was happy that May was working with others and encouraged him to strike out on his own. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 134-135.
43. Both haciendas still stand at 7477 and 7575 Hillside Drive. Although the Department of Parks and Recreation Primary Record states that the rancheria at 7455 was moved, the house was actually bulldozed. The other rancheria at 7447 was moved due to unstable soil conditions; however, the owner has since let the house fall into disrepair. State of California—The Resources Agency, Department of Parks and Recreation, Primary Record, 7455 Hillside Drive, March 2000; State of California—The Resources Agency, *Trevor Residence*, November 1998; "A Hilltop Cottage," *Sunset* (April 1940): 56; Bruce Coons (Executive Director, Save Our Heritage Organization), telephone conversation with author, February 14, 2011. Both Spanish words are misused. Hacienda is an area of land or a ranch and "rancheria" is a word coined by the Spaniards for an Indian village.
44. Interestingly, this house never seemed to be featured in architectural magazines of the day such as *Architectural Digest* and *California Arts & Architecture*.
45. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 122-125.
46. "Tete-a-tete," *San Diego Union*, February 10, 1935, p. 4, c. 6.
47. "The California Hacienda Develops into the Modern Rancheria," *Arts & Architecture*, (September 1936): 23-25, 52, 54; "Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Cliff May, San Diego," *Architectural Digest*, IX [1936]: 72-73. May claimed that this is the house he first built in the rancheria style. However, both the Sweetwater Woman's Club and Neil B. Dittenhaver House were clearly built in the rancheria style before May's own house. Cliff May, interviewed by Laskey, 128; County of San Diego, Deed Book no. 360, November 28, 1934, 110.
48. Cliff May, interview by Laskey, 125-26.
49. For more information on Cliff May's career, see Mary A. van Balgooy, "Designer of the Dream: Cliff May and the California Ranch House," *Southern California Quarterly*, 86 (2006): 127-44.
50. "Cliff May: Designer of Dream Houses," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1989, p. 2, c. K.