

Borrego Springs Retreat Home

Dear Devotees,

How many times have we read about Master and those close to Him (when He was still in the body) retreating to the desert East of Los Angeles? I for one have always longed to go to the desert where these founders of SRF received days of silence, fresh air, great solace and peace much needed to carry on this work. A few years ago I was fortunate enough to visit the Lewis Ashram (retreat) out in the desert in a little town called Borrego. There in the middle of the cactus and desert foliage stands a little bit of heaven - a home once frequented by Dr. and Mrs. Lewis and the Lewis family. Dr. sometimes would bring some of the monks out to the desert to meditate. A place where even after the passing of Dr. Lewis many a devotee, friends and acquaintances of Mamma Lewis, Brenda Lewis Rosser and her husband John Rosser, spent hours chanting, meditating, and divinely loving.

Not too long ago Mr. and Mrs. Rosser gave to Self-Realization Fellowship this little retreat. SRF continues to use it for the purpose of deep communion with God. Below Mr. John Rosser writes down some of his memories of this sacred spot..... Borrego.

Jai Guru, Rebekah



A Little History of Borrego

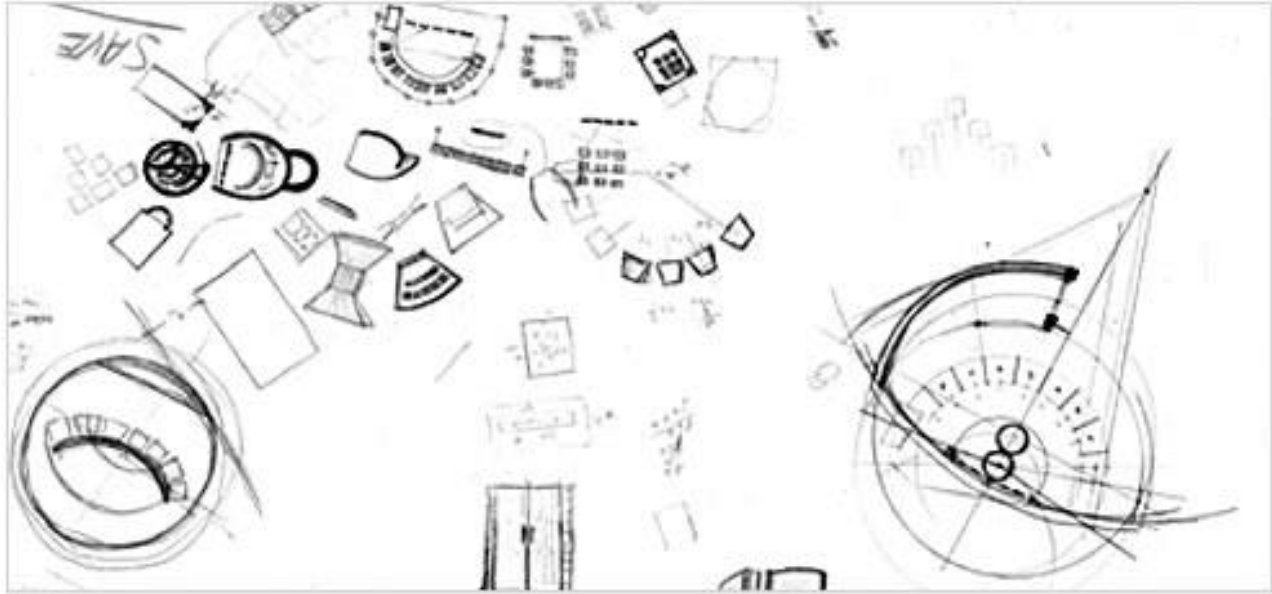
by John Rosser

Borrego first came to light insofar as SRF is concerned when Master dispatched Durga Ma and Mrs. Lewis to go out there and scout for some property for Rajarsi (although Master never went to Borrego Springs). They found several sites, one of which Rajarsi purchased: a very large farm which he developed into the growing of various fruits and vegetables. Rajarsi sent Bob Raymer, the leader of the Minneapolis group whom Master had made a lay minister, and Gene BenVau, a long time devotee, to Texas to obtain some grapefruit saplings from the Red River Valley. These saplings were the seeds for the vast grapefruit farms that now exist in the Borrego Valley. In recent years, some Israelis found the land very similar to that in Israel where they grow French bell peppers. They recently harvested 500 tons from Borrego!

After Master had passed, Doctor was looking into the purchase of a little desert house in Borrego owned by Galla-Curci. She sold it to Doctor at a reduced price saying that she thought she purchased it in the first place for "Lewis," which she called him. She had to sell it however, as her husband Homer Samuels was told by his doctors that the Borrego climate was not good for his health.

Rajarsi's farm thrived until his passing. He actually died on the farm as the result of three brain operations. I asked Doctor Lewis why such an advanced devotee had to leave this earth under such painful circumstances. He replied that you can't make that much money without laying up a lot of karma. Rajarsi owned oil wells, oil property, insurance companies, trucking companies, vast agricultural complexes and a host of other investments. Master said to Brenda, "Your mother and father and Rajarsi and I are One!" SRF sold the vast farm, but the farm house where he lived and died remained for a long time until vandals and the desert itself left it in ruins. A devotee who used to be in the Palm Springs Center retrieved some of the boards and other building materials and from them built a house in Borrego.

In the meantime, Durga Ma had built her retreat over near the Galleria about a mile north of the Lewis property. She took nuns and lay people there for years until her advanced age made it difficult for her to continue and she turned it over to the nuns.



Lewis Chapel Concept Drawings-Zerbe Architectural Records

Doctor Lewis used their new retreat on a weekly basis. As vice-president of SRF in those days and also in charge of the Encinitas Hermitage, plus giving seven services a week (one of which was driving to Hollywood Temple on Friday to give a class for the monks, and later the lay disciples), he needed a getaway. And Borrego was perfect with no telephone or television. He meditated for long hours in the little bedroom by the living room while Mrs. Lewis would leave and do various things around the valley.

I was with the monks on Christmas Day in 1958 where Doctor was hosting the banquet at India Center. He said that Sister Daya had told him to tell the monks what he experienced on the desert. He said, "It was on May 1, 1958, in the small hours of the morning that God showed me His Great Face." He continued that it had taken him forty years of meditation to reach that state, but he wouldn't have cared if it had taken a thousand (I suppose that in the Bliss of God, nothing makes any difference). Of course, we don't know that that means for he had seen and penetrated the spiritual eye and seen the thousand petaled lotus and the sun of righteousness, but this experience was far beyond all that.

Mrs. Lewis, wanted to do some interior decorating to the little house, as a homemaker would, but Doctor forbade it, saying that after he was gone she could do anything she wanted with the house. And so after his passing it wasn't long before she started. The little bedroom near the living room was the garage and she felt she needed a guest bedroom so they made the driveway overhang for the cars and converted the garage into a bedroom. The next thing she did was build the lanai, which was originally just a front porch. It gave us extra room when guests were present. When Brenda and I came along, she decided that we needed a guest house so she built the middle guest house. Brenda later expanded it so that there was an office in the back of it for her bookwork.

The next addition was the chapel. Mrs. Lewis felt that a chapel should be built as a memorial to her husband's immense spiritual attainment. But she didn't have any money, for Doctor had given everything he had to Master. Durga Ma came by and gave her twenty dollars and assured her that it would grow. And grow it did. She never asked anyone for money, but the money came and she employed Architect Richard Zerbe from Julian to draw up the plans after he had read the AY. It was not an easy project. The construction crew that she initially employed ran off without finishing it and she had to find some others. When it was finished, a devotee from the Fullerton Temple, who owns an office furniture business, donated the chairs that are in the chapel. It was Mrs. Lewis' idea to make the altar with the transparencies.

In 1972, James Arness came on the scene. He had been having a lot of personal problems and sought out Dennis Weaver for help. Dennis called me and I told Dennis to send him to the asana class at Hollywood, conducted by Haig Koobatian (who is now imbedded in the Sacramento group). Mr. Arness wasn't satisfied with just the exercises so I told Dennis to have his wife Gerry to bring their good friend to our Tuesday night meditation. Right off we developed a fast friendship and James Arness started going to Borrego with us on the weekends. He had flown out there before and knew of it, saying that it was one of the best kept secrets in California. After a few visits he suggested that in the summertime a swimming pool would be nice, and so he funded the pool. He soon decided that we needed more guest rooms so he and Dennis got together and provided the funds for the rooms' construction, along with a wall around entire complex to keep out the sand and the inquisitive eyes of passersby. The flag pole was also the idea of Mr. Arness. All of this was terribly expensive for everything had to be brought in from the city.

Mrs. Lewis employed a little gardener by the name of Henry Pekala. He had come from New England as a youth and landed in Borrego. He was a true man of the desert. He planted many of cactus plants around the property. Henry also had a system for planting flowers in the courtyard and around the yard. There were flowers everywhere. It really made it nice. Henry lived over at the former Mrs. Raymer's house on Country Club drive. She was a follower of Ananda Moi Ma and had pictures of her throughout her house. I don't know whether or not she continued to visit Borrego. It was from that property that Henry operated. We needed no pool man in those days for he could do that, too. He had a vast knowledge of the desert: the weather, the flora and the fauna. We didn't have to worry about anything when Henry was with us. But old age finally took its toll and he had to leave this earth.

Mrs. Raymer originally lived with her husband, Bob, in the house with all the oleanders around it that was directly behind us across the wash. In Doctor's day he would go over there and meditate with him. Bob Raymer is now in charge of the Oliver Black Ashram in upper Michigan. Anyway, one night there was a flash flood and when Doctor tried to come back, he found the wash rushing with torrential water. The water was up to his arm pits but he made it safely across. That is just an idea of what can happen when flash floods strike in the valley, on very rare occasions!

A long time devotee of the era purchased the lot that is between the house and Vincent's house to keep a "buffer" around the ashram. Mary Crawford did the same thing on the lot on the other side of the house.

The Anza-Borrego state park is the largest state park in the nation. Until just recently, there were around 38 wild horses up in Coyote Canyon. In 1971, when Congress passed the Wild Horse preservation act there were only 17,000 horses in the Western U.S. Today there are between fifty and seventy thousands. These few in Borrego were the remnants of those herds, but some of the locals complained that the wild horses were damaging the feeding areas for the desert Big Horn sheep, the "Borregos." So the horses were rounded up and sent to a wild horse refuge in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Some people are now campaigning to get them back. A wild horse is one of the wildest animals in the animal kingdom. In all my years in Borrego and hiking in that area I never saw one; even the sheep are hard to see. They keep trying to keep a herd of them although mountain lions come down from the Julian Mountains when they don't get their deer a week and prey upon them. A mountain lion can leap farther than any feline in the cat kingdom.

The highest mountain in San Diego County, Hot Springs Mountain, is 6,533 feet and is near Warner's Hot Springs, which is close to where you first turn to go down the mountain. That is not very high by California standards! We used to visit Jim Arness' ski lodge in the High Sierras where the mountains are over 14,000 feet. As a matter of fact, Mt. Whitney is the highest mountain in the United States.

The Borrego Valley and Anza-Borrego Desert are filled with colorful history. One very interesting historic fact is how "Christmas Circle" got its name. Christmas Circle, as all visitors to Borrego Springs come to know, is the little circular drive around a round tiny park at the beginning of town on Palm Canyon Drive. It got its name from the expedition of the Spanish explorer "Anza," who came through the valley in the 1700s. They arrived in what is now Borrego Springs in the winter time and on Christmas Day, the first European child in California was born.

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Here is a wonderful website for more information on Master and Dr. Lewis -- and the history of Borrego Springs. Obviously written by a devotee!

Borrego Springs Chamber of Commerce:

[http://www.borregospringschamber.com/BorregoHistory/people/Dr\\_Lewis.htm](http://www.borregospringschamber.com/BorregoHistory/people/Dr_Lewis.htm)

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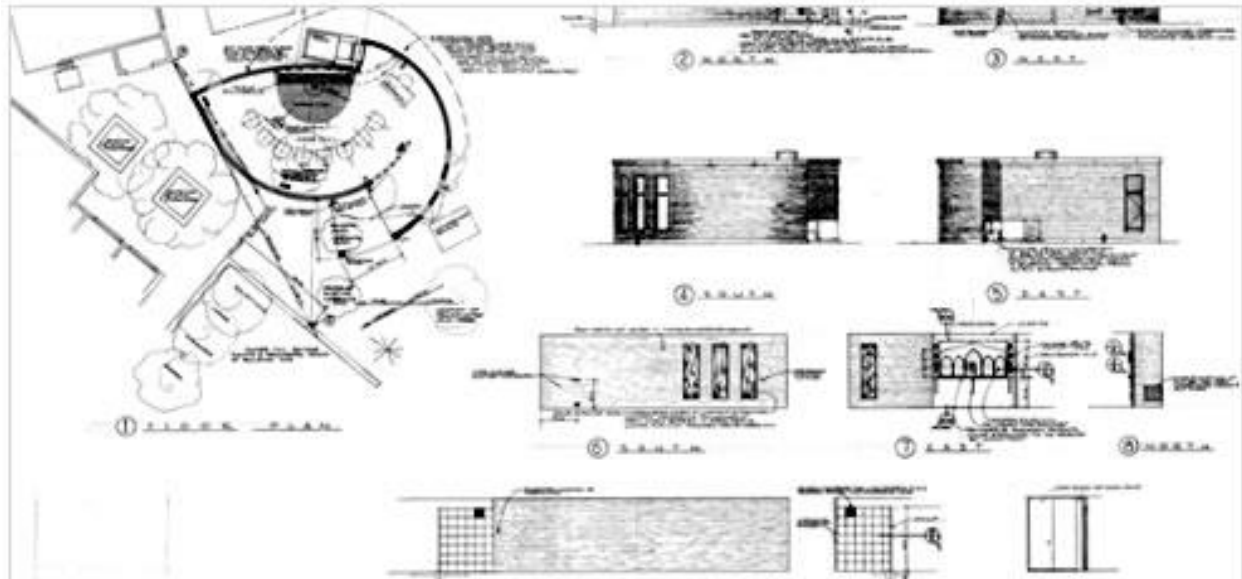
Borrego Springs, California

This home was originally constructed in 1953 by contractor Donald H. Castle for Opera Star Madame Amelita Galli-Curci and her husband Homer Samuels who came to Borrego after seeing a television program about the Valley in San Diego. In an interview with the Borrego Sun, Galli-Curci said of the valley "During our musical career we have had the opportunity to travel the world many times. We are

not stretching the truth when we say Borrego Springs is one of the most beautiful spots we have ever seen. The closest to it is Africa in the Valley of a Thousand Hills" 16 Galli-Curci and her husband also maintained a home in La Jolla, where she died in 1963. The Borrego Springs home was purchased by Dr Minott Lewis and his wife Mildred who were disciples and close friends of Paramahansa Yogananda founder of the Self Realization Fellowship. It was at the Fellowship's prominent Hermitage and Meditation Gardens on the ocean in Encinitas, CA where Yogananda lived and wrote "Autobiography of a Yogi".17 Borrego Springs was also a desert spiritual retreat for Dr. James Lynn, another disciple and friend of Yogananda and officer of the Fellowship who purchased the 600+ acre "Lynn Ranch" with the idea to grow crops that would feed the members of the SRF nationwide. 18 (Zerbe's Projects List includes the Ranch House for the Lynn ranch). The Self Realization Fellowship has an interesting relationship to Borrego Springs, in that the desert community has offered a desert contrast to the Self Realization's coastal center in Encinitas. In 1968, Lewis' widow contracted with Dick Zerbe to design and build a chapel to honor her late husband.



"A unique shape made possible by the flexibility of unit masonry. This small private chapel is an auxiliary building to a small desert retreat originally designed for one time opera star Amelita Galli-Curci. The chapel serves a sect which combines some ideas of Christianity with those of some philosophies of India. It is a very special purpose building which must be entered to be appreciated.



Lewis Chapel, 1968 - *Zerbe Architectural Records*

Designed and constructed for a widow as a memorial to her husband who retired from dentistry to become a spiritual and temporal leader of the sect." 19

In addition to the Chapel, Zerbe also designed an additional guest room for the home, which was frequented by actors Dennis Weaver and James Arness both of whom starred in the television western, "Gunsmoke". The Chapel's stained glass is the work of artist James Hubbell.

The home today remains a spiritual retreat in the desert for monastics of the Self Realization Fellowship.