

Ravenswood, once the country estate of Christopher A. Buckley, has been preserved and consists of several buildings at 2647 Arroyo Road.

Buckley was born in New York City in 1845. His Irish immigrant parents brought the family to San Francisco in 1862. Buckley first became a conductor on a horse-car railway line, then operated a number of saloons in San Francisco and Vallejo. When he was about 30 years old he became legally blind, not as the result of an accident but from natural causes. He could still distinguish forms of light and dark, but he had to have someone read newspapers and documents to him. He compensated for his loss of sight by developing excellent hearing and an impressive memory. Over the years he became a powerful figure—his sobriquet was the “Blind Boss.” He never sought political office for himself, but he was the “power behind the throne.” After he bought half interest in the Alhambra Saloon at Bush

Do You Remember?



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Ravenswood Historic Site

and Kearney Streets in San Francisco in the 1880s, the establishment became known as Buckley’s City Hall. For a fee, he would ensure that someone secured a license or contract with the city. A shrewd business man, he also used inside information to make investments.

He was at the height of his power in the late 1880s: at the state Democratic convention in 1888, the 140 delegates from San Francisco rubber-stamped all his choices. Only three years later, a grand jury packed with his enemies found him guilty of bribery. Although the charges were eventually dismissed, his former influence never

returned.

Buckley bought the 100-acre Ravenswood property in 1884 or 1885. He had 60 acres planted in grapes. He chose Livermore because at the time, the plant disease Phylloxera had not yet invaded the Livermore Valley vineyards. He imported vines from France that were resistant to the disease—Folle Blanche, Semillon, French Colombard, Mourestel, and Sauvignon Blanc among others. They were planted for him by his neighbor, Clarence Wetmore, who owned the Cresta Blanca Winery. In 1890 Buckley built a winery and a brandy distillery. Seven years later,

he added to the winery, enlarging its capacity from 75,000 to 150,000 gallons. Its new walls were 18-inch thick concrete. From 1903 to 1917 Cresta Blanca took over the wine operations. Prohibition soon followed. The Concannons stored altar wines in the cement winery until it burned in the late 1920s. The vineyard remained productive until sometime in the 1940s when the vines were torn out because of poor production.

At first Buckley thought of Ravenswood as simply a rural escape from the city. He was active in local cultural affairs but not a part of the Livermore or Alameda County political scene. After the birth of his son, Christopher Jr., to his third wife, Anne Marie Hurley, in 1893, he began to spend more time at Ravenswood. He continued, however, to invest in real estate and other ventures in San Francisco.

The 1906 earthquake was a financial disaster for him. After the earthquake the family moved permanently to Ravenswood. Young Christopher gradu-



Ravenswood decked out for the holidays.

100-acre Ravenswood to a German Catholic order for a nominal fee; in 1971 the order sold the property to developer Masud Mehran, who donated the buildings and 32.6 acres to the City of Livermore.

Although I have attended many events at Ravenswood, I had never taken an official tour of the white buildings, until this past Sunday. Docents in period costume lead tours every second and fourth Sundays from 12 until four. Sandy Silva was my knowledgeable docent. We started at the cottage, built in 1885. There are few original furnishings. However, the Ravenswood Progress League has worked hard to find appropriate antiques. Several years ago, after they had collected enough scraps of the original wallpapers, they had the house repapered. The result is really stunning. This building was the home of the Buckylys, with bed-

the first and second floors.

Next we visited the main house, built about 1891. The view from the porch is amazing; all across the valley to the surrounding hills. This building was primarily used for lavish entertaining of guests in the large dining room and parlor. There is a kitchen and a pantry. Downstairs is the dark room (Sandy called it a “man cave”) that contained a billiard table, a poker table, and a bar. The two major buildings are Queen Anne style, with lots of gingerbread decoration, especially on the main house.

After the tour, I walked down a gravel pathway shaded by an arbor to see the old cement walls, ruins of the winery. There are orchards, mostly of almonds and apples. The original palm and pepper trees still grace the entrance to the houses. The grape vines planted recently in front of the

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ated from Livermore High School in 1910. The family took part in community activities and joined St. Michael's Catholic Church. In 1918 Buckley contributed \$10,000 to a Livermore World War I Liberty Loan drive. He managed to recover financially, leaving an estate valued at nearly \$1,000,000 when he died in 1922. His son sold

rooms, a library, a parlor, and a bathroom with a claw-footed tub. Stained glass is in the top half of the windows. The parlor includes a magnificent oak fireplace surround. The kitchen, presided over by the Chinese cook, Hee Gong, was out back on the first floor of the tankhouse. The servants lived there on

site look in very healthy. Ravenswood, administered through Livermore Area Recreation and Park District (LARPD), is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Go for the Old-fashioned Ice Cream Social on August 12!

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