
ARTHUR HAROLD BEAL: A PIONEERING FIGURE OF THE
WESTERN SECTION OF CAMBRIA PINES, CALIFORNIA

Imagine for a moment that you are standing in the Western Section of Cambria Pines circa 1920's. The area around you is a virtual wilderness.

Below, in Santa Rosa Creek, salmon and steelhead spawn. Eagles occasionally fly overhead. The condor soars higher above. Deer wander through the coastal pine forests.

This was the world Art Beal entered. He began building his multi-level hillside residence in 1928.

A small cabin on the north-west side of the property served as shelter during the early construction phases. First the footings for the big house were excavated into the rocky hillside. Next came the solidly constructed foundation of tumbled boulders and mortar. The natural topography was sculpted and terraced and planted with flowers, vegetables, herbs, etc. Three springs on the property were developed into a unique watering system. Pipe handrails which run along the meandering stairways also carry water to the gardens. Some of the railings actually have tiny holes drilled in them to produce sprinklers.

One aspect of Art's Native American heritage is evident in this earliest phase of development. According to the Smithsonian Institute, the Klamath Indians of Southern Oregon, traditionally excavate their shelters from the earth. The above ground structure is described as conical in shape assembled around a single ridge pole. The foundation of Art's home is an adaptation of traditional Klamath design. As Art continued to build, the upper stories of the house took on what might best be described as a blend of western ranch house and victorian design, common throughout California.

Basic human survival dictates an awareness of three basic needs: shelter, food, clothing—in that order. Art had his priorities in order. With shelter established, food resources were developed. One unique feature of Art's home is a system for cooling and preserving fresh foods. Rising along the rock face of the hillside, inside the house, is a circular stairway from the lower level to the kitchen. Cool air travels through the passageway, cooling and preserving food items. The third item—clothing—was often optional in the wilderness days of Cambria Pines (this became the origin of one of Art's many nicknames, Chief Run Fast).

Nitt Witt Ridge, as Art's home has been dubbed, is a blend of cultures and architectural styles. It represents an example of pioneering practices by utilizing found items as building materials (shells, rocks, etc.). Some of these found and recycled items came from the construction of William Randolph Hearst's estate known as Hearst's Castle where Art worked at various times. Other discards came from local dumps. Long before recycling was popularized and partial subterranean homes were the rage, Art Beal had implemented the techniques.

Nitt Witt Ridge is but only one aspect of the complex human being, Art Beal. Over the 92 years of his life (born June 26, 1896) Art has been a merchant seaman on squarerigged sailing vessels, a vaudevillian, a marathon swimmer (once having made the "impossible" Oakland to San Francisco swim across the Bay), a chef, during World War II he chauffeured G.I.'s around the central coast by bus, a poet and songwriter.

Art Beal is considered by many to be a living treasure. Over the years, he has entertained thousands. He has been featured in many books, magazines and appeared numerous times on television. He's known great scientist, rubbed elbows with showbusiness celebrities and even entertained children as Santa Claus (with a real beard). Yet, he exemplifies everyman.

If you visit Nitt Witt Ridge, realize this is Art's home. Please respect it.

For more information on how you can support efforts to stabilize and preserve Nitt Witt Ridge please contact: Art Beal Foundation Inc., P.O. Box 571, San Luis Obispo, CA 93406 or phone 805-543-2248 or 805-927-3581.

The Art Beal Foundation has prepared a prospectus for the repairs needed at Nitt Witt Ridge. Two copies are available at the Cambria Public Library.

Nitt Witt Ridge is California Historical Landmark No. 939.

Additional reading:

Rosen, Seymour, 1979, In Celebration of Ourselves, California Living.

Wampler, Jan, 1977, All Their Own: People and the Places They Build, Schenkman, Cambridge, Mass.

