

Villa della Rocca, the Sills' Thousand Oaks citadel

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Formal entrance to the Sill house from Yosemite Avenue, formerly called Lovers' Lane (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2007)

Facing Albany Hill at the extreme northwestern corner of Berkeley is the Thousand Oaks neighborhood, subdivided in 1909. Noted for its scenic beauty, Thousand Oaks is also the land of a thousand rocks. These silica-rich volcanic rocks, named Northbrae rhyolite by geologist Andrew Lawson, are scattered wherever the eye may fall. Some of the largest may be found in public parks donated to the city by the Mason-McDuffie realty company, but many more are hidden from view in private gardens or under houses.

Thousand Oaks developer John Hopkins Spring sold lots in the new tract with the promise that he would build his own home there. Although he reputedly owed more than a million dollars at the time, Spring was true to his word. He engaged architect John Hudson Thomas, who had made a name for himself as a designer of imposing houses, and in 1912 erected a 12,000-square-foot mansion, built entirely of reinforced concrete (the originally planned marble cladding proved to expensive).



The Sill house in the 1910s. The Spring Mansion is visible behind. To the left is Tunnel Rock. (courtesy of the Berkeley Historical Society)

One of the earliest and largest homes built in Thousand Oaks in Spring's wake was Villa della Rocca, the residence of Stephen Joseph Sill (1856–1930) and his wife, Victorine Grace Harlan Sill (1858–1944), constructed in 1913.

Stephen Sill was president of S.J. Sill Co., the largest retail grocery concern in the East Bay. Both he and his wife were born in the Sacramento

delta and grew up in Woodland, Yolo County. Their fathers were farm owners active in civic affairs. Stephen's father sometimes doubled as public administrator, while Victorine's father, the conservative Democrat [Joseph H. Harlan](#), was elected to the State Senate in 1879. In *Memorial and Biographical History of Northern California* (1891), Harlan was described as owning 2,820 acres in Yolo County and 1,800 acres in Fresno County, "a practical farmer, a wide-awake citizen and a generous neighbor. He has given employment to many deserving men."



Stephen Sill in a 1908 newspaper photograph

Married in 1886, the Sills moved from Woodland to Berkeley in 1900. Mr. Sill established a tony grocery store at 2201 Shattuck Avenue that catered to the town's elite and grew in leaps and bounds. Within two years, Sill had added a second storefront and included delicacies and fruit in his merchandise. Two years later, the business was incorporated and occupied three storefronts on Shattuck and a fourth on Allston Way. By 1906, another store had been opened at 2447 Telegraph Avenue. The 1908 directory now listed the Shattuck store address as 2201–2209, and the merchandise also included vegetables, household goods, and hardware. Bakery goods followed. Fine teas and coffees were a specialty.



Sill's grocery store, 2201 Shattuck Avenue (photo: BAHA archives)

A 1917 Sill's ad advertising Thanksgiving dinner requisites tells volumes about the eating habits of the time. Among the essentials offered "far below usual value—but the Highest in Quality" were Cresca fruit cake in 2-lb. tins ("finest in the world"), Cresco stuffed dates in 14-oz. jars, and Crisco shortening in small, medium, or large cans.

While the illustration depicted a small child plucking a goose (child labor turned into the stuff of fairy tales?), the store had no meat counter. All the items offered in the ad were dried (figs, raisins, nuts), in jars (mincemeat, sweet pickled peaches and

Sill's
HOUSE OF QUALITY

Make This Store Your Shopping Center Tomorrow
for Your

**Thanksgiving
Dinner**

Requisites
Everything priced far below
usual value—but the Highest
in Quality. You can depend
upon this:—IF IT COMES
FROM SILL'S IT'S GOOD.

SPECIALS FOR TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY:
CRESCA FRUIT CAKE—
In 2-lb. tins. Finest in the world.
CRESCO STUFFED DATES—In 14-oz jars..... 68c

Detail from newspaper ad published on 26 Nov. 1917

pears), or tinned (pumpkin, green beans, prunes). To top it off, there was Turkish Delight, “The most popular Confection in the world,” in 1-lb. boxes.

In 1915, The store moved to 2145 University Avenue. The new building was designed by James W. Plachek and constructed especially for Sill’s by William J. Acheson, who owned so many commercial structures along the north side of University Avenue that the stretch was known as the Acheson Block.



Sill's grocery & hardware store, 2145 University Avenue (photo: BAHA archives)

According to Sill’s obituary, “For nearly a quarter of a century the business flourished largely due to the great personality of Stephen Sill.” A large share of the store’s revenues came from home deliveries. Jim Dempsey described this service in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* of 26 March 1960:

Regular customers were contacted by a small battery of clerks who made hundreds of phone calls throughout the morning, taking orders. In the afternoon, one or more wagons, loaded with grocery

boxes, would move through the south campus and north and central Berkeley area, drawn by a pair of slick horses.

The delivery business was so good that Sill purchased one of those “infernal machines”—a shining Autocar delivery truck, which was a strange sight in a quiet little town [that] had just entered the Twentieth Century.



Sill's Autocar delivery truck in front of the University Ave. store (Berkeley Daily Gazette, 26 March 1960)

When Sill retired in 1924, he sold the business to the Appleton Grocery Company, which made a point of advertising itself as the successor of Sill's. The Sill's building, a designated Berkeley Landmark, has been occupied by Berkeley Hardware since 1964.

Victorine Sill was a graduate of Mills College and a prodigious club woman. Her associations included the Twentieth Century Club, the Oratorio Society, the Mills Club of Alameda County, and the San Francisco Art Association. Her husband



was a member of the Masons, Knights Templar, and the Elks, as well as a leading member of the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce. Both were involved in Democratic Party politics, and in 1908 traveled to Denver to attend the national convention that nominated William Jennings Bryan as its presidential candidate (Bryan lost to William Howard Taft). Although Stephen Sill was the official delegate, it was his wife who made news by waving the California banner from a box occupied by the wives of the state's delegates during the 80-minute ovation to Bryan.

Mrs. Sill was also a well-known traveler, described by the *Oakland Tribune* as one “who gets more than the ordinary individual out of her journeying, and her experiences are always most interesting.” In 1907, following an extended tour of Europe, Mrs. Sill was asked by the Cap and Bells Club of San Francisco to deliver a paper on her “wanderings in the Old World,” featuring “a description of the various shopping methods and ideas employed by the women of European cities.” The Sills would make several trips to Europe and travel to the Far East, South America, and the Caribbean.

The couple's first Berkeley home was at 2224 Dana Street, but within two years they moved to 2120 Kittredge, and by 1904 they were living above the store at 2209 Shattuck. They entertained regularly and lavishly. In May 1904, the *Oakland Tribune* reported that on the 10th of that month the Sills had

entertained 85 guests at their beautifully decorated, spacious home.

Eventually, fashion must have dictated a move away from Downtown. In the wide-open Thousand Oaks, they selected a choice lot near the Great Stone Face. Taking their cue from [John Hopkins Spring](#), they turned to John Hudson Thomas for the design of their home.



Part of the façade on Thousand Oaks Blvd., formerly Escondido Avenue (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2007)

A childless couple, the Sills nonetheless built a rambling residence (albeit with only one bedroom) on a lot extending from Thousand Oaks Blvd. (then called Escondido Avenue) to Yosemite Road (aka Lovers' Lane). The house has entrances on both streets, with a garden on each side. No attempt was made to remove the rocks; one large rock juts directly out of the house wall on the west side. Sturdy buttresses and irregular massing of varying heights make the structure appear like a citadel. The Sills, who had encountered similarly situated structures while traveling in Italy, named their house Villa della Rocca (rocca is a rock-top fortress).



Photo: Daniella Thompson, 2007

According to Stephen Sill's obituary, "the beautiful Sill estate" was "always open to the great hosts of friends of Mr. and Mrs. Sill." The house boasts a ballroom unique to Berkeley—entirely wood-lined and informal in the living-with-nature tradition. A large stage can accommodate musical performances and amateur theatricals. Mrs. Sill used this ballroom to advantage; in March 1915, she offered a musical program to members of the Mills Club. The following October, the Sills hosted a dance for 60 guests from the Benedicts Club. In November 1919, it was the turn of the Five Hundred Club members to enjoy the Sills' hospitality.



Thousand Oaks Blvd. entrance. The gate, a recent

addition, won a BAHA preservation award. (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2007)

In 1925, following Stephen Sill's retirement, the couple sold the house and moved to scenic Benbow, in Humboldt County. After her husband's death, Victorine Sill must have felt isolated in the north country and returned to Berkeley, where she took up permanent residence in the Berkeley Women's City Club, 2315 Durant Avenue. Here she continued her rounds of social activities to a ripe old age.

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BAHA EAST BAY: THEN AND NOW

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