

McCrea Ranch Visitor Center completed

By Rachel McGrath

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Sixteen years after the historic McCrea Ranch was donated to the Conejo Recreation and Park District, work has been completed on a new visitor center dedicated to preserving the history of the area.

Hollywood actor Joel McCrea purchased the ranch in 1933 and it was there that he and his wife, movie star Frances Dee, raised their three sons, farming the land as well as pursuing their Hollywood careers.

In 1995, the family gave the park district the family home and 225 surrounding acres of ranchland situated at the bottom of the Norwegian grade that links Thousand Oaks to the Santa Rosa Valley.

The visitor center will house an exhibition of historic photos and memorabilia showcasing the history of the working ranch and the Hollywood careers of Joel and Frances.

"There's been a lot of blood, sweat and tears shed by members of the McCrea family over the years in this place and it's a new chapter, a new era in the history of the ranch, but it's emotional to think of all the things that happened here in the past," said the couple's eldest grandson Wyatt McCrea.

The oldest buildings on the property are a bunkhouse, dating back to 1890, and a foreman's house, built in 1911. The McCreas, who married in 1933, built a house on the ranch and kept about 150 head of cattle as well as grew feed crops.

Wyatt McCrea still lives on the property and has been instrumental in working with the park district in carrying out his grandparents' wishes to preserve the ranch for posterity.

"Our goal was to preserve it and to share it with the public and to educate the public on what this whole area used to be like and this is the first step to getting to that end," he said.

"It was most important to my grandmother that the buildings be preserved. My grandfather passed away in 1990 and my grandmother in 2004. For her it was very important to make sure that the main house wasn't torn down and that what they had spent their life building up would stay around," he said.

The park district took over the property in 2004 and the construction of a visitor center was approved by the district's board of directors in 2009. The restoration and improvements to date, including the development of the center, were made possible through grants totaling \$1.75 million from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

SBS constructed a new visitor center and renovation to existing caretaker building.