

Mattei's Tavern

Excerpts from Historic Landmark Nomination

1. Name of Place: Mattei's Tavern
2. Other Historical Names: Central Hotel, Hotel Los Olivos, Mattei's Tavern, Stage Coach Inn
3. Location: Block bounded by Railway Avenue, Nojoqui Avenue, Santa Barbara Street & Jonata Street, Los Olivos, Santa Barbara County, California. Address: 2326 Railway Avenue, (2329 Jonata St. – Keenan Harley House), Los Olivos, California
4. Type of Place:
Historic Landmark - Primary Building with Associated Buildings, Structures, and Landscaping,
Historic specimen trees including Cedars and Palms, Approximately 2.87 acres total
Current Site of Keenan-Hartley House, S.B. County Historical Landmark #30
5. Date of construction or origin:
Mattei's Tavern original structure – 1886, Water Tower – 1890, Cottages (5) – 1900-1915
Gin Lung Gin (Famous Chinese cook) House – 1900 -1910, Wicker Room and Arbor -1910
Keenan–Hartley House (Oldest wood-framed house in Los Olivos, relocated to site 1998) – 1880-1882

“In 1886, Mattei built a two-story gabled redwood building with a one-story flat-roofed wing, which he named the Central Hotel. Fronting Railway Avenue, it housed a downstairs bar, dining room, and seven upstairs bedrooms, reached by stairs at the rear which were protected by a shed-roof enclosure. Behind the hotel a large water tank and tank house were built. When the narrow-gauge railway indeed came to Los Olivos in 1887, with a warehouse and depot just across Railway Avenue from Mattei's Central Hotel, his business was assured.” (Cole 2009)

Mattei's Tavern was virtually the cultural and social center of the Santa Ynez Valley from the 1890's through the 1930's. Up until the establishment and development of Solvang, Los Olivos was the principal community of the Valley and Mattei's served as a magnet for local residents and visitors. There is no remaining historic development in the Santa Ynez Valley that better reflects the 'American' period of settlement and the accompanying cultural, social, economic and political growth.

The evolution of Mattei's from a facility serving guests brought by horse or train, to those brought by automobile or bus, reflects the changing modes of American transportation. Mattei was sufficiently farsighted to forge an early and long-lasting relationship with the influential Automobile Club of Southern California founded in 1900. His was one of the earliest hotels in the state approved by the young club and it prominently displayed the diamond shaped sign identifying it as the fourth contracted hotel in the state.

“For thirty years those who travel between San Francisco and Los Angeles have enjoyed the hospitality of Felix Mattei, founder and proprietor of Mattei's Tavern at Los Olivos. This inn, famous for its trout dinners and bounteous table, noted among two generations for the warm hearted hospitality of its proprietor and the charm of its location, has gained renown throughout the United States.” - October 1918 article in the Auto Club's 'Touring Topics'

Notable guests to Mattei's have run the gamut from William Jennings Bryan to Bing Crosby.

While many were in transit, others chose to stay at Mattei's because of its fine dining, hospitality, scenic setting, hunting and fishing resources, rustic charm and/or privacy. Celebrity guests of William Randolph Hearst invited to Hearst Castle in San Simeon often stopped at Mattei's when driving north from Los Angeles. The Eastern elite wintering in Santa Barbara often visited and the guest register includes Armours, Cudahys, Fleischmans, Rockerfellers, Vanderbilts, etc.

'In 1915 Mattei built his most important annex, the so-called 'West Cottage' on the site of the big stage barn and stable, with four big palms out front. This cottage had five bedrooms and a large parlor with a fine fieldstone fireplace. Its guests in years to come included many movie celebrities seeking to get away from the world for a quiet, country-style vacation.' (Tompkins 1974) Notable movie stars who enjoyed the hospitality and privacy of Mattei's include Clark Gable, Rosalind Russell, Dixie Lee, Edmund Lowe, and Marjorie Main.

Mattei's Tavern and its site, with the associated structures and landscaping, has long been recognized as a 'Landmark'. Past and present residents, foreign and domestic tourists, commercial travelers, authors, artists, filmmakers, dignitaries, celebrities, movie stars, historians, postcard publishers, magazine publishers, travel writers, tour organizers, map publishers, carriage collectors, railroad buffs, local and state organizations, museums, television media, and even puzzle-makers have recognized it as an iconic feature of the landscape and unique historical resource.

One hundred years ago, Mattei was still running his regular stage to Gaviota. One can still see the "Santa Barbara Stage Office" lettering identifying Mattei's as a stage stop, and walk into a hostelry remarkably similar to that experienced by our ancestors.

Mattei's has been "taken for granted" by generations of Californians. It is the responsibility of the Historic Landmarks Advisory Commission and the County of Santa Barbara to act on behalf of the entire community and simply state the obvious, "Mattei's Tavern is a Historical Landmark".

In 1982, as Mattei's Tavern approached 100 years of age, the Santa Barbara County Historical Landmark Advisory Committee wrote Friends for the Preservation of Mattei's Tavern, Inc. (the owners of the property at that time) expressing an interest in nominating Mattei's Tavern for Landmark status.... "Our Committee feels strongly that Mattei's Tavern is long overdue for the protection and preservation that landmark status can afford it". Twenty-eight years later, this unique historical resource and the community, are still waiting for that protection.