

Paradise Regained

As Crystal Cove, California, changes, a life-long visitor asks: can places like these really be owned?

Photographed by Jackie Bohnert for Metropolis
By Karen E. Steen
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On an August evening sometime in the mid-1950s, as a perfect California day drew down to darkness, a small sailboat on its way home to the Newport Beach harbor skated too close to shore and got stuck in the surf. The sailors were starting to panic when a group of browned burly men on the shore spotted them and swam out through darkness to help beach the boat. As they landed, the smell of roasting meat wafted over from what looked to be a village of thatched huts. A group of natives sat around a bonfire, drinking and singing. "My god," one of the sailors gasped. "Where are we? How far did we drift?"

They had strayed just a mile and a half. They'd landed not on some South Pacific island but on the rustic shores of Crystal Cove, California, an hour south of Los Angeles, beloved atoll of vacationing American families. My father was one of those burly rescuers, and my mother and grandparents were sitting at that bonfire. Although I wouldn't be born for another 15 years, I consider this one of my family's most profound stories. It says: "This life of ours was ideal. To passersby, it seemed impossibly exotic, a tropical fantasia, a mirage." It is a tale from the Golden Age of California, when automobile motoring opened up new vistas and rustic beach colonies sprang up along the coast, from Malibu to San Diego. A time when it was legal to dive for abalone--and there was still abalone left to dive for. When the hills beyond the beach were thick with wild grass and sagebrush instead of golf courses and gated communities.

Offsite:

More on Crystal Cove is available at Laura Davick's site, www.crystalcove.net, and through the California Parks Department site, <http://cal-parks.ca.gov>. Go to www.coastalconservancy.ca.gov for more info on the work being done to protect the California coastline.

Today Crystal Cove and its 46 ramshackle cottages stand empty. Until recently its residents--some year-round, some vacationers--had continued to enjoy a relaxed existence not so different from my family's 1950s idyll. But their tenancy arrangement was as casual as their lifestyle, and the residents did not own the beachfront property, just the rustic cabins they'd built on it. The unusual arrangement dated back to the 1920s, when rancher James Irvine II allowed squatters to erect simple structures on a slice of his 110,000-acre coastal property. In 1979 the late Irvine's wish for Crystal Cove to remain undeveloped was respected when it was sold to the state parks department. But that turned the long-standing residents into tenants of the California Parks Department--which this past July evicted them to make way for public use of the cottages.

The eviction followed two decades of legal battles between residents and the parks department, which felt its property should be open to all Californians, not just a lucky few. A third faction wanted the cottages razed and the land returned to wilderness. Early last year, when I learned that the residents had lost their fight and would soon have to move, I decided to investigate what was going to become of my favorite place. The parks department did not yet have an official plan, and locals were both worried about the state's intent and arguing over the best use of the land. Although my own politics would usually put me on the side of public parks, I couldn't get past the idea of Crystal Cove as I knew it ceasing to exist.

I started my reporting by calling the one person I still knew at the Cove: Laura Davick. Her father and mine grew up together there and were widely regarded as the reigning studs of the beach in the late 1940s and early '50s. In those days camping was allowed on the beach and a community of summer people returned every year to put up elaborate tents on Memorial Day, not taking them down until Labor Day. It was a life that revolved around play: luau parties, sunset cocktails, endless volleyball games, and catamaran rides. Kids were never bored, and waterskiing men named Pinky and Babe never seemed to grow old.



Hidden by the bluffs along Pacific Coast Highway, the rustic cottages of Crystal Cove are an island in time.



Vernacular architecture peeks out from overgrown vegetation.



Laura Davick on the front



According to Cove legend,

Laura's parents met at the Cove as teenagers and bought a house there in 1960, when she was a year old. In the 1970s, when my family spent every August at cottage no. 17, Laura was one of the carefree, long-haired teenagers I looked up to--a party girl with a husky laugh who worked at the Shake Shack, a bright yellow roadside stand that overlooks the Cove from Pacific Coast Highway. In recent years she'd started sending out a photo Christmas card that pictured her in a Santa hat and red minidress, perched in front of a giant decorated pine tree that she installed on the beach every December. Whenever I made a day trip to the Cove, she was still at cottage no. 2--ever tan, ever bikini-clad--inviting me to park in her driveway, where I wouldn't get a ticket from the vigilant park rangers.

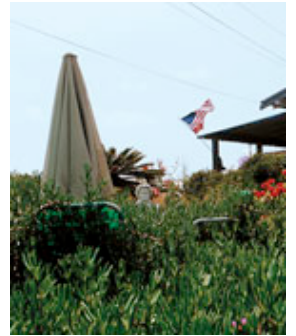
This is the person I expected to meet again when I took up this story--and in many ways I did. What I didn't expect was that to defend the place that means so much to her, Laura has funneled the force of her larger-than-life personality into becoming a very savvy, very powerful community activist. "It's something that I've always felt I was supposed to do," she told me. "I don't even know how to put it into words. It's like it's my job to try and save this place." In June, a few weeks before the residents would be evicted, she invited me out to her cottage to soak up the last lingering days of an era that was swiftly coming to an end.

There's a pinpoint-able feeling that accompanies any return to Crystal Cove, whether you've been away a few decades or a few hours. The off-ramp from Pacific Coast Highway quickly drops down to a potholed road snaking around huge eucalyptus trees and through embankments overgrown with morning glory. The zzzp zzzp of highway traffic becomes the slow rhythmic build and crash of waves. The smell of California reaches up from the past: the winelike ferment of warm ice plant and eucalyptus, the dusty dirt road, and the tang of drying seaweed--all wrapped in a fine mesh of ocean salt.

I arrived to find the cottages looking as they ever had, nestled in so cozily that they seemed to have grown here, twining along the bluffs with the bougainvillea and nasturtiums. Around the same time that Frank Lloyd Wright was meticulously siting low-slung homes into Midwestern landscapes, the amateur builders of Crystal Cove were pursuing a remarkably similar goal. The results were nowhere near as graceful, but you get the feeling that Wright would have appreciated the curving boardwalk and hill-hugging staircases that lead to those cottages the dirt road does not reach.

The people who crafted this world--and it is a world of its own--are as laid-back and friendly as the cottages. As Laura introduced me around, I was offered stories, grilled-cheese sandwiches, beer, and membership in the world's most casual private club, the Crystal Cove Yacht Club. "We have only one requirement, and it's very strict," founder Jim Thobe told me. "I have to like you."

The oldest of the cottages started out as tents and shacks in the 1920s. As their needs grew, the families added rooms and built patios, enclosed porches, and outdoor showers. Jane Burzell told me her family's impressive two-story house "started out as a palm-frond hut and a slab of concrete." Brent and Peggy Ogden showed me the droll physiology of their bluff-top home: two separate cabins had been joined together by an ad hoc bathroom with a door at either end. Cove building materials included salvaged train-car windows, driftwood and hatch covers washed up by the sea, and leaded glass purchased at Carmen Miranda's estate sale in Hollywood. As a result, in 1979 all 46 houses were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the last intact examples of Southern California vernacular beach architecture--a style that once dominated these shores, then gave way to the tile and stucco of shopping centers and luxury resorts.



Clockwise from top left: A new high-end development looms across the highway from Crystal Cove; creeping iceplant turns lawn furniture and a bust of Beethoven into yard art; cottages on the sand can only be reached by the handmade boardwalk; a surfboard doubles as decor; a relic from the Yacht Club days, when neighbors gathered for cocktails under a thatched canopy on the sand.



Because the houses were small and close together, and because they didn't have private yards or fences, anyone who lived at the Cove had to embrace the outdoors--and the community. The obsessions with privacy and property that often isolate people or flare into conflict simply didn't exist. "People have compared it to being like a tribe down here," Laura says.

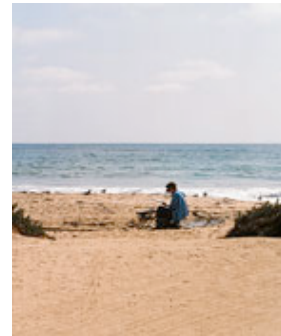
Certainly Crystal Cove was a place where neighbors helped out the older folks and watched each other's children. It was even a place where an itinerant artist-handyman like Alan Wallace could find a niche as a caretaker and guard. Most residents weren't sure where Alan actually lived, but for almost 30 years he spent most of his time at the Cove's entrance road and garage. With a righteousness bordering on vendetta, he discouraged intruders from crashing the gates. "We had a sign there that used to say 'No Trespassing,'" he says. "Well I changed it to 'You are trespassing.'" In return the other residents didn't question his right to stay; and when the state tried to get rid of him, a few even signed letters naming him official caretaker of their cottages. On New Year's Eve 2000, when Alan got into an altercation with a trespasser who broke his wrist, Laura was the one who picked him up from the hospital. Whatever the doctors and nurses thought when they saw the 75-year-old man with broken teeth and weathered skin stepping into a Mercedes convertible driven by a tall leggy blonde, it probably didn't have much to do with community spirit. Yet if you can picture the bridging of that particular social gap, then you can begin to understand what community means in a place like Crystal Cove.

One morning I sat down with Laura to get the dirt on Cove politics and her role in it. She explained that she'd first gotten involved as a resident who didn't want to leave her cottage. Starting in 1982, when the state first threatened the residents with eviction, Laura joined her neighbors in a string of legal battles that extended their leases for a few more years in exchange for giving up relocation rights, housing replacement allowances, and even ownership of the cottages (with no financial compensation). "Bit by bit we've given up everything we could possibly give to stay here for additional time," she told me. "It's down to where there's nothing left to bargain with."

About the time the residents first began running out of things to bargain with, Laura broadened her focus on the Cove to other issues, including environmental protection. She even crawled through drainage pipes to investigate runoff pollution from a housing development across the highway. In 1997, when Republican Pete Wilson was governor, the state adopted a cynical plan that would have turned the cottages into a luxury "eco resort" with a swimming pool and restaurant. Wilson's funding solution to historic rehabilitation of the cottages--mandated by their listing on the National Register--was high-end units that would charge no less than \$375 a night. Laura now faced the most important battle yet, and to fight it she founded the Alliance to Rescue Crystal Cove in 1998.

The idea of a state-park facility being affordable only to the rich was offensive to almost everyone who heard about it. "They hadn't gone through the public-review process properly," Laura says. "They had signed away the historic district for sixty years to a private for-profit developer. It would've been like the Ritz-Carlton down here." To anyone who had ever stayed in one of those cottages, the plan was preposterous. With their makeshift rooms added one by one, their sloping floors and tilting walls, the cottages are hardly a luxury accommodation.

Soon Laura was focusing all of her time on stopping the resort plan: she enlisted environmentalists, historic preservationists, and parks advocates to speak out along with members of the local community. It was the first time these groups were all on the same side, and the effect was enormous--enough to bring 800 irate screaming citizens to a public meeting in January 2001. The shout-down that ensued has become legendary: it embarrassed the parks



Clockwise from top left: handyman and guard Alan Wallace with his deputy, Shadow; Jane Burzel and her son Blake on their porch; Jim Thobe and Pam Gardner, commodores of the Crystal Cove Yacht Club; Stella Hiatt, who started coming to the Cove in 1938; a plein-air painter finds inspiration in the Cove's modest charm.



They appear patriotic, but these 1950s tent campers (above) are actually saluting the beloved martini flag, which bore the outline of a cocktail glass. A postcard shows the beach during its midcentury heyday, when tents lined the sand (below).



department and changed the fate of Crystal Cove forever. Soon thereafter the California Coastal Conservancy, a state agency, agreed to contribute \$2 million to buy out the resort developer, and the plan went back to the dark place it had come from.

In engaging various groups to fight the resort, Laura had begun to look at the Cove from a broader perspective. The result was an extraordinary transition from a resident hell-bent on staying in her home to a crusader for a new paradigm that goes very far toward uniting the warring factions who have fought over Crystal Cove for so long. "I realized that our time was limited," she says. "There was going to come a day when we would all have to leave here, but I still wanted to do whatever I could to be part of this place for the rest of my life."



Her solution was a proposal that would make a variety of groups stakeholders in the future of the Cove. One cottage might be an office for a nonprofit environmental group; another could house the park's tide-pool interpretive program. The Coastal Dolphin Survey Project of Orange Coast College could establish a permanent research outpost. Plein-air painting groups, who have been setting up their easels at Crystal Cove for decades, could provide accommodations for a visiting-artist program. And there would still be some cottages available for overnight stays by regular folks--at prices nowhere near \$375 a night. It was a plan the parks department just might embrace--and an acknowledgment that staying involved with Crystal Cove would mean working with the state, not against it.

By virtue of the twelve-hour days and six-day weeks she has spent defending this place, Laura is now more or less married to Crystal Cove. "I was talking to someone from the parks department," she recalls, laughing, "and I said, 'You know that state park up north where those historic buildings were turned into a conference center? You know how the place mats in the restaurant have a picture of the woman who saved those buildings? Someday you're going to see my face on a place mat at Crystal Cove.'"

Outspoken activists draw heat, and Laura has earned her share of nemeses. To some she's still just a resident looking out for her own best interests. To others she has hogged the spotlight or muddied the argument by bringing environmental groups into the fray. But when you ask these people what they want to see at the Cove, a lot of them are now proposing mixed-use plans that sound a lot like hers.



The author's grandmother and mother in their tiki tent, circa 1951.

In December 2000 Laura found a powerful ally in another woman with deep roots in the area: the formidable Joan Irvine Smith, granddaughter of James Irvine II. Smith is one of the most powerful and tenacious people in Orange County, and she regards Crystal Cove State Park as her family's legacy. She likes to recall the story of her car trips to the Crystal Cove area with her late mother: "We'd look down on the coast and she would say to me, 'Now dear, you know your grandfather wanted this to be a park, your father wanted it to be a park, and I want it to be a park. You must see that they never develop this.'"



Windows from an old train car provide a panoramic view from one of the cottages today.

In enthusiasm for Laura's idea, Smith set up the Crystal Cove Conservancy, a nonprofit organization to help fund a center for history, the arts, and the environment. Funding, of course, is the hitch. How much, exactly, does it cost to restore funky, falling-down beach cottages to their equally funky but less falling-down previous state? Estimates put the rehabilitation at as much as \$20 million, but where that money will come from remains unknown. The state's intent, however, is finally clear, even if its funding source is not. After the residents moved out in July, the parks department held several public meetings to determine an official plan. A "vision statement" completed in September 2001 calls for historic preservation of the cottages for state-parks programs; overnight rentals; the Crystal Cove CARE Program for culture, arts, research, and the environment; and a beach store and snack bar. Laura, who is monitoring the cottages while they're empty and will continue to act as a watchdog, is happy with the plan. Never content with the minimum effort, however, she tells me her latest ambition: "We want to do something that can be a role model for sustainability along the California coast."



In the 1920s the cottages were draped in palm fronds to create a tropical backdrop for silent movies.

On my last morning at Crystal Cove, I took the walk down the beach that all Cove families have taken thousands of times. It always begins at First Rocks--a smooth, flat tide-pool formation that's easy for even the youngest kids and the oldest grandparents to navigate. I thought it might be a good place to start my own journey into Life-after-Crystal-Cove-as-I-Knew-It. As I watched a pair of white herons search for breakfast among the rocks, I remembered that this was the spot where Laura stood when she returned the ashes of her parents to the ocean that they loved. Because her mom and dad will forever reside just off the First Rocks, it continues to be her true spiritual home. Her connection to the Cove is so strong that merely displacing her from the family cottage there does almost nothing to remove her spirit or watchful eye.

If places, like people, can be said to have natural genius, then Crystal Cove is a savant. It is a beautiful ruin, overgrown to perfection, casual and glamorous, welcoming and secretive--all without ever seeming to try. The cultural factors that

created it are lost (imagine squatters scoring California's most valuable coastal property today). So perhaps it's inevitable that the lifestyle that went with it could not be sustained in such a changed world.

Recently I came across an out-of-date Web site that was a tribute of sorts to Crystal Cove. It contained some pictures, a sample protest letter to the state about the (now dead) resort plan, and a journal entry about a recent visit to the Cove. "I know my rocks remembered me," the author wrote of her walk to the tide pools. The words jarred me: Does the rock miss the Indians? Does it pine for the early tent campers? Will it even notice that we are gone? And in knowing the answer, I knew something more: we don't own Crystal Cove--it owns us. If we really care about the Cove, we can stick around and get involved in its next life, whatever that turns out to be. But we shouldn't mistake possessiveness for stewardship, we shouldn't forget that it has been the land that has nurtured us most, and not vice versa. To respect that is to respect the historical reality that we too--like the Indians, like the campers, like the herons--are just passing through. And if we really love and admire the genius of a certain place, what we take away from it is not just memories but lessons in how to live, how to create new places that are worth fighting for and will someday be worth mourning.