

A LOST MARIPOSA GARDEN

Richard Whittaker
text and photos



Coming home late one evening, I found a message on my voice mail; an unusual garden was being demolished. Although I didn't know the caller, Jan Peters, the next morning I returned her call. We'd talked for several minutes before I learned that Peters is eighty years old and an artist herself. The garden was in Mariposa, she told me, not far from Yosemite—about a three-hour drive from the Bay Area. It had already been partially bulldozed, she explained, and the rest would be gone soon. "It sounds like I'd be getting there a little too late," I said. Still, I was curious to learn more. "I used to live up there," Peters told me. Her friend Jackie Airamé had built the garden over a period of thirty-five years. The more Peters told me, the more interesting the story became.

It happened that another couple, friends of Airamé, still live in the area. "They can show you the place," Peters told me. I called them next and Ann Mendershausen answered. It turned out that the developers had given the Mendershausens an additional week to salvage whatever they could from the Airamé garden.

Hearing that, I decided to make the drive to Mariposa. The Mendershausens hoped some of the pieces could be placed in nearby Mariposa as public art, but the larger pieces—a griffin and a couple of horses and two large cats, among others—were too heavy to move without special equipment. They weren't sure they'd be able to manage it, "and the blue mosaic hillside has already been bulldozed, most of it, anyway."

The February morning I left, a steady drizzle was falling, but as I headed east on 580 the gray skies gave way to patches of blue. The open hills of Altamont Pass had already turned green with the new grass just coming up, and as I headed east the bare orchards along highway 132 had the same tentative green carpet stretching out beneath the rows of empty trees.

A few miles out of Merced, I noticed a sign "Fruit Basket" and pulled over to stretch my legs and buy an apple or orange. Getting out, I noticed a couple of utilitarian looking buildings and a string of old farm equipment lined up along the edge of the parking area. Stepping through the door, I was surprised. A middle-



aged woman sat behind a counter keeping to herself. “No fruit?”

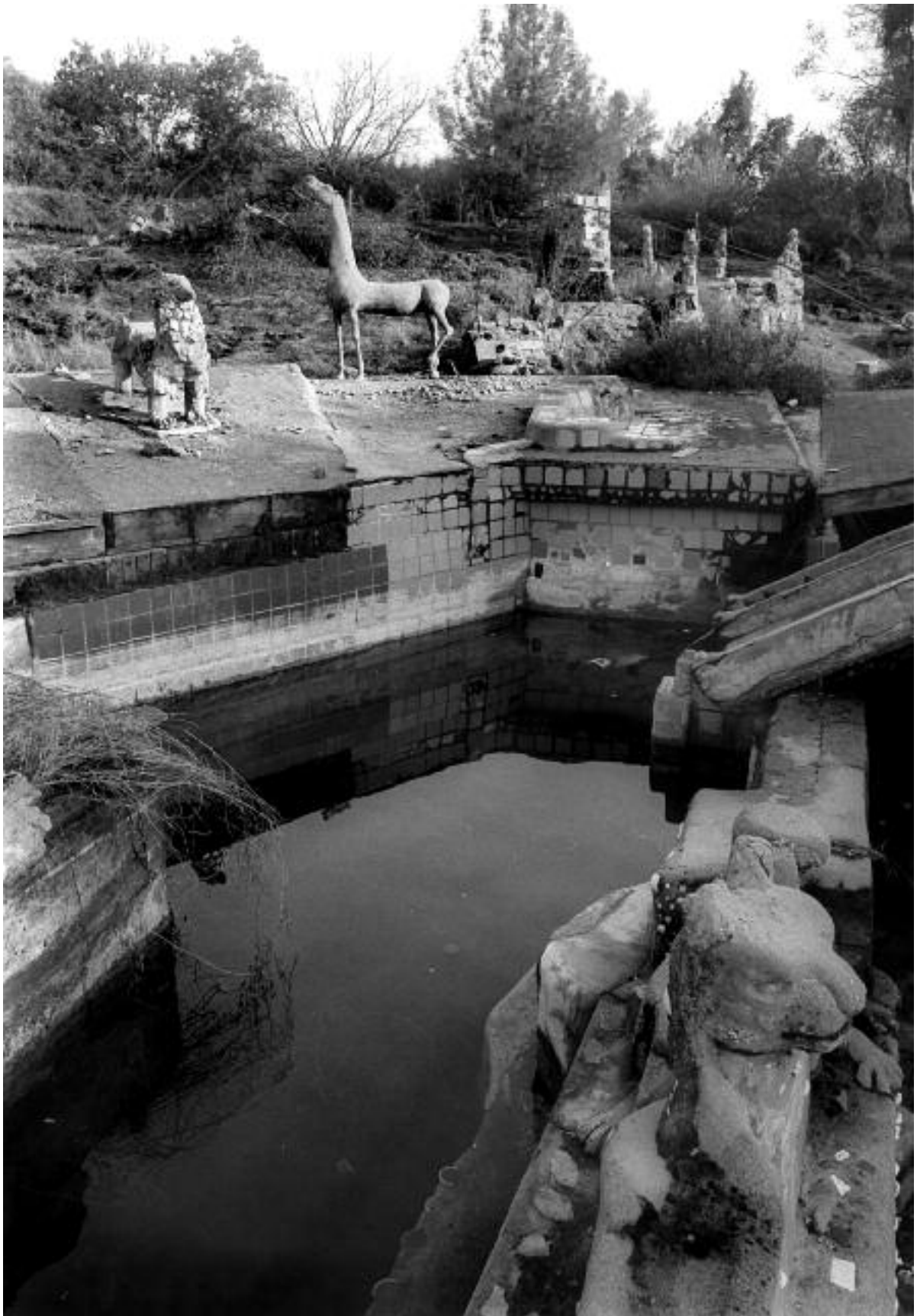
“This time of year, there’s not much,” she said. I was in too good a mood to argue the proposition, and I noticed a humble collection of plastic bags spread out across a tabletop: dried fruit and nuts. The spare room I was in had windows opening out into a warehouse. Walking over to the nearest one, I peered through; I’d stumbled into a museum! The Ag Museum and Fruit Basket. Out in the warehouse sat such a collection of antique gadgets and curious agricultural equipment as anyone could hope to find on short notice. “Can I look around?” I asked. The woman nodded. “Can I take a few pictures?” The woman nodded again. [see page 64]

Maybe I’d just take a little time to explore this unexpected find. So I lost myself for awhile wandering through this small sea of old home appliances, gasoline

tractors, quirky field equipment and other eccentric relics, the personal collection, as was discreetly posted, of one Charles Parish. Across the aisle from an old broom jig sat a big glass jar on top of an antiquated cabinet with a few vagrant dollar bills lying inside. “Please help pay for the light and heat for the museum,” the sign read, simply enough. I paused and then dropped another dollar in.

On the way out, a bag of pistachios in hand, I pulled back onto the highway, but I’d hardly gone a mile before a feeling of remorse came over me. Why didn’t I leave more? But now I needed to get to Mariposa with enough daylight left to take photos.

It’s only now I find myself wondering about that feeling of remorse. Even then, it seemed all out of proportion. Interesting I’ve remembered it so clearly, this seemingly unimportant eddy of the inner landscape. It





was a door I was unable to open. Was it because I took my pleasure without the slightest feeling of gratitude for the work another person had done? Unfortunately, this is probably typical. Was it the little sign? There was an example of text and a subtext, one that opened out toward an entire world. But why, someone might ask, should it be that a feeling of remorse appeared? After all, I'd left a contribution; I'd left a dollar. The phrase, "a labor of love" comes up, perhaps too sentimentally. I think it's more complex than that, as if there is some subterranean connectedness where when I short another, I short myself.

MARIPOSA

The Mendershausens' place was well off the beat-

en path. When I finally found my way to their house, Ann met me. We'd been standing outside talking for several minutes when I spotted a man walking towards us from out of the woods. It was Ann's husband Ralph. As we shook hands, I was struck, even slightly alarmed, by the impression he'd been in some sort of tussle. His face was bleeding and it looked like he might have been dragged several yards through some underbrush. His grip was firm, however, and he seemed in good spirits, robust. "Give me a little time to clean up," he said, disappearing into the house. "He's got to wash the poison oak off," Ann said matter-of-factly. He'd been clearing brush on their property. Establishing and maintaining one's own mountain retreat was not something accomplished without work.



Perhaps this touched on another aspect of what might have been a bond among this group of friends I was discovering on the way to Airamé's garden.

Twenty minutes later Ralph reappeared, a new man. We all walked down to their studio. As I was looking at Ann's ceramic work, I heard an oddly disturbing sound coming through the walls, something like a howling animal. "It's some kid on one of those quad-bikes," Ralph said. "Their parents just let them run wild. There's not much you can do about it." There was a certain amount of culture clash, he explained. We talked about the rising prices of land and the growing popularity of the area. "We never used to be able to see lights at night. It's getting suburban out here. If you gave me the choice, I'd rather be surrounded by rednecks than suburbanites, any day. At least they feel some connection to the land."

Ralph Mendershausen had gotten his PhD in German History, but with the difficulties associated with finding a job in the university system, had decided he'd rather build a house in the Sierras and teach

high school. Now, after twenty-one years, he'd retired. Ann had been a ceramics artist going way back, and Ralph had been drawn in to making sculpture himself. Their first house had burned to the ground in a forest fire, but they'd rebuilt. What I found when I arrived on their property was something of an artists' retreat. Besides the new house and studio, there was a guest-house and a couple of other small buildings. Sculptures and whimsical constructions were scattered across the grounds. I was already with Airamé's kindred spirits.

The way Jan Peters had talked earlier about Airamé and her garden and, as my introduction to the Mendershausens continued to unfold, my sense grew that whoever the mysterious garden maker was, something significant set her apart. She had been very close to Jean Varda, I was told. I recalled Henry Miller's thoroughly enthusiastic account of the man, "Varda: The Master Builder" (*Remember to Remember*, New Directions 1941). Of Varda, Miller writes, "No wonder that people love to visit his place. I have never met a man so plagued with visitors. They come like locusts,



Photo: Ira Estin

ANN MENDERSHAUSEN SEATED ON GRIFFIN, AT LEFT REAR, RALPH MENDERSHAUSEN WITH FRIENDS

people from all walks of life.... They come in search of that mysterious elixir which no vitamin seems able to supply our people with: the joy of creation."

"Jackie had married a Frenchman and their place was very unusual," Ann explained. She also told me that Airamé had worked on another project for years, one that never came to fruition. "Wait a minute," she said and disappeared into the house. She came back with a twelve-page brochure entitled "Magic Kingdoms—A Search for Bewitching Environments." It was a preview of a book Airamé had envisioned. In the brochure Airamé writes, "I used to ask people everywhere I went if there were any really strange creations around—houses built out of bottles or junk or shells. Any castles? Glass tree houses? People's fairy-tale-like recollections were enough in themselves to keep me fascinated—rumors of underground fruit orchards, mountains carved in eagles and gods, 'mistle-toe heads,' an old lady who lived in a redwood stump—would I like to see the place where white clay pours out of the mountain? Six thousand sculptures in

one garage? But these were no rumors. They were all true."

Her search, she writes, was inspired by the French book *Les Inspires et Leurs Demeures* [The Inspired Ones and Their Dwellings] by Gilles Ehrmann, Paris 1962. Airamé writes, "Ever since seeing this spell-casting book I have been haunted more and more by a torrent of visions and intangible longings. In hope of exorcising these chimera, I took to going on trips to search out American counterparts to the European inspired ones."

As much as I was enjoying the Mendershausens, I realized the daylight hours were fast disappearing. "Maybe we better head over to the garden," I said, and we all got into their Subaru. Our destination wasn't far, maybe five or six miles. On the way over I heard more about Airamé and about some of the good times this group of friends had spent together when Jackie and her husband and daughter still lived there. There was a faux foxhunt, for instance, cont. page 63

