This Old House
The Chronicle of Kerrwood Hall

The story of Kerrwood Hall, familiar lore for the Westmont family, begins with Ruth Kerr. This visionary Christian founded the college in 1940 and led it from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara five years later. She selected a new site on a Montecito estate because, “As we drove into the entrance gate the Lord said, ‘This is the place I have chosen for you.’”

So goes the Kerrwood chronicle. But the building itself dates to earlier days. The campus once belonged to Peter and Jennie Patton Murphy, and they built a grand house on its grounds in 1907.

Peter, who died in 1917, developed a successful business based on his railroad inventions. His sixth child, Dwight, worked in the family enterprise and often spent winters with his parents at the estate they named Graysen Terrace and later called El Tejado. After eight years as a widow, Jennie married Robert James Baldwin.

In 1929 Mrs. Baldwin tore down her deteriorating home and built a second El Tejado, a Mediterranean-style estate designed by Reginald Johnson. When his mother died in 1933, Dwight brought his wife, Grace, and their daughter, Marjorie, there to live.

Elegant and spacious, the house was ideal for entertaining. Marjorie Murphy Bacon remembers many parties in the large, lovely living room and visits by governors in town for the Fiesta festivities (Dwight Murphy was the first Fiesta president). The family spent most of their time in the library and the loggia, an enclosed porch with huge windows that overlooked the gardens. Mrs. Bacon recalls quiet evenings there listening to the mis-
sion bells. A stately dining room and an art gallery that exhibited Mrs. Baldwin’s carefully chosen collection added to the building’s charm. The L-shaped west wing housed more servants and the kitchen quarters. Two staircases and an elevator connected the floors. In addition to the five bedrooms, the upstairs contained a sitting room, dressing rooms, bathrooms, two maids’ rooms, a sewing room, and a cedar closet.

Dwight played a key role in Santa Barbara civic life, and wartime gasoline rationing made it difficult for him to travel to town. A member of the first county planning commission and the longtime director of the city parks commission, he had led the effort to restore the mission after the 1925 earthquake. He also owned a large ranch where he bred golden Palomino horses.

For convenience, the Murphys sold El Tejado to Charles Holland in 1943 and moved downtown. The Hollands may have also found the house inconvenient. According to John Hubbard, a former music professor, Westmont’s field representative, James Denham, knocked on the door in August 1945 and asked if the house were for sale. “How in the world did you know?” Holland wondered. “My wife and I have just decided to sell this place.”

Westmont needed a new home as it had quickly outgrown its Los Angeles campus. But shortages of labor and materials made construction impossible—the college had to find buildings it could adapt for educational purposes. The problem seemed solved with the purchase of a golf course and club house in Altadena, but opposition from local residents forced officials to sell the property and look elsewhere for a new campus.

Wallace Emerson, Westmont’s first president, recalled spending the summer of 1945 searching for a site. “We landed in Santa Barbara because it seemed to have some buildings, and we could buy it,” he explained. The Arcady estate on Sycamore Canyon Road presented one option with 142 acres, a 22-room house, cottages, a swimming pool, and a pipe organ. But its $300,000 price and run-down condition concerned the board.

Then Mrs. Kerr, James Denham, and Mabel Culter visited El Tejado on August 15, 1945—VJ Day. Not only was the building in perfect repair, but the Hollands wanted only $125,000 for their 133-acre estate. Just 10 days later, the board voted unanimously to purchase the property.

Fortunately, the end of the war delayed the start of the school year for most colleges, so the new campus was ready when classes began in November. Mrs. Kerr had named the main building in Los Angeles “Kerrwood” after her late husband, Alexander,

A fire in 1970 destroyed much of the upstairs but spared the president’s office and lounge.
Kerr, and the name moved with the rest of the campus.

In those early years, Kerrwood Hall served nearly every purpose of a campus facility. Students ate in the dining room and the loggia, clearing the tables to study in between meals. The art gallery became the library, which extended down into the basement. The paneled library housed the president in style. Three maids’ rooms in the west wing became the music department classrooms and offices. The college chef lived in an apartment next to the kitchen which now fed considerably more people.

Upstairs, lockers lined the halls. The bedrooms became classrooms, and some bathrooms and dressing rooms served as offices. The late Ken Monroe, a professor who served in many administrative positions as well, had his first office in a former closet. “Whenever anyone closed the door, my light went off,” he recalled. Students crowded to collect mail at the post office, located at the top of the back stairs.

Once reserved for entertaining, the lounge became a classroom, a concert hall, and the location of chapel. “Speakers for chapel stood in the doorway and addressed students sitting in the lounge and the hall,” Ed Tuggy ’48 explains. “Faculty sat on the stairs, out of sight.” “It seemed that everyone addressing chapel made some reference to a split personality or being two-faced,” adds Art Nelson ’52.

Many memories of the lounge are musical. Maxine Caswell ’50 recalls students singing there, especially the favorite “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” Art Nelson relates the glory of hearing the Westmont quartet perform in that gracious setting.

Whenever possible, chapel and concerts moved outdoors. Rosella Wilson remembers musical programs on Kerrwood lawn with a beautiful moon rising in the background.

Spacious as a home, Kerrwood was cramped as a college. In 1947, Westmont completed its first addition to the building by enclosing a sun deck on the northwest side of the second floor to make three new offices.

The space problem persisted, and President Roger Voskuyl decided in 1953 to extend the building to the south to create a large room for chapel and concerts. Dividers split it up into smaller spaces for classes. For the first time, the entire community could assemble together in one place. The “Garden Room” cost $16,000 and added 2,700 square feet. It also provided recreation space as well as an overflow for the dining room and library. Regrettably, the renovation covered the beautiful arched windows of the old loggia.

Mrs. Kerr donated a roof for the room made of Rippolite, a new corrugated, translucent material that let in some daylight—and a lot of heat. Keeping the windows open to cool off the room brought in bugs, and Bill Beasley ’50 recalls chapel speakers sweating and swatting flies on warm days.

Later, Westmont added another room next to what is now the college store. It replaced an earlier storage shed that held kitchen supplies.

Despite its elegant past, Kerrwood has seen its share of college life. Bill Beasley still laughs about the student who suggested painting ice crystals on the windows for Christmas. “He brought the ingredients he needed in
brown bags and mixed the solution himself,” Bill recalls. “The designs he painted were beautiful, but they gave Kerwood a peculiar odor—he had used Epsom salts and beer.”

Martha Nelson ’68 remembers wonderful parties in Kerwood, especially at Halloween. “We had pixies, headless horsemen, and ghouls running through the estate gardens, and trolls under every bridge.”

A Homecoming go-cart race once began at Kerwood’s front steps. Students have thrown everything—jello, goldfish, soap bubbles, and engaged men—into the fountain. “Golfers” playing Westmont’s frisbee golf course shoot over Kerwood circle on an almost daily basis.

The children of faculty and staff used to hunt Easter eggs on the lawn. In the 1960s, new facilities began taking over for Kerwood. The kitchen and eating areas moved to the dining commons, and chapel migrated to the Page Hall lounge. Then the library took over the Garden Room and the dining room—and eventually the hallways—until it too left in 1968. Administrative offices, including Admissions, Records, and the registrar, then moved into this space.

One day in March 1970, Westmont nearly lost Kerwood as a smouldering fire ate through the walls. A short circuit in a cable hidden between the floors started the blaze that burned undetected for hours. When smoke finally escaped, students, staff, and faculty reacted quickly. They grabbed everything in sight and began emptying the building.

It was a day of dramatic stories. The development staff got nearly everything out of their office before the ceiling collapsed, just missing them. A student saved Professor Robert Gundry’s newly completed textbook manuscript by throwing the pages out the window. The local media initially reported that students were looting the burning building, then praised them as heroes.

By saving most of the furnishings and important records, the college community limited the loss to structural damage. Thanks to insurance money and gifts, Westmont was able to restore Kerwood in time for the 1970
fall quarter. The configuration of some rooms changed, and the back stairs disappeared, replaced by a metal, exterior staircase.

Today only one classroom remains in the college’s administrative building. The lounge, named for the late Frank Hieronymus, academic dean and history professor, still hosts lectures and special events such as the gala Christmas party for local residents. Guests of the college come most frequently to Kernwood for receptions and other activities as the heritage of hospitality continues.

Art exhibits occasionally grace the downstairs hallway, while a fine collection of Norman Rockwell early American prints decorates the upstairs walls. Hauntingly beautiful Chagall prints featuring biblical themes hang in Hieronymus Lounge. A special case downstairs displays copies of rare manuscripts, such as a page of the Gutenberg Bible, from the Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum.

Randy Jones, the new director of campus planning and services, will oversee work on the building’s exterior. “We hope to replaster the walls, paint, and replace missing shutters and damaged woodwork,” he explains. “Old photographs and early plans of the building will help us stay true to its original character,” Randy adds. “Restoring Kernwood will keep that the centerpiece of the campus.”

Keeping Up Kernwood’s Appearance

At the time, washing the huge arched windows in Kernwood Hall seemed like a chore. Maggie McKee Dorsey faced this task as a Westmont student whenever her youthful high spirits led to an encounter with the dean of women. Discipline in those days often involved “hard labor.”

Today she thinks the hours of cleaning gave her a love for the building and a desire to preserve it. A member of the board of trustees since 1989, Maggie has made caring for Kernwood and its grounds a primary interest.

“Both Westmont’s identification and a historical landmark, the old estate has such elegance,” Maggie says. “It’s the thread that connects past and present students. Restoring the house is a tremendous undertaking—the needs are both superficial and structural—but we must bring it back to its original stateliness.”

To achieve this goal, Maggie and fellow trustee Bill Kerr and his wife, Beverly, have redecorated Hieronymus Lounge. Installing new carpeting and furniture and building new bookshelves over the old, boarded-up doors have transformed the lounge.

Maggie has also worked her magic on the room across from the president’s office. Renovating it has uncovered the lovely, vaulted ceiling of the old loggia. “Creating false ceilings to save heat and hold fluorescent lights has obscured a lot of architectural details,” Maggie notes.

She enjoys looking for hidden treasures around the building. “I found a fireplace with hand-painted tiles in a room near the switchboard,” she exults. “I also discovered another beautiful fireplace behind a wall in the financial aid office.

“I want Kernwood to reflect the experiences of Westmont people,” she explains. “It should embody warmth and caring and the vitality of intellectual pursuits—and help us remember the past.”