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SOUTH COUNTY STORYTELLERS

'Round' barn gave chicks a fighting chance

By Susan D. Walter

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A unique “round” – actually 12-sided – barn structure is located on the historic Bird Ranch in Otay Valley.

The structure, besides its unusual configuration, has an intriguing history. Elisha S. Babcock bought the Otay and Janal ranches in the 1880s. Babcock, an avid sportsman, built a lodge nearby and spent a great deal of time on the property. The area abounded with small game and was particularly rich in quail. California hunters at that time had no quota limits, and the result, not surprisingly, was that game diminished.

Babcock died in 1922, and the property passed on to Rube Harrison, a real estate dealer who sold the land to Stephen Birch in 1936. Birch was of “old family” from the East. He made a large fortune in mining from the Alaskan gold bonanza and invested in copper mines elsewhere. This fortune moved him into the same social set as J.P. Morgan and Simon Guggenheim.

Birch acquired several additional tracts of land that eventually were joined into a huge, contiguous property of some 29,000 acres. An 11-acre portion of it was called Rancho Del Otay.

Most of the property was farmed. The principal crops at first were lima beans, hay, grain and later barley, wheat and oat hay. Beef ranching of Hereford, Black Angus and Santa Gertrudis cattle helped the ranch turn a tidy profit.

Besides the moneymaking ventures, Birch used parts of the property for his hobbies. Raising orchids was one of them, which he did in a greenhouse that housed 1,800 plants, cared for by a university-trained botanist. Birch also was a fan of bird hunting, and it was this interest that resulted in the construction of the unusually shaped barn.

Game in San Diego County had been declining. Theories for this included the long drought; an increase in predators, including cats and dogs; and the greater accessibility into more distant regions for hunting parties who were now traveling in automobiles.

Birch, with his vast wealth, spared no expense. He had learned that baby quail tended to crowd into corners. The chicks flock, instinctively piling on top of each other for warmth and company, and those on the bottom were smothered or injured. It may have been through the advice of the California Fish and Game, or the U.S. Department of Fish and Game, that Birch learned of the efficacy of building a specialized hatchery barn without sharp corners.

The round structure protected the chicks from their piling activities. The plans for the building were made, and it was constructed in about 1936 or '37.

After the construction of the hatchery barn and the installation of the water pipes made of copper from his mines, and with an unlimited supply of feed from his ranching activities, Stephen Birch, so to speak, was ready to roll.

Instead, he came to an abrupt stop when it was discovered that he may have obtained his eggs, initial hatchlings, or funds from a state or federal agency for his bird-raising complex. At any rate, a lawsuit was brought against him, and the law was specific and final on this point: If services of this type of agency were used by an individual, the public was to be included in the benefits of the results.

Birch lost the lawsuit. The 10,000-acre private hunting reserve he had envisioned for himself and his guests was no longer private. In other words, Birch had to allow people he did not know to hunt on his land. He refused.

Birch died in 1940, soon after shutting down the bird operation.

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