

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 97000295

Date Listed: 4/18/97

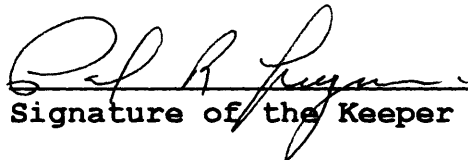
McCrea, Joel, Ranch
Property Name

Ventura
County

CA
State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.


Signature of the Keeper

4/18/97
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

Significance:

Entertainment/Recreation is added as an area of significance under Criterion A. [While Performing Arts and Other: movie industry are not inappropriate choices, previous National Register nominations have used entertainment/recreation as an appropriate area of significance for actors, entertainers, and showmen.]

These corrections were confirmed with Cynthia Howse of the CA SHPO.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

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OHP

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by Marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name McCrea, Joel, Ranch

other names/site number Dumortier, August, Ranch

2. Location

street & number 4500 North Moorpark Road not for publication

city or town Thousand Oaks NA vicinity

state CA code CA county Ventura code 111 zip code 91360

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Samuel Abeyta, Deputy 2/27/97
Signature of certifying official/Title Date
State Historic Preservation Officer
State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments).

Signature of commenting or other official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined to be eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper Cal R. Lugin Date of Action 4/10/97

McCrea, Joel, Ranch
Name of Property

Ventura CA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply) **Category of Property** (Check only one box)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State | <input type="checkbox"/> site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal | <input type="checkbox"/> structure |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> object |

Number of Resources within Property
(Do no include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
8	4	buildings
_____	_____	sites
4	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
12	4	Total
_____	_____	

Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

agriculture
domestic

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

agriculture
domestic

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Ranch Style

Materials
(enter categories from instructions)

foundations concrete
walls wood

roof composition
other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- Criteria A, B, C, D with checkboxes and descriptions.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- Criteria A through G with checkboxes and descriptions.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Performing Arts

Other - Movie Industry

Architecture

Period of Significance

1933-1947

Significant Dates

1933

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

McCrea, Joel

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Byers, John - architect

Winget, Glenn O. - builder

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Documentation checkboxes: preliminary determination, previously listed, designated landmark, recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey, recorded by Historic American Engineering Record.

Primary location of additional data:

- Location checkboxes: State historic preservation office, Other State agency, Federal agency, Local government, University, Other.

Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 220

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	11	328420	3790745
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	11	329700	3790940

3	11	329600	3790240
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	11	328705	3789925

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Judith P. Triem (Historian) Mitch Stone (Preservation Planner)

organization San Buenaventura Research Associates date 10/25/96

street & number 627 E. Pleasant Street telephone (805) 525-1909

city or town Santa Paula state CA zip code 93060

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Conejo Recreation and Park District

street & number 155 E. Wilbur Road telephone (805) 495-6471

city or town Thousand Oaks state CA zip code 91360

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (19 U.S.C. 470 *et. seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding the burden estimate or any aspect of the form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington DC 20503.

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Section number 7 Page 1

McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]

Summary

The Joel McCrea Ranch is located on approximately 220 acres east of Moorpark Road not far from its intersection with Santa Rosa Road at the northern edge of Thousand Oaks in eastern Ventura County. The former cattle ranch is comprised of gently sloping chaparral covered hillsides forming a long, narrow valley at the eastern end of the Santa Rosa Valley. The working portion of the ranch is located near the road. Here are clustered the barns, shop, milk house, corrals and bunkhouse. Adjacent to the ranch buildings, a private road runs east through the fields to the end of the small valley where the main residence and maid's residence are located against the hillside. The buildings and structures all retain a high degree of architectural integrity. The 220 acre ranch retains its essential appearance from its period of significance (1933 to 1947).

Contributors

Main residence (building) - 1933
Maid's residence (building) - 1939
Dumortier residence (bunkhouse-building) - 1890
Upper barn (building) - 1937
Lower barn (building) - 1937
Shop (building) - 1937
Milk house (building) - 1937
Corral system (structure) - 1935
Cabaña (pool house - building) - 1933
Pool (structure) - 1933
Water tanks (two structures) - 1945

Non-Contributors

mobile home (building)
modern metal shed (building)
chicken coop (building)
chicken house (building)

Main Residence (1933)

Built into the natural contours of the hillside, this sprawling Ranch style residence looks out over the valley below it. The house is divided into three distinct sections, with a large central section flanked by acutely angled wings on either end. The main, center section of the house has a medium-pitched side-facing gable roof extending over the broad veranda supported by square posts. Two brick chimneys punctuate the roofline at each end of the center section. The front entrance is flanked with a slanted multi-paned bay window on the west side and a large fixed picture window on the east side. Remaining windows are double-hung six-over-one wood frame with wood shutters. The recessed front wood door is divided into two recessed panels with vertical tongue-in-groove planks covered by angled boards creating a rustic effect. This part of the house is constructed of concrete blocks resembling oversized bricks painted white.

The east wing has a low gable roof with chimneys at each end. The wing was extended a few years after it was originally constructed (1939), creating a section that is slightly recessed from the main east wing. Across the front is a single, three part window with a large fixed multi-paned window flanked by double-hung six-over-one windows on either side. Remaining windows are double-hung, six-over-one with wood shutters. The wing is covered with board-and-batten siding.

Built on a sloping portion of the site, the west wing has a two-story portion in the rear and a wooden stairway leading up to the corner of the house. The roof is a combination hip and gable extending over the front veranda and is supported by square posts with a wood slat railing. The front portion of the west wing is covered with board-and-batten siding. A two-car garage is located under the west wing.

The rear of the house is covered by wide horizontal lap siding and concrete blocks. The blocks are the size of large bricks and painted white. The house rests on a concrete pier foundation. The wood-framed windows are six-over-six double-hung, some with wood

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]

shutters.

The house is only slightly altered. The front picture window was originally divided into four sections of three panes each. At some later date it was converted to a single fixed window. The original wood shingle roof was replaced with composition shingles during the 1950s.

Interior features in the living room include wood paneling, wide plank flooring, open beamed ceilings and built-in window seats and bookshelves.

Maid's Residence (1939)

This residence resembles the main house with a low pitched gable roof extending over a front veranda supported by square posts. A flagstone foundation runs across the front of the porch. The windows are multi-paned double-hung with wood shutters. The house is covered with board-and-batten siding. A shed roof garage extension is located on the east side of the house with a cutout opening rather than a formal garage door. The house is built against the hillside just northwest of the main residence. There have been no significant changes made to this residence since it was built in 1939.

Dumortier residence (bunkhouse) (circa 1890)

This small residence, known as the bunkhouse, is rectangular in plan with a gabled roof tack room wing attached to the south side. The house was the first building constructed on the original ranch circa 1890. The south wing and front porch were added circa 1937 by Joel McCrea. The building has a medium side-facing gable roof extending out over the porch and is covered with corrugated metal siding. Rafters are exposed under the broad eaves. The porch is supported by square posts and a slatted wood railing. Windows are tall and narrow two-over-two wood sash with wood casings. The house is covered with board-and-batten siding and rests on a concrete perimeter foundation. It is in good condition and appears to have retained its integrity from the 1890 period, with the exception of the 1937 additions. These later alterations do not detract from the visual character of the building.

Upper barn (1937)

This western style barn has a tall central gable flanked by low shed roofs on each side. A vented opening divides the taller roof from the one below it. The roof is covered with corrugated metal siding and exposed rafters are located under the eaves. Two large sliding doors on tracks are located on the west side. Small openings along the north and south sides once used for horse stalls now hold metal frame windows. The barn is covered with board-and-batten siding and has a concrete perimeter foundation. The one-story wings of the barn were converted to residences between 1975 and 1989. At that time, that portion of the roof over the converted area was covered with composition shingles and windows were added to the horse stall openings.

Lower barn (1937)

This large rectangular shaped barn has a medium-high gable roof covered with corrugated metal siding and exposed rafters under the broad eaves. The barn, used for equipment and hay storage, is open on the southwest corner and supported by wood posts. The remainder of the building is covered with board-and-batten siding. Small double-hung wood windows are located on the eastern side. The concrete perimeter foundation is higher on the west and north sides. A shed roof wing was added to the north side of the barn circa 1988. This wing is used as a residence and has a small porch, sliding aluminum windows and is covered with board-and-batten siding. Although the addition is recent, it is small, uses the same siding as the original barn and does not detract from the remaining portion of the original barn.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]

Shop (1937)

Located between the two barns is a long, rectangular-plan shop building, with a low gable roof covered with corrugated metal siding and exposed rafters under the eaves. The building is open on the north and south sides and supported by square posts with brackets. The east and west sides are supported by board-and-batten covered walls. The building is unaltered.

Milkhouse (1937)

Located behind the shop, the milkhouse is square in plan with a medium-low gable roof covered with corrugated metal siding and exposed rafters under the eaves. The concrete foundation extends to the window level with the upper half of the building covered with tongue and groove vertical board siding. Small woodframed sliding or fixed multi-paned windows are located on four sides of the building. This building is unaltered.

Corrals (1935)

Surrounding the lower and upper barns are wooden corrals. A cattle chute is located adjacent to the north end of the corral behind the lower barn. The corrals are unaltered.

Cabaña and pool (1933)

An avocado shaped swimming pool with native stone walls along the top is located just below the house. Nearby is a small cabaña (pool house) built of wood and stone. Attached to the cabaña is a vine-covered arbor. No alterations have occurred to the pool or cabaña.

Landscape features

The working ranch buildings are surrounded by California Pepper trees and Eucalyptus trees. These trees also line the narrow rural road that climbs the historic Norwegian Grade in front of the McCrea Ranch. In contrast to the disked fields and native chaparral in the canyon and hillsides, the landscape surrounding the main residence is lush, with numerous Eucalyptus and pine trees, shrubs and a large grassy lawn criss-crossed by numerous walkways. Numerous stone walls, some made from imported Palo Verde stone and others from native stone, form foundations and skirt borders along the pathways. A dry creek or wash runs through the property providing opportunity for a small, rustic bridge constructed of logs. Behind the main residence at the top of the hill, are two round wooden water tanks, built circa 1945, each holding approximately 5,000 gallons.

Non-contributing buildings include a mobile home (circa 1980), a metal shed (1970) and a chicken coop (circa 1960). The chicken house (circa 1937) has been altered from its original appearance and use.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

Summary

The Joel McCrea Ranch is significant at the national level under Criterion B in the areas of performing arts and the movie industry for the association with Joel McCrea, a major Hollywood movie star whose film career spanned over forty years and included over eighty films, like *Sullivan's Travels*, *The Palm Beach Story*, and *The Virginian*. McCrea purchased the ranch property in 1933 and it remained his primary residence until his death in 1990. The buildings, especially the main house, are also significant at the local level under Criterion C in the area of architecture as important designs in the career of master architect John Byers. Byers was a prominent regional architect, best known for his adobe and Spanish Colonial Revival designs. The Joel McCrea ranch house is a rare and very successful departure from Byers' usual period revivalism into the realm of the informal California Ranch style, just emerging in Southern California.

Period of Significance

The period of significance (1933 - 1947) is based on the property's association with Joel McCrea, who purchased the ranch in 1933 and began construction of the ranch buildings that year. Although McCrea continued his film career through the 1970s, his exceptional significance as an actor after 1947 (within the last fifty years) has not been established.

Early History of the Property

The land that is presently the Joel McCrea Ranch represents over one hundred years of livestock ranching and dry farming history in the Santa Rosa Valley and the surrounding eastern Ventura County. The 220 acre present day McCrea Ranch is located in the far southeast corner of Rancho Simi granted to three Pico brothers, Francisco Javier, Miguel and Patricio, in 1795 and 1821 by the Spanish government. The 113,009 acre grant was patented in 1865 to Jose de la Guerra. During this time period, both cattle and sheep grazed on the vast rancho, the largest of the nineteen land grants in Ventura County.

In 1870 Thomas Scott purchased 99,000 of the 113,009 acres of the Rancho Simi from the de la Guerra family for oil exploration. Scott's agent, Thomas Bard, allowed the de la Guerras to continue to graze their livestock on the rancho. However, by 1887, after little success with oil development, the Simi Rancho lands were broken up for subdivision and development. Surveyors Stow and Powers mapped the property in 1887-1888 for the Simi Land and Water Company.

August Dumortier purchased 851.36 acres, a portion of Lot G of the Simi Land and Water Company's subdivision, from the company in 1890. Shortly thereafter, Dumortier built a house and barn. The house he built is now part of the Joel McCrea ranch. The barn is no longer extant, and may have burned down.

A native of Belgium, Dumortier brought two of his six children with him to farm the new land. His oldest sons, Achille and Paul, assisted their father on the farm until their father's unexpected death in 1895. August Dumortier died intestate and the sons were underage, so the property was sold in 1896 to the highest bidders, Huene farmers Frank and Justin Petit and their brother-in-law, Martin J. Laurent. The Petit and Laurent families were natives of France. The Dumortier sons returned to Belgium, but returned to Ventura County several years later and farmed in the nearby Somis area.

In 1901 a road was constructed through the Petit-Laurent ranch. This road became known as the Norwegian Grade because of a nearby colony of five Norwegian families who in 1890 purchased five properties containing a total of 650 acres. These grain farmers required a better road to transport their crops to the markets in Camarillo and to the port at Hueneme for shipment to San Francisco and England, a major destination for California grain. The old Butterfield Stage Road was too steep, so they built what came to be known as the Norwegian Grade on land owned by them, and land deeded to them by the Petit and Laurent families.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

Adjacent to the Dumortier property was a 548 acre parcel purchased by Adolph Wyseur in 1890. Wyseur was also a native of Belgium. The two families remained friends for many years following the death of August Dumortier. When the two Dumortier brothers returned to Ventura County, their sister Celine accompanied them. In 1909 she married a French Basque, Jean B. Lapeyre, whose farm near Moorpark was located a few miles north of the original Dumortier ranch.

A succession of owners followed the sale of the Dumortier ranch in 1896. The Petit and Laurent families farmed the land, but lived in Hueneme and Oxnard. A ranch foreman probably occupied the Dumortier house. By 1911 Cora McClain is recorded as owning the property. At some point between 1896 and 1911 another house was built across the road from the Dumortier house. This land on the west side of Moorpark Road is not included in the nomination.

The ranch continued to be used for dry farming and possibly livestock raising until it was purchased by Joel McCrea in 1933 from the Title Insurance and Trust Company. At the time of its purchase, John Agourre was leasing the ranch and raising row crops. After its purchase, Joel McCrea built a number of ranch buildings between 1933 and 1939. They included a new ranch house for his bride, Frances Dee, two barns, a shop, and milk house. The McCreas kept horses and cattle and raised oats and hay. The original Dumortier house was converted into the "bunkhouse" and a tack room was added to the south side. The ranch foreman lived across the road in the larger house.

McCrea farmed the land himself with the help of hired hands. Until the 1950s when a tractor was purchased, all the the work was performed by horse and wagon. Oats, grain and winter wheat were raised for feed crops for the animals, including about 200-250 head of cattle. Although there were wells on the property, all the crops were dry farmed.

The Santa Rosa and adjacent Conejo, Tierra Rejada and Little Simi valleys remained rural and agricultural until the 1950s and 1960s when the freeways were constructed and water was imported from the Los Angeles Metropolitan Water District. During this period, the City of Thousand Oaks was incorporated, and the Conejo Valley grew from approximately 3,000 residents in 1950 to 35,000 in 1970. The City of Thousand Oaks continued to spread in all directions, so that the McCrea Ranch, once identified with the community of Camarillo, is now part of the City of Thousand Oaks.

Urban expansion has had a devastating effect on agriculture. Virtually none of the large cattle ranches and fields of grain which once dotted the Conejo Valley remain today. The McCrea-Dumortier Ranch is a rare surviving example of the ranching heritage in the Conejo/Santa Rosa Valley area of eastern Ventura County. It reflects the cattle and sheep ranching culture that once dominated the area and illustrates the ethnic diversity of land ownership by Spanish, French, Belgian, Norwegian and American ranchers.

Performing Arts/Film Industry Context

The McCrea Ranch is eligible under National Register Criterion B because of its association with film star Joel McCrea. The ranch was purchased by McCrea in 1933, near the beginning of his Hollywood acting career. McCrea had made just eleven of his eighty-one films by 1933. His work as an actor allowed him the flexibility and provided him the economic means to acquire the 851 acre cattle and wheat growing ranch where he and his actress-wife Frances Dee lived and raised their family from 1933 until his death in 1990.

Joel McCrea: Film Career

Joel McCrea is best known as a Hollywood actor, whose career spanned over forty years (1929-1976) and over eighty films, the majority made during Hollywood's Golden Age, from the 1920s through the 1940s. McCrea's film biographer, Tony Thomas states the following about McCrea's acting abilities:

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

His is an extraordinary filmography, one that has seldom been given much attention, possibly because McCrea himself was a man who never sought much attention. ... It is also doubtful if any other man as placid or as amiable as Joel McCrea ever became a major film figure. The words used to describe him do not usually appear in descriptions of movie stars: non-neurotic, non-egocentric, non-narcissistic.

To describe McCrea only in terms of niceness is deceptive. The essential quality of McCrea as an actor was his strength. He was reliable, solid, sober, difficult to ruffle, dependable. And if he lacked much color, he was at least likeable. Probably the harshest comment ever made about McCrea by a critic was the one which likened him to a concert pianist specializing in a single chord. What that critic might have missed was the art which conceals art.

Bryon Haskins, who directed McCrea in *The First Texan* (1956), told interviewer Joe Adamson: "I finally ran across the man I consider the greatest pure cinema actor I ever worked with - Joel McCrea." (Thomas, 1991:7)

Childhood and Education: 1905 - 1928

Joel Albert McCrea was born on November 5, 1905 in South Pasadena, California, one of three children born to Lou Whipple and Thomas P. McCrea. His father was an executive with the Los Angeles Gas and Electric Company, known today as the Southern California Gas Company. The family moved to Hollywood in 1914. Surrounded by the infant Hollywood movie industry, the young McCrea could not help being impressed by the filming of D.W. Griffith and others going on all around him. His first acting experiences came in bit roles in high school plays, one of which featured classmate Harleen Carpenter, later known to moviegoers as Jean Harlow.

After graduation from high school in 1924, McCrea attended Pomona College in Claremont, California, although he perhaps had always been more interested in horses than academics, having spent many summers working on horse ranches and as a teamster. He was encouraged by the head of the Drama Department at Pomona College to pursue his talent for acting as a means of attaining his ultimate goal of becoming a rancher. He appeared as the male lead in several college plays and began to make movie industry connections. One important connection was his friendship with another drama student, Jeane Wood, daughter of director Sam Wood. It was through Wood that McCrea received a small part as an extra and stuntman in a film starring Marian Davies being filmed near Pomona College. This relationship led to further roles for the up-and-coming young actor.

Journeyman Actor: 1929 - 1932

Following his graduation in the spring of 1928, McCrea began looking for roles. He worked for a time as an extra and bit-part actor until, by early 1929, he began to land small roles in a number of films and was signed to a contract with FBO (soon to merge into RKO) studios. At FBO he was given a small role in *The Jazz Age* opposite his school friend, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. His part was not memorable, and the company offered him no more roles until, in 1929, William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies mentioned his name for a role in *The Silver Horde*. This was his first talking picture, and the film that helped launch his career.

That same year he also had his first feature role, in Cecil B. DeMille's film *Dynamite*. It failed to produce the hoped-for long-term contract with MGM, but helped the young twenty-four year old begin his career working with important producers.

Actors found that although they were under contract to one studio, they might be loaned out to another. Joel McCrea met Will Rogers for the first time when in 1930 they worked together on *Lightmin'* for Fox studios. This was the beginning of a close friendship between the two men. It was Rogers that encouraged McCrea to buy a ranch, even if he had to borrow the money to do it. He even recommended his bank and said to use Rogers' name when McCrea was turned down for a loan on the ranch he then tried to purchase.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

McCrea made a second movie, *Business and Pleasure*, with Will Rogers in 1932. McCrea stated, "Will told me, 'You need to get out of this town regularly to get perspective on it, and there's no better spot than the back of a horse, herdin' cows.' He was right." (Thomas, 1991: 12) In a newspaper interview conducted with McCrea in 1985, he discussed his short but close relationship with Will Rogers, whom he looked to as his mentor. McCrea served as the chairman of The Friends of Will Rogers, an organization devoted "...to preserv[ing] the memory of the famed humorist-actor-philosopher and the spirit that he exemplified in his lifetime." (Ventura County Star Free Press, 8/15/85) Rogers died in a plane crash with famed aviator Wiley Post in 1935.

Leading Man Roles with RKO Studios: 1930 - 1940

During the decade of the thirties, McCrea moved into Hollywood leading man roles with RKO pictures, playing opposite such stars as sisters Constance and Joan Bennett, Barbara Stanwyck, Ginger Rogers, Claudette Colbert, Kay Francis, Miriam Hopkins, Jean Arthur and Irene Dunne. While film critics did not rave about his performances, he did manage to star in some thirty-three films during this period.

McCrea recalls that era of movie making, "I managed to get out of those I knew I couldn't handle. In those first ten years I was paired with actresses who were much more important than me, like Connie Bennett and Irene Dunne. I would go to them and say, 'You know, I don't have a clue as to what this thing is about. I've got to be honest with you. I just worked on a ranch and I was a cowboy, and I don't really know anything...' That would scare them a little. So they would then work on my side in getting me out of these things and getting Cary Grant or Robert Montgomery to do them." (Thomas, 1991:14) It was to McCrea's credit that he knew his acting abilities and set limits for himself.

Critical Roles: 1940 - 1942

Some of McCrea's most critically acclaimed work, and the films that advanced his career, came during the late 1930s and 1940s when he took on more substantial roles. Under the directorship of Alfred Hitchcock, he played the lead in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940). With the "screwball comedy" director and writer Preston Sturges, McCrea played John L. Sullivan in *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), followed by two more films with Sturges, *The Palm Beach Story* and *The Great Moment* (1942). The first two Sturges films were hits, but the third was a failure. Sturges was considered a director of comedic genius. He hired McCrea for the roles in most of his films because, "... Sturges had known McCrea for years and later said how much he admired the actor's persona and the image of quiet determination." (Thomas, 1991: 16)

In order to make *Sullivan's Travels*, McCrea had turned down Cecil B. DeMille's offer of the lead role in *Reap the Wild Wind* that later went to John Wayne. McCrea had been advised by DeMille to turn down Sturges' offer, acknowledging his brilliance as a writer, but saying the film would probably be forgotten. But for McCrea it was more important that the director was a brilliant writer and that he wrote the part with McCrea in mind. "The quiet, stalwart McCrea image was precisely what Sturges needed for this film, and he put McCrea at ease by telling him just that." (Thomas: 1991:85) *Sullivan's Travels* became a major film in his career.

Westerns: 1937 - 1976

Although he did not appear in a western film until *Wells Fargo* in 1937, McCrea decided to specialize in westerns after making *The Virginian* in 1946. In his own words, "I wasn't instinctively an actor and I had no burning desire to act, but I liked making movies and I wanted to do the western things I had read about, like *The Virginian*, and different things like *Ramrod* and *Four Faces West*. I had enjoyed doing the comedies but as I got older I was better suited to westerns." (Thomas, 1991:17)

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

Between 1946 and 1959, McCrea made only one film out of twenty-five that was not a western, *Rough Shoot* (1953). He ended his long career in 1959 with a television series called *Wichita Town*, that was not renewed after its twenty-four episode run. In 1961 he came out of retirement briefly for a movie with Randolph Scott called *Ride the High Country*, which was followed by *Cry Blood, Apache* (1970), where he had a small role in a movie co-produced by his son Jody McCrea. His final film appearance in 1976 was produced in Banff National Park by a Canadian producer. At seventy years of age, McCrea was still quite physically active from his daily riding at the ranch. Although beautifully filmed, the movie was not successful because of a thin plot. A reviewer for *Variety* found it rather "bland entertainment." However, about McCrea's performance, he reported,

McCrea's particular strength as a western actor has always been the serenity of his character, an unflappable, straight-as-an-arrow rectitude beautifully displayed in his previous film, Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country*, and in other top oaters [sic] such as *Stars in My Crown, Wichita, and Buffalo Bill* (Thomas, 1991: 157).

Producer Harry Sherman stated the following about McCrea's career,

Joel is the greatest natural Western star since the old days of Tom Mix and William S. Hart. He has an authentic background, and he is one of the finest natural horsemen I've ever seen...Just a guy who knows how to sit on a horse with grace and authority (Los Angeles Times, 10/21/90).

Conclusions

During the period of significance (1933-1947) Joel McCrea's film career transitioned from that of a relatively minor bit-part player to a "star" actor with significant public recognition. Of the eighty-one movies McCrea made during his lifetime, half were filmed during this time period. An increasingly popular movie actor during the 1930s and 1940s, McCrea's career spanned roughly 40 years. During this period, he averaged between two and three films a year. He was hired by the major Hollywood studios of the day and played leading roles paired with many of the popular "leading ladies" of the period. Although he never received an Academy Award, he was highly regarded as an actor and as an individual by members of the film community. His peak critical acclaim came for his work in the early 1940s under the direction of Alfred Hitchcock in *Foreign Correspondent* and Preston Sturges in *Sullivan's Travels* and *The Palm Beach Story*. By 1947 he had given up serious drama and comedy for western films, the genre where he said he felt the most comfortable. McCrea took his western roles seriously, and his first-hand knowledge of ranching, cattle and horses contributed to making him a believable and authentic presence in western movies.

Family and Ranch Life

Joel McCrea purchased his ranch in the Santa Rosa Valley just prior to his marriage to Frances Dee, an actress Joel met while the two were filming *The Silver Cord* for RKO in 1933. Born in Los Angeles in 1907, Frances Dee had always been interested in acting, starring in school plays while in high school, followed by enrollment in the Pasadena Playhouse. Her first film was *Words and Music* in 1929, where she played a bit part for Fox before signing with Paramount studios. By the time she met McCrea, she had appeared in a dozen films, achieving "critical and public approval" for her work as Meg in *Little Women* (1933), *Of Human Bondage* (1934) and *Becky Sharp* (1935) (Thomas, 1991:14). During the 1930s, Dee was one of the most sought after actresses in Hollywood.

After their marriage in 1933, Frances Dee McCrea continued her film career but scaled it back, because she felt her family came before acting. The couple's first son, Joel Dee, known as "Jody," was born on September 6, 1934, followed by David one year later on November 15, 1935. In 1954 their third and last son, Peter, was born. Frances, assisted by her mother-in-law Lou Whipple McCrea, was responsible for the selection and planting of the beautiful landscaping surrounding the main ranch house.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

Frances Dee McCrea either starred or appeared in almost fifty films between 1929 and 1954, when she made her final film appearance, in *Gypsy Colt*. The height of her career came in 1937, when Paramount signed her for three films: *Wells Fargo*, with her husband; *Souls at Sea* with Gary Cooper; and *If I were King* with Ronald Coleman, released in 1938 (Thomas, 1990:14). Two of her films have become cult classics: *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *If I were King* (1938).

Joel McCrea felt most at home when working on his ranch. He maintained a close stewardship with the land, careful not to overgraze the land and to conserve it by saving the feed for lean years. His success in films allowed him to purchase other ranches in San Luis Obispo, Nevada and New Mexico. In addition, McCrea purchased land adjacent to the Santa Rosa ranch increasing the 850 acres to a total of some 3,000 acres. During the 1950s, however, McCrea began to sell off or donate portions of the ranch, leaving approximately 220 acres surrounding the buildings today.

The McCrea Ranch served as a haven for the busy actors. Joel and Frances attended ceremonies and parties in Los Angeles, but kept entertainment at the ranch primarily for the family or close friends. No films were ever made at the ranch. Those actors who visited the ranch and were very close to the McCreas included Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott, Barbara Stanwyck and her husband Robert Taylor. Ronald Reagan, Spencer Tracey and Katherine Hepburn also visited the ranch a few times. McCrea starred in six films with Barbara Stanwyck over a fifteen year period.

Community life was also important to Joel and Frances McCrea. Their three sons attended the small Santa Rosa public school. Joel served on the local school board as president, and paid the salary of the teacher one year when they needed a second teacher. Joel also coached a winning baseball team at Santa Rosa School for two years. In 1980 Joel was honored by the United Way of Ventura County and given the Milton Teague award for his volunteerism efforts for the Tri-Valley YMCA in Thousand Oaks and the Camarillo Boys Club. Joel and Frances McCrea donated thirty-five acres of land for the YMCA summer camp in 1961 and were benefactors of the new Camarillo Boys and Girls Club building in 1983. The couple also donated seventy-five acres to the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency for a wildlife preserve along the Norwegian Grade.

McCrea was interested in promoting and preserving the true portrait of the American cowboy. For his work in western films, he was honored by being nominated to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in 1969, the first living cowboy to be honored. He also served as president of the organization and donated several art works by Charles Russell to the collection. Located in Oklahoma, the museum is not far from the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore, Oklahoma.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]

Architectural Context

The Joel McCrea house is architecturally significant under National Register Criterion C as an important work of a master architect, John Byers.

Born in 1875 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, John Byers received his degree in electrical engineering from the University of Michigan, with one year of graduate school at Harvard. He spent only two years practicing engineering before traveling abroad in 1901 to teach linguistics at the North American Academy in Montevideo, Uruguay. He spent the next two decades teaching languages, with the last ten years at Santa Monica High School where he became head of the Modern Language Department.

Although he was a language teacher by profession, Byers never lost his interest in design, especially for adobe architecture. Despite a lack of formal training in architecture, he designed a house for his family in 1916. By 1919, at the age of forty-four, he began to actively pursue a career as a designer and builder of adobe residences. By 1922 he was receiving recognition for his work on adobes in the prestigious architectural magazine, *The Architect and Engineer*. Byers received his architect's license in 1926, and for the next twenty-five years he designed buildings almost exclusively for residents of the Santa Monica, Brentwood and West Los Angeles areas.

He specialized in adobe designs and construction during his early years (until 1929), but by the mid-1920s he was beginning to design in the Spanish Colonial Revival, Monterey Revival, French Norman, English Tudor and American Colonial styles dominant during the 1920s and 1930s. He was a popular designer and secured a large number of important commissions, including residences for Joel McCrea, Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg, the Shirley Temple family, Laurence (Buster) Crabbe, and J. Paul Getty.

As his practice grew, Byers hired assistants. Edla Muir started in Byers' office while she was still in high school. She was promoted to draftsman in 1923 following her graduation from high school, and by the late 1920s, Muir had become Byers' primary assistant. After obtaining her architect's license in 1934, she was promoted to the position of Associate Architect, which was her role in the design of the Joel McCrea ranch house. Byers generally prepared the presentation drawings and supervised the construction. Muir completed the remaining drawings, elevations and details.

The significance of John Byers as an architect has been thoroughly evaluated by Herbert Andree in his master's thesis for the University of California, Santa Barbara, *John Byers, Domestic Architect in Southern California*, 1919-c. 1960. Andree has made a convincing case for the significance of John Byers as, "...one of a number of competent designers who worked in Southern California in the period between the two Wars. ... Byers is one of the best of this group we have placed him in." (Andree, 1971: 51) Byers is ranked by Andree just below the widely acknowledged Spanish Colonial Revival master, George Washington Smith, and along with Wallace Neff, Reginald Johnson, Roland Coate, Gordon Kauffman, H. Roy Kelly and Lillian Rice.

Byers designed the McCrea house in the manner of the historic California ranch houses, with a deliberate informality emulating the rambling plan of early California adobe residences, "...handsomely sited in a gently rolling landscape, the long low lines bespeaking the generous use of ground in the sprawling floor plan, the wings stretching out but enclosing, the private and public spaces harmoniously defined." (McCoy & Hitchcock, 1983: 88). The center portion of this Ranch house is built of oversized whitewashed concrete blocks resembling adobe blocks and the wings grow out of each end of the main body of the house at shallow angles, creating a semi-circular plan. These wings, with their low gable and hipped roofs, are covered with board-and-batten siding. In the nature of California adobes, a long veranda (corredor) extends across the front of the main center section and is supported by square posts. Several doors open onto the corredor to allow direct circulation to the outdoors. Large windows with interior window seats emphasize this connection between indoor and outdoor space.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

Perhaps the most influential proponent of the California Ranch House style was Cliff May, who designed his first Ranch style house in San Diego in 1932. While May's designs were inspired principally by the Spanish-Mexican Colonial style of rural vernacular architecture, they were not intended to read as replicas or as efforts in period revivalism. Rather, his was a free adaptation of the early California style which made reference to the adobe plan and the traditional methods used to describe relationships between internal and external space. This aspect of adobe design, May felt, was particularly well-suited to the California climate and way of life.

In the McCrea house, John Byers indicates a close, if only momentary, kinship with Cliff May and his reading of the California vernacular design tradition. In plan, Byers' design clearly draws inspiration from the open and sprawling characteristics of the Spanish-Mexican Rural Vernacular style. The detailing and architectural treatments refer to the Neocolonial and Colonial-influenced Monterey Style, though without an effort to strictly imitate them. This casual and non-dogmatic combination of stylistic inspirations also became hallmarks of the Cliff May Ranch House style.

Byers was very much enamored with vernacular architecture, and particularly California adobes. He designed and built several adobe houses in the early years of his career, including an exact replica of the del Valle adobe at Camulos in Ventura County, reproduced in Pacific Palisades (1927-28) for Y.R. del Valle. By 1933, when Joel McCrea selected him to design his residence, Byers had already completed numerous commissions in the popular Spanish Colonial, French Norman and Tudor half-timber styles. As a revivalist, Byers was particularly dedicated to the "authentic," and this point of view is clearly played out in his design for the Joel McCrea ranch house and outbuildings. This is seen particularly in the design inspiration he drew from the earlier buildings on the property. The bunkhouse (1890) is a simple ranch building with a low gable roof and board-and-batten siding. Byers quite clearly used this original building and the rural setting to develop his design scheme for the main ranch house. In Byers' writings, he indicated his awareness of other architects using earlier buildings on a site as source material for new buildings.

The majority of Byers' designs of the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly following his adobe period, were exercises in orthodox period revival styles. As indicated by Byers' work both before and after the McCrea house, he was (unlike May) a dedicated period revivalist at heart. Even as May was moving towards combining traditional design concepts with modern details and materials, Byers was renewing his interests in a more conventional sort of period revivalism. Their otherwise divergent approaches appear to have intersected during this brief period in the early 1930s. The ease with which Byers participated in the early development of the Ranch House style is an indication of the close kinship between the Ranch House style and the regional vernacular. As such, the McCrea house can be seen as an important expression of California regionalism and a notable contributor to the evolution of the Ranch House style.

His client probably exerted some influence on the design. Joel McCrea's unassuming personality would not have demanded anything pretentious, and he no doubt desired a comfortable house, but one that would fit into its rural surroundings. The Ranch style was the perfect solution for both the location and client. It is not presently known how many ranch style residences were designed by John Byers, since he destroyed the majority of his drawings in 1960. In his thesis, Andree cites only the McCrea ranch as an example of this style. At this time it can be safely said that the McCrea house is the only known example of Byers experimentation with the Ranch style, contributing rarity to its significance as a fine example of his work.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Verbal Boundary Description [continued]

The 220 acre ranch is located in a narrow valley bounded on the north by rolling hills that reach about 700 feet above sea level; on the south by hills of similar height; on the east by the end of the valley at the head of the Santa Rosa drainage; and on the west by Moorpark Road.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Boundary Justification [continued]

The boundary includes 220 acres of the original 851 acre ranch established in 1890 including the 1890 residence and all of the McCrea Ranch buildings constructed between 1933 and 1939. That portion of the acreage west of the highway containing a residence from ca 1905 is not included in the nomination at this time.

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McCrea, Joel Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Photo Log [continued]

Joel McCrea Ranch
Thousand Oaks
Ventura County, CA

Photographer: Rich Texier

Date of photographs: 10/21/96

Location of negatives: Conejo Recreation and Park District, 155 E. Wilbur Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

- 1 Main residence, north wing and portion of center section, west elevation, facing east
- 2 Main residence, center section and portion of south wing, west elevation, facing east
- 3 Main residence, south wing, west elevation, facing east
- 4 Main residence, south elevation with maid's residence on right, facing north
- 5 Main residence and front lawn area, facing east
- 6 Maid's residence, west elevation, facing east
- 7 Walkway, bridge and tree house, facing west
- 8 Pool house/cabaña, facing west
- 9 Dumortier bunkhouse, west elevation, facing east
- 10 Milkhouse, northwest elevation, facing south
- 11 Shop, northeast elevation, facing west
- 12 Upper barn, east elevation, facing west
- 13 Lower barn, south elevation, facing north
- 14 Corral and cattle chute north of lower barn, facing south
- 15 Ranch lands and private road, facing east
- 16 Ranch lands, facing east with main residence at end of road surrounded by trees
- 17 Main house with Joel and Frances Dee McCrea in front, facing south, ca 1950

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McCrea, Joel, Ranch, Ventura County, CA — Photo Log [continued]

Joel McCrea Ranch
Thousand Oaks
Ventura County, CA

Photographer: Rich Texier

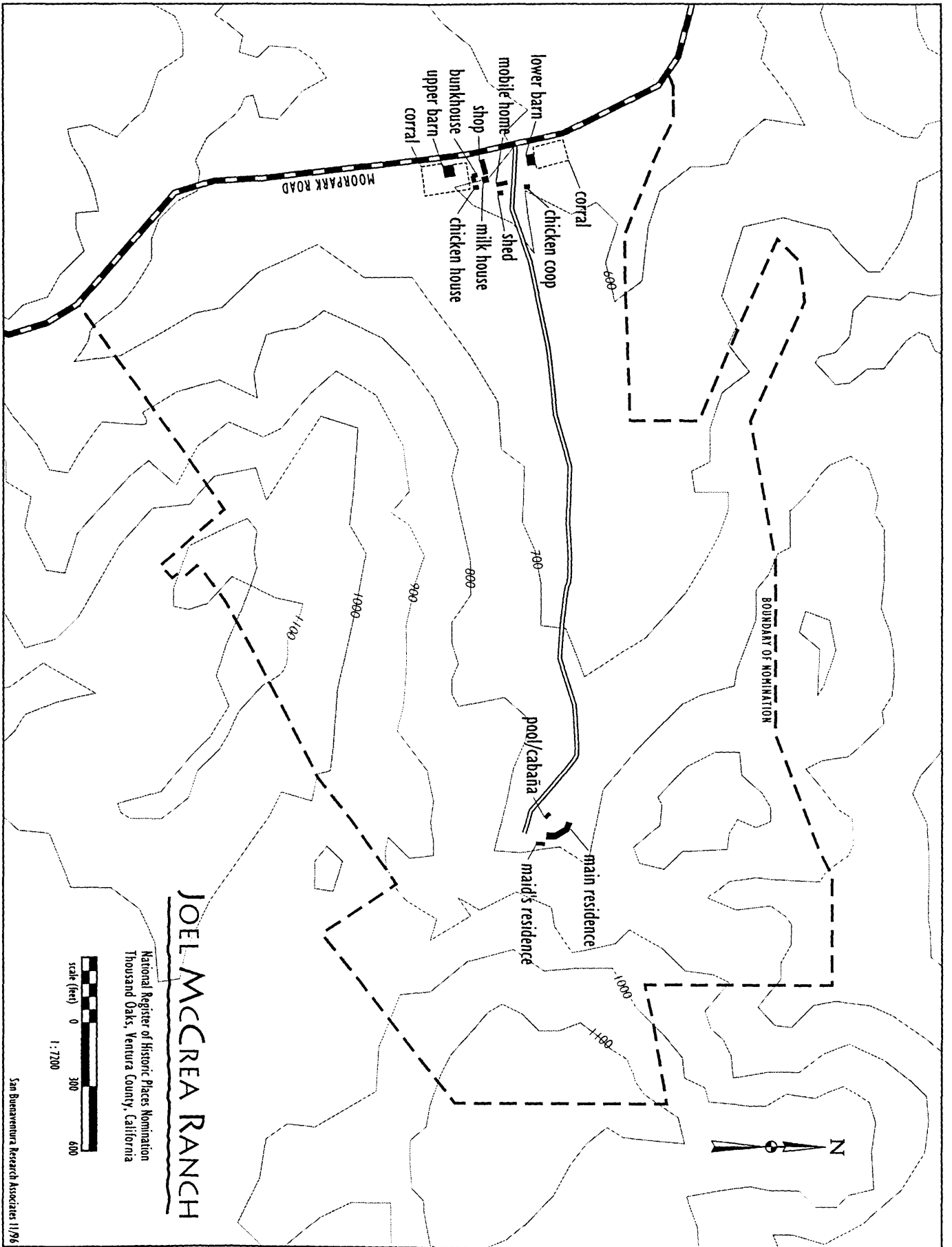
Date of photographs: 1/21/97

Location of negatives: Conejo Recreation and Park District, 155 E. Wilbur Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

18 Mobile home and metal shed, northwest elevation, facing east

19 Chicken house, northeast elevation, facing south

20 Chicken coop, southwest elevation, facing northeast



JOEL MCCREA RANCH

National Register of Historic Places Nomination
 Thousand Oaks, Ventura County, California

