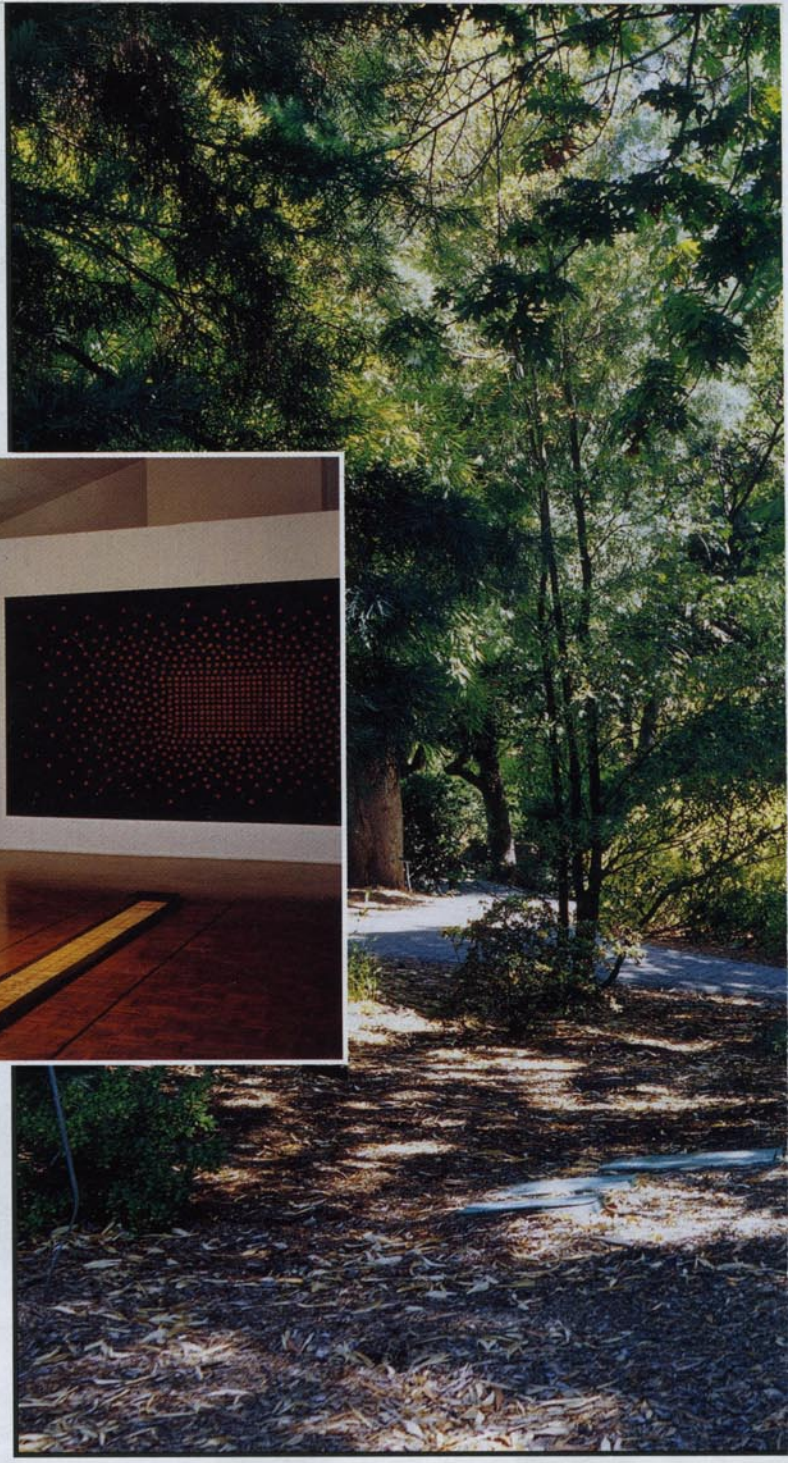
Art Appreciation

BY MINAL GANDHI

Saratoga's Villa Montalvo has an artistic pedigree, but looks forward to the future

Villa Montalvo stands before the lush, rolling hills of Saratoga, in a quaint area where the air seems cleaner, the sun seems brighter and a bird's song seems louder than usual. It's the grand centerpiece in a grand setting, the home of Montalvo, Silicon Valley's multi-disciplinary center for the arts. • Perhaps it's the surroundings that give Montalvo a characteristic all its own — a stillness that is both exciting and calm. But beauty is not its sole offering. And with a new name, a new theme and new events on its menu of activities, the people behind the non-profit organization want us to realize that Montalvo is more than just a pretty place.

The 89-year-old Mediterranean-style villa, built by former U.S. Senator and three-term San Francisco Mayor James Phelan, has always served as a center of artistic, political and social life in Northern California, according to Montalvo historians. Before he died in 1930, Phelan made his very private art salon a more public space. "I would like the property of Saratoga, California, known as Villa Montalvo, to be maintained as a public park open under reasonable restrictions, the buildings and grounds



immediately surrounding the same to be used as far as possible for the development of art, literature, music and architecture by promising students," Phelan wrote in his will. Hence the beginning of Montalvo's association with the arts.

History has its charms. But through the decades, as art galleries, book readings and live-music performances have become popular in San Francisco and other parts of the Bay Area, the organization fears the public has overlooked the similar entertainment that Montalvo has to offer.

"People think of us as a historic landmark or a summer concerts venue," says Elisbeth Challener, Montalvo's executive director. "But what we really are is a lively, dynamic arts center that has something going on every week of the year and something different every day of the week. And I think because the villa is such an extraordinary and beautiful building, sometimes it's hard for people to get past that."

Among its programs, Montalvo offers an arts education and outreach program for K-12 students of Santa Clara County that is mostly free. According to Challener, about half of the 15,000 students who participate in the program come from lower-income, underprivileged households. With the program activities, students are granted opportunities to participate in workshops or matinees. Master classes are also offered, where students are taught by professional visual and literary artists as well as performers.

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Lee Murray, an aerospace engineer who lives in Saratoga, thinks such programs are vital.

"You need to start exposing people to the arts, and I believe you need to start it at an early age," the Montalvo regular says. "[This program] will reach the artists of tomorrow."

Professional artists from around the world are abundant at Montalvo, as the center's 2001-2002 performing arts calendar demonstrates. Yet the major factor that differentiates a musical or literary experience at Montalvo from one elsewhere, says Challener, is the quality of the performing space. Some summer performances are held in the Garden Theatre, a 1,150-seat setting that is located outdoors, behind the villa. For book readings and small performances, guests are directed to the Carriage House, a theater that holds 300 people.

"Quite frankly, when most people come here and have a chance to see a performer in a 300-seat theater, there's no going back to a 2,500-seat theater," Challener says. "I mean, we've spoiled you for life." The two venues are among six locations where Montalvo hosts performances.

The organization, also, is proud of its artist residency program. Founded in 1942 by Anne Dodge Bailhache, Montalvo's program has been around for almost 60 years, making it the oldest artist-residency program west of the Mississippi. Once again, though, Montalvo isn't content to rest on its laurels: Ten new live/work units for artists and a commons building are currently under construction. While residencies have been suspended until construction is complete, Montalvo staff members are in the process of rebuilding the program, as well, to take best advantage of the new facility — and some rare downtime.

As Visual Arts Director for Montalvo, Michelle Rowe-Shields says she understands how necessary the arts really are. Rowe-Shields has been with the organization for about five months and regards artists as "the mirror of our time."

"I think that's the wonderful opportunity for us in presenting contemporary art, because it speaks to the problems or issues of the day, the concerns of the day," she says.

Visitors can view such artwork at Montalvo's free art gallery, a welcoming place where people can be close to the work and learn more about it, according to Rowe-Shields.

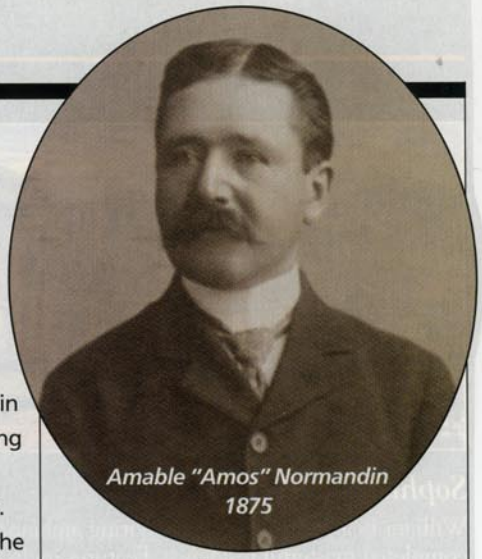
"There's really this sort of dialogue that can occur when coming into the gallery," she says. "And especially here at Montalvo, it's intimate enough that it's not an overwhelming and off-putting experience. You want everyone to come…and engage in a conversation about the work."

Intimacy seems to be the theme at Montalvo. Smaller venues, easy access and a friendly staff are reasons Murray says he keeps going back.

And it's that intimacy Challener promises to keep up. Yet, she says, she hopes hordes of people will take the time to visit.

"What I believe is the essence of the message…is to 'Rediscover Montalvo,'" she says. "Because there is literally something here for everyone." **SJM**

Normandin Family



Amable "Amos" Normandin 1875

It's often said that men love cars. But when referring to the men of the Normandin family, consider this an understatement. For more than 125 years, the Normandins have made a career out of cars. And, surprisingly, their family business started before the birth of America's automobile industry — two decades before.

In 1875, Amable "Amos" Normandin, a blacksmith and sleigh builder from Canada, opened Pacific Carriage Factory in south San Jose, where he was known for building buggy-and-harness carriages.

Finding success in his father's 28-year old enterprise, Amable's son Louis bought the company and renamed it Normandin-Campen, for his and partner Fritz Campen's business. Not long after the acquisition, the company developed and began selling horseless carriages in the early 1900s.

Fast-forward an entire century — after the Great Depression, two world wars, the baby boom and several recessions — to see that the Normandins are involved in the same trade, only the carriages are gone now.

Along Capitol Expressway Auto Mall, just off Highway 87, is Normandin Chrysler Plymouth Jeep, where the long rows of lustrous cars form a rainbow that spans the dealership's 10-acre lot. And those cars sell fast, according to the Normandins. The dealership's sales volume averages more than 100 new vehicles per month, thus earning Chrysler Corporation's Five Star Award for Excellence and making Normandin one of the 10 dealers in the country to earn the Automotive Dealership Service Excellence Award from Good Housekeeping.

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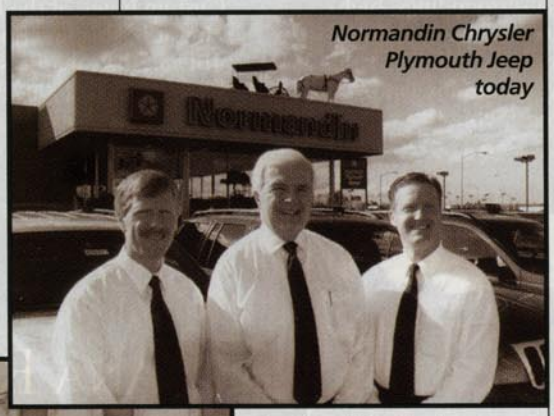
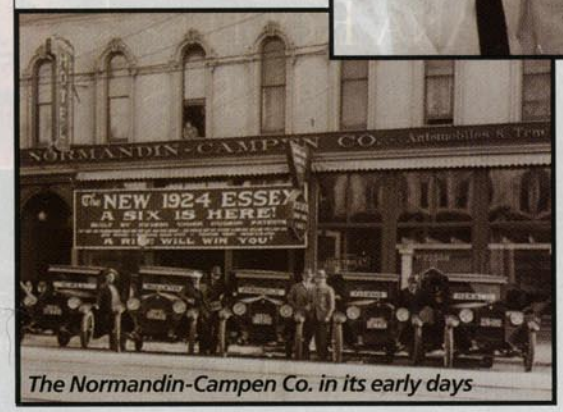
Ask owner Lon Normandin, Amable's great grandson, how the family business gains such recognition and he'll laugh, adding he doesn't like to boast.



Normandin Chrysler Plymouth Jeep today



The Normandin-Campen Co. in its early days

"We've just represented our manufacturer very well and have had a very loving community. We always treated everybody as a part of our family… and I think that goes a long way in doing a good job business-wise."

Such treatment is also put forth in several community activities in which the Normandins have been involved.

Lon's grandfather, Louis, founded the local Better Business Bureau. His father, Irving, was president of the Santa Clara Motor Car Dealers Association. Lon himself is a co-founder and current board member of Heritage Bank. He is also involved in education as a member of Santa Clara University's board of fellows, Bellarmine High School's board of regents and Presentation High School's board of trustees.

"I think the family needs to impact the community by way of giving back and helping," he says. "We have scholarships in four or five different schools for people who can't afford their education. Our focus seems to be on education."

Lon says his sons Mark and Paul participate in community activities as well. However, their time is allotted for their respective jobs of president/general manager and general sales manager of Normandin ChryslerPlymouth Jeep.

Many decades have passed since the days of Amable Normandin's similar "auto" business. But the family, now onto its sixth generation, never forgets, thanks to the 119-year-old horse-and-buggy carriage that stands atop the auto showroom's roof. And it's a business that Lon says the family will not tire of any time soon. SJM *Minal Gandhi*

The Natalie Fund

Natalie, 3½ years

Local family fights bewildering, rare disease

Natalie Aurelio's last coherent word was "Mama," spoken at age four. Seven years have passed, and although the 11-year-old cannot speak or move, she still smiles, giving her parents the motivation needed to battle the rare, debilitating disease their daughter suffers from.

Batten Disease, according to the National Institutes of Health, is the most common form of neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses disorders, or NCLs. At age three, Natalie began experiencing seizures, loss of muscle coordination and progressive mental deterioration, all signs of Late Infantile NCL.

Natalie's parents soon began their crusade for a cure. In 1995, Liz and Dan Aurelio met Dr. William Mobley, the current chairman of Neurology at Stanford University.

It was then that the couple, who had no fund-raising experience, was asked to supply $200,000 for Batten Disease research.

"We thought it was a lot of money, but knew we could do it," recalls Liz.

And they have. With money from a garage sale, bowl-a-thon, celebrity golf tournament and their compassionate San Jose community, the Aurelios raised $200,000 by 1999.

And they'll continue. The Aurelios have since founded the Natalie Fund to enhance awareness of childhood brain diseases such as Batten.

Liz says she's learned much in the recent years. "Mostly: Never give up on a situation, regardless of how hopeless it may seem. If you really believe and try to make things happen, they really will happen."

Cinnabar Hills Golf Club will host the Fifth Annual Natalie Fund Golf Tournament on October 22. Guests include baseball greats Sean Estes and Mike Aldrete. SJM

Minal Gandhi

The family at the Big Sur Marathon Event, April 2001. Julio Fernandez, Liz Aurelio, Dorothy Fernandez, Dave Aurelio, Natalie and Nick Aurelio.