

A folk art trash palace in the shadow of Hearst Castle

 [latimes.com/california/story/2019-07-19/nitt-witt-ridge-folk-art-hearst-castle](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-07-19/nitt-witt-ridge-folk-art-hearst-castle)

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Good morning, and welcome to the Essential California newsletter. It's **Friday, July 19**, and I'm writing from Los Angeles.

Once upon a time, the California coast was a place where one could live strangely and cheaply, out on the fringes.

There were wild, sacred landscapes, like something out of a Robinson Jeffers poem. Rugged places that still had room for restless eccentrics and searchers and cranks.

In 1919, newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst inherited acres upon acres of the most beautiful land California had to offer and began to build one of the great palaces of our time. But this is definitely not a story about William Randolph Hearst, or his castle.

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Our story starts nearly a decade later and eight miles down the road from San Simeon, with a trash collector who was once hired to haul materials up to the Hearst Castle construction site.

Back when all of this was still woods, **Art Beal purchased an acre and a half of pine-covered Cambria hillside for \$500.** It was 1928, and he began by building himself a one-room shack with his own two hands. And then he just kept building.

For the next 50 years, **Beal constructed Nitt Witt Ridge, a home built almost entirely of found objects and trash.** It was a monument to the heights of human ingenuity, or to the depths of folly, depending on whom you asked.

Beal liked to say that he had one rule, and the rule was that you never pay for anything except cement.

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Nitt Witt Ridge, above Cambria, in 1999.

(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Hearst's castle incorporated the highest traditions of Western art and architecture, and the grandest materials that money could buy. Beal's castle was a hallucinatory, improbable cascade of car bumpers, endless Busch beer cans, plaster of Paris archways embedded with abalone shells and dolls, rusted car wheels and driftwood.

The decades Beal spent as a garbage collector allowed him to salvage an endless supply of materials for his pentimento pastiche of a living space, which grew like a vine up into the steep hillside — eventually, there were eight or nine levels, each with a room or so apiece. The famous junk house became the focus of adoration and hatred from the surrounding community.

By the 1970s, Cambria was beginning to take on the polished sheen of a quaint vacation town. Nice, new homes were rising around Beal, bringing the kind of neighbors who would publicly call for the “monstrosity” to be bulldozed out of sight.

“They’re all Johnny-come-latelys,” Beal — by then a crotchety town character — would be known to loudly declare, often while shirtless. (This was when he still wore pants; eventually, there would just be an ever present ratty blue bathrobe, even for wandering down Main Street.)



An undated photo of Art Beal in front of Nitt Witt Ridge.

(Seymour Rosen / © SPACES)

But, along with the angry neighbors, the '70s also brought a different kind of attention: Art people started to take notice and began to celebrate Nitt Witt Ridge as an ingenious, wholly untrained **folk art environment**.

The late Seymour Rosen, a folk art champion who played an integral role in the preservation of the Watts Towers and Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain, was instrumental in getting California State Historical Landmark status for the home. Rosen also founded the nonprofit organization Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments, or SPACES.

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Simon Rodia's Watts Towers is by far the most famous example of a folk art environment in the state, but California is home to numerous idiosyncratic personal worlds, like the aforementioned Salvation Mountain, Nitt Witt Ridge, Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in Simi Valley and Baldassare Forestiere in Fresno.

"I think there are some people that just feel compelled. They feel driven to create," Ann Gappmayer, the archivist at SPACES, said.

In 1973, a then 77-year-old Beal told a Times reporter that he would "never" be finished with the house. "Time means nothing to me," Beal said, tugging on his pointed beard. "The tide comes and goes. Time never returns. I'll worry about time when I'm in the marble orchard."

Beal died at a Morro Bay nursing home in 1992 at the age of 96.

"The neighbors have complained about that place for years. I think when he passed over, they were all going, 'Yippee, now someone will come and tear it down,'" Melody Coe, a curator with the Cambria Historical Society, said. "But they didn't." Instead, a local plumber and his wife bought the crumbling fantasyland in 1999. It's not exactly inhabitable, but they gave tours, billing it as the "anti-Hearst Castle." The residential zoning designation kept them from making it into a gallery or even selling T-shirts outside.

The ramshackle castoff castle went back on the market last year, where it has sat since, with a recent drastic reduction in price. No one seems to know what will become of the place — or whether it's art or an eyesore. Coe, who personally believes that Nitt Witt Ridge is art, said that the house has been a frequent topic of conversation in town, and plenty of people would still love to see it torn down.

"It probably has to do with a basic aspect of folk art," Kathe Tanner, a member of the Cambria Historical Society, told The Times back in 2002, describing the everlasting neighborhood controversy over the place. "It would be wonderful to drive somewhere and look at it, but people don't really want to see it at 7:30 a.m. each day when they get up to get their newspaper."

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And now, **here's what's happening across California:**

TOP STORIES

A growing dispute between the Trump administration and California firefighting agencies over millions of dollars in back pay has ended with both sides agreeing to maintain an existing cooperation agreement, according to officials. At stake was more than \$9 million of a total \$72-million reimbursement request that California made of the U.S. Forest Service after helping to battle wildfires on federal lands in 2018. Those fires included the Camp fire that killed 85 people in November 2018 and the Carr fire that killed a Redding firefighter and seven others that summer. **Los Angeles Times**

A judge has quashed a search warrant used by San Francisco police to conduct surveillance on a journalist's phone. The phone surveillance was part of an investigation into the leak of a police report on the death of Public Defender Jeff Adachi, which also included a raid on a journalist's home. **San Francisco Chronicle**

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L.A. STORIES



Clockwise: Fresh birria at the La Papa Loca stand, food at the Tacos el Chivo stand, garbanzo beans, and fresh sopes at the La Papa Loca stand in the Piñata District.

(Silvia Razgova / For The Times)

In the Piñata District, a street food market is a theater that overwhelms the senses. **Los Angeles Times**

How former Vice President Joe Biden won friends in Hollywood by helping studios get their movies into China. **Los Angeles Times**

L.A.'s greatest jazz night turns 70, led by its 94-year-old matriarch. Hermosa Beach's Lighthouse Cafe (as seen in "La La Land") is led by Gloria Cadena, the widow of its onetime ringleader. **Los Angeles Times**

Netflix lost \$17 billion in value on Thursday as the company's stock tumbled after the announcement of weak subscriber addition numbers. **The Hollywood Reporter**

and their tech pals are storming L.A.'s office market. **Los Angeles Times**

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IMMIGRATION AND THE BORDER

Some Central American asylum seekers forced to await their claims in Mexico under new policies are deciding to make a U-turn. For some, that means returning home saddled with debt they took on to finance the journey north. **Desert Sun**

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Why pick just one? Big Hollywood donors are funding numerous Democrats in a bid to beat Trump. **Los Angeles Times**

Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris will have a debate rematch when they appear July 31 for the second night of CNN's televised Democratic presidential primary debates. Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders will headline the first night of debates. **Los Angeles Times**

CRIME AND COURTS

San Luis Obispo's police chief has been disciplined for leaving her gun in an El Pollo Loco restaurant bathroom, but she will keep her job. **San Luis Obispo Tribune**

A man was arrested at Comic-Con after rescuers lowered him from atop a temporary installation for the TV show "Brooklyn Nine-Nine." **San Diego Union-Tribune**

HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Kern County Chevron site is still leaking a hazardous mix of oil and water after an 800,000-gallon spill. **Los Angeles Times**

(See also: Our previous newsletter coverage of the spill, and the role oil plays in environmentally conscious California.)

Plans to drill a new oil well in the Carrizo Plain National Monument have been halted, in a victory for conservation groups. **San Luis Obispo Tribune**

CALIFORNIA CULTURE

A famous San Francisco skateboarder is in critical condition after suffering a head injury at last week's Dolores Street hill bomb. **SF Gate**

Mass murderer? Cult leader? Musician? Charles Manson's son wrestles with father's legacy. **Los Angeles Times**

The Orange County city of La Habra has opened its first Trader Joe's after years of petitioning for a store. **Orange County Register**

The Warriors may be leaving, but Steph and Ayesha Curry are committed to Oakland. The couple are launching a new family foundation committed to Oakland kids. **San Francisco Chronicle**

The origins of the much-beloved "Dutch Crunch" bread found in the Bay Area. **KQED**

Here's what's on the menu at that pop-up Taco Bell-themed hotel in Palm Springs. **Desert Sun**

CALIFORNIA ALMANAC

Los Angeles: partly sunny, 76. **San Diego:** partly sunny, 71. **San Francisco:** partly sunny, 68. **San Jose:** sunny, 81. **Sacramento:** sunny, 89. More weather is here.

AND FINALLY

| All scenery in California requires distance to give it its highest charm.

— Mark Twain

If you have a memory or story about the Golden State, . (Please keep your story to 100 words.)

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