

THE MAHARAJA OF INDORE

THE WORLD'S RICHEST MAN BUILDS A PALACE IN FORAL PARK

by Diann Marsh



The Maharajah of Indore was said to have been so wealthy when he built his palace at the corner of Heliotrope and Santa Clara that he could plunge his arm up to his elbow into several chests full of precious jewels. In 1937, these treasures had an estimated value of \$20 million.

Why did the Maharajah choose Santa Ana in which to build his eighteenth home? It was reported that he wanted a safe place for his daughter, five-year-old Princess Usha. He and his new bride, Marguerite Branyen, liked Santa Ana's beauty, its quiet, and the promise of restful seclusion. At the time, Allison Honer, who lived in the midst of a small orange grove across the street from the Maharajah property, was one of Orange County's most prominent building contractors. His firm constructed the house, which was designed by Donald Beach Kirby of Balboa Island.

The Santa Ana Register stated, "A man's home is his castle, and the castle being built for the world's richest man, the Maharajah of Indore, in Santa Ana is not only a castle; it is literally a fortress. It will guard that which is more dear to him than all of his income—it will guard the safety and continued well-being of his daughter, Princess Usha." The Register claimed it was the only castle in Western America to house a foreign ruler and his family.

Steel and concrete bars and heavy metal grates were used on all of the windows in the 12-room home. The basic cost of the house was \$50,000, a very large sum during the Depression.

The house was built of frame and stucco, with a high marching wall around the back yard, including

the driveway and attached garage. In 1938, it was still rare to have the garage attached to the house in the fashion seen in almost every new house today. The stairway leading from the front entry hall to the second floor was guarded by a wrought iron gate. Although the house was a fortress, it did not appear that the threat the Maharajah feared came from local citizens, but rather from some foreign danger, because Princess Usha attended Hoover Elementary School with all of the other neighborhood children.

Approximately \$150,000 was spent on the furnishings and works of art. Tiger-skin rugs and leopard-skin draperies added an exotic touch, while a polished green rubber floor was covered by custom woven white carpets. Huge contemporary divans, an 11-piece dining room set, and eight-and-a-half-foot copper pillar lamps were among the new furnishings. The living room is 28 by 34 feet and contained a fireplace clad in polished glass. The walls of the second floor hallway were covered with scarlet grass cloth. A servant slept in the hall, outside Princess Usha's door, every night. A beautifully-tiled swimming pool

was the centerpiece of the backyard and could be viewed from the 80-foot-long terrace at the rear of the second floor.

Marguerite Lawler Branyen met the Maharajah in 1937, at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles.

The prince managed to assemble one of the most important private collections of Modernist furniture and decorative arts from the 1920s and 1930s in the world.

Still in mourning for his first wife who had recently died, he had been traveling with his five-year-old daughter, Princess Usha, when he had a severe asthma attack. Marguerite, who was divorced from her first husband, John Branyen, a Minneapolis jeweler, had worked as a stewardess for the Union Pacific before settling in Los Angeles.

After the Maharajah recovered, he took her to Europe as a nurse for his daughter. They were married on September 19, 1938.

When the house was finished in 1938, the Prince, whose proper name was Sir Yeshwant Holkar, his new bride, Marguerite, Princess Usha, and several servants moved into the striking Moderne residence. While in Santa Ana, the Holkars did little formal entertaining but did have a small circle of friends that included the Honers and attorney Dave Howell and his wife. According to Donald Honer, Princess Usha fit in well with the children in the neighborhood and they treated her the same as they treated everyone else. The Princess and Helen Honer became life-long friends, and still correspond, even though the Princess lives in India and Helen lives in Italy.

The Holkars had been in Santa Ana for only a year when they announced that they would be "returning to India to be of service to his emperor and his country." Princess Usha stayed in the house on Heliotrope with her governess, who was named her legal guardian.

Life in India was beyond anything Marguerite had dreamed.





MAHARAJEE HOLKAR, American wife of the Maharajah of Indore, India, and her seven-year-old daughter, Princess Usha, who arrived by flying-boat from the United States yesterday on their way home to India.



(Above, front row right) Princess Usha at a birthday party on Spurgeon Street in Santa Ana in 1940 and (right) in traditional dress.



She was mistress of the Maharajah's 17 mansions, presided over a \$3 million palace with 200 servants, and had the use of her husband's 15 cars. She had her pick of any of the jewelry in the family collection, said to have been worth at least \$20 million. The servants in the palace, which had its own electric plant and was air-conditioned, wore gold-embroidered uniforms.

The Holkar's daily schedule usually began at noon with baths. After reading the Bombay Chronicle, they would have lunch in bed. Rarely were they alone because people were always dropping in. The Maharajah had a passion for playing bridge (his friends called him the Indore Sport), which they would usually do until afternoon tea. After tea they would

swim, play tennis, go calling, or play golf with their friends. In the evening they would see a movie in their own movie theatre or go to Whow, the nearest town. Marguerite commented that they rarely got to bed before 2 a.m., because they usually had company. They spent a great deal of time in their home at Fontainebleau, outside of Paris. Sometimes they went on hunting trips, with Marguerite's record adding up to 30 tigers, 8 panthers, and one bear.

Marguerite yearned for a good old American hot dog and a trolley ride. She flew back to the United States in 1942 and moved into the Holkar's second home at Emerald Bay. A year later the Maharajah took up residence in Reno, where he filed for divorce. It was reported that he spent the required

six weeks riding on a donkey and carrying a fishing rod. Ten hours after he got his divorce from Marguerite, he married Mrs. Euphemia Watt Crane. She became the new Maharanee.

Marguerite was given the home on Heliotrope and the house at Emerald Bay. Surprisingly, she was also given Princess Usha, whom she legally adopted. A substantial amount of alimony and jewelry were also a part of the divorce settlement. Although Marguerite denied the rumors, it was hinted that the cause of domestic discord was not mental cruelty, but the failure to produce an heir.

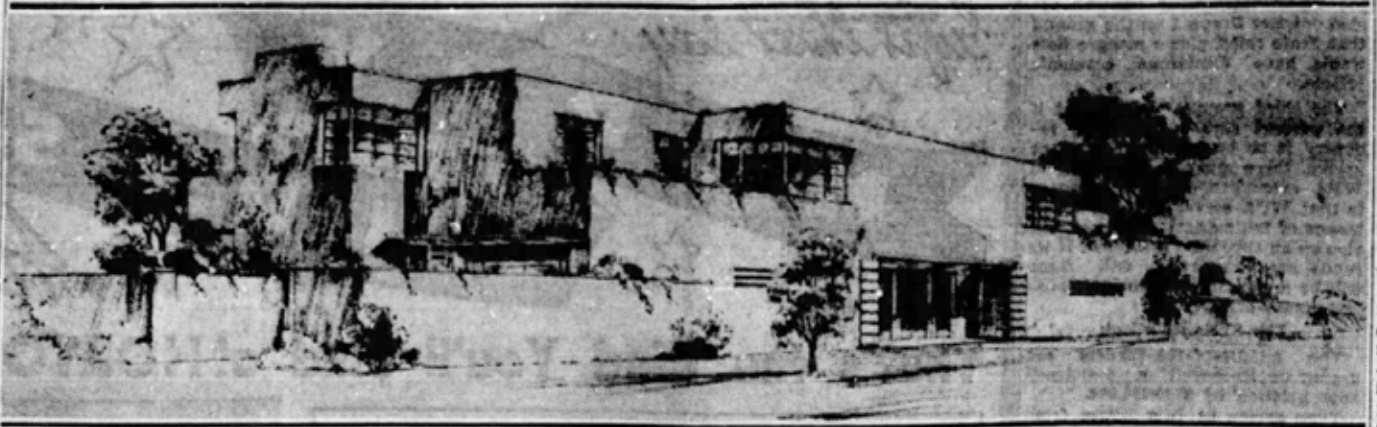
Marguerite, a truly remarkable woman who refused to be defeated by life, wanted to be a part of America again, so she joined the Waves. She is reported to have said, "I'm truly happy now." She was sent to the Hunter College training center in New York, where she lived the life of a typical trainee. Ten-year-old Princess Usha went back to India because Marguerite felt that she would be happier and less lonely if she lived with her father and his new family.

Marguerite met Charles W. Masters, a Santa Ana postman who was in the Coast Guard, and they fell in love immediately. In 1945, after they both



(Above) Interior Entry of the Maharaja's Heliotrope art moderne house. (Right) One of two 47-carot "Pearls of Indore" diamonds. They were sold to Harry Winston in 1946.

Maharaja's \$50,000 Palace To Be Built In Santa Ana



Pictured above is Architect Donald Beach Kirby's conception of how the \$50,000 home being built for "M. L. Holkar", the Maharaja of Indore, India, by Allison Honer at the southeast corner of Heliotrope Drive and Santa Clara avenue, will look. Of frame and stucco construction, the "palace" that will house the Maharaja's five-year-old daughter and her friends will be surrounded by a masonry wall, and is reported to be one of a number of establishments in various parts of the world, owned by the wealthy Hindu prince. The house will contain 12 rooms with a living room 25 by 32 feet, and bedrooms 18 by 25 feet. An 80 foot deck, enclosed with glass will be one of the unusual features of the house. Windows of the home will be of plate glass and will have cast iron grilles that will be ornamental as well as protective. Double floors will be installed in the house and these covered with sheet rubber. The house itself will cost \$40,000, with an additional \$10,000 being added in special features that will include a tile pool at the rear of the establishment.

received honorable discharges, they slipped away to Las Vegas, Nevada, and were married by a Justice of the Peace.

They returned to the house on Heliotrope in Santa Ana, where they lived for several years. In 1952, the house and most of the furnishings went on the auction block. Marguerite felt that the house was too large for her and her doctor recommended that she move to a drier climate. The high taxes and upkeep of the house had become a burden for her also.

What happened to all of the people whose lives were woven together in this stranger-than-fiction story? Marguerite

lived out her days in Corona del Mar (California), passing away in 1963. (*She is interred at Fairhaven Memorial Park in Santa Ana*). Tukoji Rao Holkar, Yeshwant's father, married Nancy Ann Miller of Seattle, Washington. They lived in India and had four children. Yeshwant Holkar and his wife had a son, Prince Richard, in 1944. He gave up the throne of the State of Indore to Princess Usha, rather than his son. He

went to work for the United Nations and died in 1959. Princess Usha still resides in the palace in India. (*She will be 87 years old in October*).

The house on Heliotrope still presents a private face to the world. It is beautifully-maintained and has changed little since Princess Usha ran through the rooms with her young friends. The neighborhood is lined with fine homes set amid manicured lawns — a fitting setting for a Princess.

—Diann Marsh is the author of *Santa Ana (An Illustrated History)*. Printed with permission.



The Maharaja and his first wife, Maharani Sanyogita, on the set of "The Plainsman", with Gary Cooper and Cecil B. DeMille, 1936.