

Thunderbird Lodge – a glimpse into old Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – Along the East Shore of Lake Tahoe is one of Nevada's most famous houses that belonged to a man few have heard of.

The Thunderbird Lodge was George Whittell's escape from the world and especially people.

And while Howard Hughes and William Randolph Hearst Jr. were his peers – especially in terms of wealth – Whittell did not leave a legacy like those men did. He was a bit eccentric and liked to keep to himself.

What he left is a swath of undeveloped land along with a house made of native wood and rock that sits on a pristine piece of Lake Tahoe shoreline.



The Thunderbird Lodge in Incline Village is open for tours throughout the summer.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

Whittell was born into San Francisco money and never had to work. He did serve in World War I.

Against his parents' wishes he joined the Barnum and Bailey Circus. His love of big animals continued long after that stint. He had a barn built at Thunderbird for his elephants that had Dutch doors so they would have a lake view. There was even a fireplace to keep them warm.

But the climate in and elevation of Tahoe didn't suit these animals; so back to his Woodside estate they went.

Bill the Lion, though, was known to roam the grounds in Tahoe. And stories are that overnight guests might wake to a big kiss from the wild cat.

At one point Whittell owned 40,000 acres on the Nevada side of Tahoe that included 24 miles of shoreline. After the 1929 stock market crash the Carson & Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company and other landholders needed cash. Whittell was able to buy much of it for 6 cents an acre.

His property went from the state line on the North Shore to Zephyr Cove. That is how Whittell High School got its name.

Construction on the estate began in 1936. In the 1980s Jack Dreyfus bought the property and added on. However, at the time the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency said the construction could not be historical in nature. That policy has been reversed, and if the addition were built now, it would have to match the original architecture.

Having the building be of two distinct time periods allows the visitor to know what is old and what is new. Part of the new is built on top of what was a deck for Whittell.

The old is not so spectacular inside – especially the living area. What is interesting is the long tunnel that is rock lined that has a couple escape routes. One is to the game room. Docents said Whittell would disappear from poker games if he were losing.

A small, dark room in the tunnel is not on the plans for the house. Samples of the soot from the ceiling revealed this was where opium was smoked.

The tunnel also leads to the boathouse where the Thunderbird yacht is moored.

In 1939, John Hacker, a Naval architect, designed the vessel to resemble Whittell's personal DC-2 aircraft and his many Duesenbergs automobiles. It has two vintage V-12 Allison Aircraft engines. Jet fuel is available at the Tahoe City Marina.

When first built the Thunderbird cost \$87,000. That is about \$3.3 million in today's dollars. It is 55-feet long and made of Honduran mahogany.

To charter the boat it costs \$5,000 an hour. It gets one-quarter mile per gallon.

Today the Thunderbird Preservation Society owns the estate, which includes about 6 acres, the house and five cottages, and the yacht.

Susan Grove, lodge manager, said the society is trying to change its image from being elitist to being more inclusive. One way to do that is to create a \$20 million endowment (\$6 million is in the bank) so from that pot the annual expenses could be paid. She said it costs \$1 million to maintain the site, the boat, pay off the loan on the boat and pay the few employees. (Most of the work is done by volunteers – even the executive director works for free.)

The Dreyfus side of the estate is where the bulk of the fundraising events take place – from cocktail parties for society members to weddings to winemaker dinners. This room is what was their great room. Walls of windows look onto the shimmering lake.

Docents said the Dreyfuses never spent the night at the house because they believed it was haunted.

The Dreyfus kitchen has been changed a bit so it is a working commercial kitchen. The Whittell kitchen looks much like it would have decades ago with the old appliances. But it was functional, with an island that has a marble top.

Earlier this month the original fountain was finally restored at a cost of \$300,000. But what remains is an odd looking addition from the Dreyfus-period.

“It’s expensive to keep things up. We want to do things historically accurate,” Grove told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Whittell had three wives, but no children. When he died in 1969 he left the bulk of his estate, which was valued at more than \$300 million, to animal rights organizations.

It was in 1999 that the preservation society got the Thunderbird Lodge. Tours began in 2002.

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Notes:

- Tours are \$39 if starting by land. There are also tours via the old Tahoe out of the Tahoe Keys Marina and kayak tours starting in Tahoe City.
- Tours are May-October.
- More info is online.
- The Thunderbird Yacht will be at South Tahoe Wooden Boat Classic at Tahoe Keys Marina July 26-27. More info is online.

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