

Preliminary Draft of slide show script

A Brief History of The San Diego Self-Realization Fellowship Temple

*Research by Patrick Murphy and Dominic Alessio
With information and stories gathered from:*

The City of San Diego;
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Inner Culture Magazine;
Autobiography of a Yogi;
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Pictorial History of Self-Realization Fellowship;
The Bishops Episcopal School;
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And an earlier slide show on the temple by Edward Wiatt.

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*The History of The San Diego
Self-Realization Fellowship Temple*

On Sunday, September 5th 1943, just four days before Allied forces stormed ashore at Salerno Italy against the heavy German resistance, a peaceful little Church of All Religions overlooking San Diego Bay was dedicated by Paramahansa Yogananda.

Despite wartime gas rationing, visitors filled with enthusiasm for the liberating teachings of this God realized Master, packed the church for the 11 am dedication and ensuing meetings at 3 and 8 pm.

As light from the blue and gold draped windows reflected in large gold framed mirrors and highlighted figures of Jesus, Babaji, Krishna, St. Francis and others in the flower filled niches, Paramahansaji prayed, “Heavenly Father, may this church be blessed with the vibrations of Self perception of thy presence, and when we discuss theology and philosophy may we not get side tracked to the pitfalls of intellectual egotism and blind emotion, but travel straight to the highway of Self Realization and truth which leads to Thee.”

Guest speakers including prominent Los Angeles Attorney Arthur Kennedy, who commented that “this was an historic event...in historic territory; for it is recorded that in the early days of California it was from this very vicinity that the cross of God was carried up the Kings Highway by the padres. So we are right here where one form of religion started spreading just a few hundred years ago and it is very appropriate that there should be a Church of All Religions in this sacred place.”

Antonia Brico, the first woman to achieve international fame as a conductor of symphony orchestras commented, “I believe in the things that Paramahansaji tells us. I consider it a great privilege to have had this valuable help from my master and I can only wish that those of you who don’t know what to do with your lives, and those of your children might have the advice and backing morally and spiritually, of this enlightened master.”

Other speakers that day included an L. A. Superior Court Judge; a Professor of Languages, from Andhra Research University in India; publisher Douglas K. DeVoorss; Dr. Lloyd Kennell of San Diego; Rabbi Moise Bergman of the San Diego Synagogue and Dr. M. W. Lewis of Boston.

Dr. Lewis shown here in this photo with Paramahansaji, brother Bhaktananda, and Dr. Kennell, was one of Paramahansaji’s first American students. He offered a heartfelt tribute to the Master as he discussed the effect which the SRF teachings have had on his life. Dr. Lewis said, “I think Paramahansaji’s most potent weapon is the example of his wonderful character. I want to say that twenty-three years ago when he first came to America, he also dedicated a temple to God – and that temple was right in my soul. That light has been with me ever since and has been my inspiration.”

This beautiful, simple building which is today the San Diego Temple, was originally designed for the Episcopal Bishops School in 1909 by famed architect Irving Gill.

Gill, who had studied with Architect Louis Sullivan, believed that buildings should be simple, unified pieces of sculpture in which the form follows the function. During his years on the west coast, Gill designed many buildings including the Bishops School in La Jolla, the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, and the Christian Science Church in Coronado.

Gill studied the early California Missions and was impressed with their simplicity of line and design. He pioneered a new construction technique known today as “tilt up construction.” These photos taken by Gill show how slabs of concrete were poured on large wooden tables tilted to an angle of 15 degrees by supporting jacks. On the table were rows of hollow tiles used to reduce the weight of the massive concrete slab walls. After the concrete cured the walls were raised to the vertical position by donkey engine – small portable machines which could be heard blocks away, huffing and puffing up and down the eucalyptus lined canyons.

In August 1920, which our current chapel was serving as a gym for the girls of the Bishops School, a young Indian yogi named Swami Yogananda was sailing for America. He came as the guest speaker of the International Congress of Religious Liberals which was meeting that year in Boston. But his larger role was to spread the soul liberating teachings Kriya Yoga.

Four years after his arrival in Boston, after countless speaking tours crisscrossing America, Swamaji acquired property atop Mt. Washington in Los Angeles. This building is today the world headquarters of Self Realization Fellowship.

In 1932 he met a famous American businessman Mr. James J. Lynn of Kansas City, who became an advanced devotee of the Master.

In 1937, while Yogananda was visiting India and his Guru Swami Sri Yukteswar for the last time, Mr. Lynn had a beautiful hermitage build as a gift for the Master, along the cliffs in Encinitas, California. The beautiful Spanish style building was erected near the spot where Paramahansaji and Mr. Lynn used to stop for picnics and meditation while on trips to San Diego.

In 1938 Paramahansaji built the first official SRF church, known as the Golden Lotus Temple, it was situated just north of the hermitage on a bluff overlooking the ocean. In this beautiful place he loved to worship God with SRF students and friends.

Unfortunately soil erosion caused by tremendous pacific storms in 1941 undermined the temple and it had to be dismantled. Although he was deeply saddened, he took the adversity as a sign from God that he should expand elsewhere.

And so it was that in 1942, Paramahansaji built the next SRF temple in Hollywood, California. He personally supervised the construction which was carried out by him and monastic and lay disciples of the SRF order.

One day, Paramahansaji said to one of his students, Dr. Kennell a San Diego physician, “I think we should have a temple in San Diego. Please start looking for a spot for us.” Dr. and Mrs. Kennell found several sites, but after seeing the one at First and Redwood Street, Master said, “I don’t want to see any others. This is the spot for us.”

After the Bishops school had moved to a larger campus in La Jolla, the building was used for various functions. The former gym served as a hot house, and later as an umbrella factory. The former principle’s quarters were occupied by a retired sea captain who added the second story for a better view of the bay.

When SRF purchased the property in 1943 for \$7,500, the old gym was filled with debris which yielded an unusual find. As the story goes, Paramahansaji had been looking for a washing machine but was unable to purchase one because of wartime shortages. While Durga Ma, an SRF renouncement, and

some other volunteers were cleaning out the old junk they just happen to find the parts to an almost new washer.

The same wartime shortages made other building materials hard to find. In fact plywood was in such short supply that SRF had to obtain a special permit to buy \$50 worth of it to complete the construction of the altar and pulpits.

Soon after the building was purchased by SRF, Dr. Kennel, his wife Nikki and their son Clifford were given permission to live in the area above the new sanctuary. Because this area had been laid out as classrooms they required major reworking by Dr. Kennel who spent several thousand dollars removing partitions, adding a kitchen, bathrooms, hardwood floors, and a heating system.

From the dedication in 1943 to 1950 Paramahansaji and Dr. Kennel alternated as speakers at the temple.

In October 1950 Master retired to the desert to complete his writings and asked Dr. Lewis to take his place. The Lewis's had moved from Boston to the Encinitas hermitage in 1945 at Master's request. And Dr. Lewis had been conducting Thursday night classes in the Encinitas hermitage in 1946.

Although Dr. Lewis had a wonderful sense of humor, he was still quite shy about public speaking. The first Sunday he was to speak in San Diego was the Sunday that Paramahansaji was supposed to conduct the service. When the curtains parted and revealed Dr. Lewis some in the congregation looked dismayed. Seeing that, Dr. Lewis said, "You probably are disappointed to see me here instead of the Master. I want you to know that I'm just as disappointed as you are."

Dr. Lewis began alternating Sunday service with Dr. Kennel until Dr. Kennel's death in 1958. Mrs. Kennel continued to live here until she moved to the Hollywood temple in 1975.

At Dr. Lewis' request, Dr. Kennel gave up the little garage he had built behind the church. It was converted into the first Sunday School room.. For 17 years following the dedication all the Sunday School classes for all the age groups were held in this single room.

The current Sunday School Program which occupies classrooms above the sanctuary and in the adjacent house serves about 55 students ages 4 to 15. The program is an adaptation of the services held in the temple and consists of prayer and meditation, energization exercises, spiritual stories, lessons and crafts. Many of the classes are held outdoors.

Dr. Lewis remained in charge of the temple until in passing in 1960. After that his wife Mildred Lewis moved into the two story apartment which Mrs. Kennel had refurbished for her. She lived here attending service and counseling devotees until her passing in 1988.

Before Paramahansaji purchased the property, the Bishop's school classrooms at the east end of the building had been converted into a small apartment. In 1973 these rooms were converted back into classrooms. The former bedroom which had also been used as a banquet room in Master's time became a Sunday School room. Following Sunday services Master used to host luncheons here which were attended by students and friends including famed opera star Galacurchi and Dr.Evens Wentz who wrote the Preface to Master's Autobiography. Master also used this room for counseling. The former dining room became a book room. The book room was later moved to its present location at the northeast corner of the building.

There have been many improvements over the years; Master planted the cypress trees which line the walkway leading to the front of the temple. A wrought iron handrail was installed by Mr. Clifford

Kennell, and a small minister's room was added at the rear of the temple. Master meditated in this room before services and also counseled students here.

A large reflective fish pool in the front lawn was removed by bulldozers to create the open lawn area. And in 1992 new meditation gardens replaced this area at the rear of the small Sunday School building.

The history of the San Diego temple is an unfinished one. Today the building is bursting at the seams. To accommodate all the devotees, plans are being readied for a large overflow room above the sanctuary. And someday, it is hoped, the plan to erect a larger temple in front of the present building will become a reality.

In his Autobiography of a Yogi Master writes:

In the autumn of 1861 Mahavatar Babaji directed Lahiri Mahasaya to bring spiritual solace through Kriya Yoga to earnest seekers. "The millions who are encumbered by family ties and heavy worldly duties," he said, "will take new heart from you, a householder like themselves. You must guide them to see that the highest yogic attainments are not barred to the family man. Even in the world the yogi who faithfully discharges his responsibilities, without personal motive or attachment, treads the sure path of enlightenment."

It is to that attainment that people from all walks of life attend meditation services at the San Diego Temple each week.