

Efforts under way to preserve ashram

Mystical mountain 'monastery' marked for removal under wilderness plan, but USFS officials say that won't happen

By Julian Lukins
News Staff

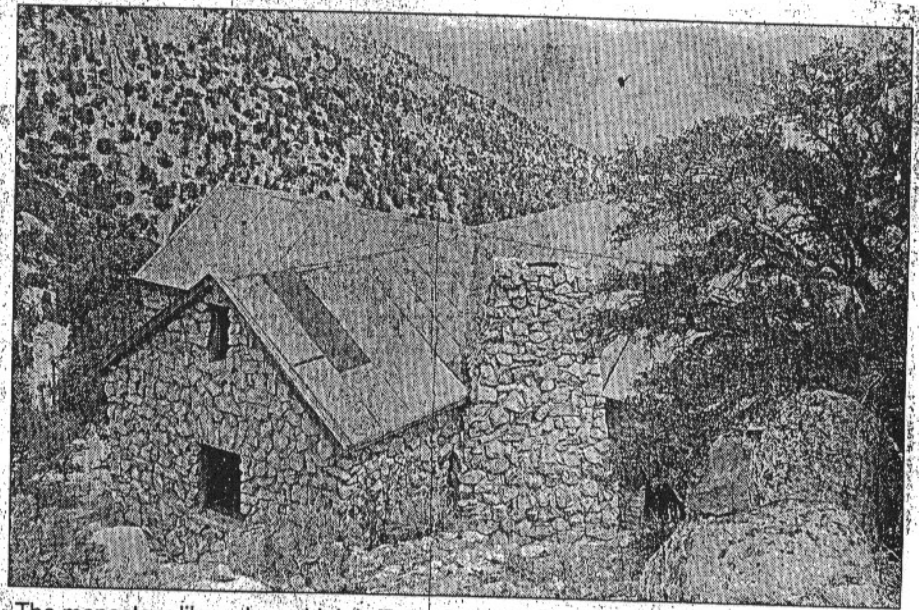
Archeologists are campaigning to preserve a unique mountain "monastery" which has been threatened with demoli-

tion under a new wilderness plan.

The fascinating stone monastery — known as an ashram — high in Tuttle Creek Canyon above Lone Pine, was built more than a half-century ago by a New Age guru and his followers. Since then, it has become a place of pilgrimage as well as a lonely site of curiosity, tucked away in the Sierra Nevada several miles west of the Alabama Hills.

But, while hikers enjoy the challenge of trekking up to the ashram along a scenic trail, the U.S. Forest Service's new wilderness plan has tagged the isolated ashram for possible removal.

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The monastery-like ashram high in Tuttle Creek Canyon above Lone Pine draws many visitors. The cross-shaped building, includes an inscribed altar and stone fireplace.
Photo by Julian Lukins

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Some conservationists claim the ashram is out-of-setting with the pristine wilderness area, but others point out that it was built long before tough new wilderness regulations applied. In fact, the ashram's defenders claim, how can it be a truly pristine wilderness area if man has already built a structure there?

Meanwhile, Linda Reynolds, an archeologist with the Inyo National Forest based in Bishop, confirmed the ashram had been included in the Forest Service's wilderness management plan. She said the ashram was put in a category of structures to be removed, but added: "That is seriously in error."

Reynolds said she would be fighting for the ashram to be protected, adding it had been nominated for the National Register of Historic Places, which would guard it against the threat of demolition.

Saying the ashram had been placed on the "removal" list without any proper evaluation, Reynolds said the proposal was currently under review. "The Forest Service would be looking at preserving this," she continued. "It is a unique architectural property."

The ashram, although now abandoned, still attracts many visitors.

The ashram — meaning a place of religious retreat — was built by Dr. Franklin Merrell-Wolff, a philosopher and psychologist who pondered life's mysteries. It attracted a number of local followers, who some referred to as his "disciples." Described as a great storyteller and viewed by many locals as somewhat of a mysterious figure, Dr. Wolff lived in the Sierra foothills near Tuttle Creek Canyon for almost 60 years. Influenced by Hindu,

Buddhist and other philosophies of "enlightenment," Dr. Wolff wrote more than a thousand books on spiritual "disciplines" and philosophy.

Born in Pasadena in 1887, his father was a Methodist minister. Wolff first came to Lone Pine in 1928 and claimed to have an "experience of realization" a few years later. Living in a remote ranch house without electricity or telephone, he was considered rather strange and eccentric by many of the more down-to-earth townsfolk living in the valley floor. Desiring to build his own spiritual center in the mountains, Wolff and his team of volunteers constructed the cross-shaped ashram at 8,000 feet in the canyon. Constructed of stone and wood, the unique monastery has weathered the test of time for the past half-century or more. Inside, visitors can view the

dome-style roof, stone fireplace and stone altar — on which an inscription invites pilgrims to pray.

Over time, the ashram has been vandalized by people looking for firewood. But, even to this day, followers of Wolff's teachings remain dedicated to restoring and preserving it.

While followers of Wolff prayed him as a compassionate, caring soul who lived life to the fullest, others felt he was "revered" too much.

He died in the mid-1980s at the age of 97, but even in death an aura of mystery surrounded him. He reportedly requested that the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" be read aloud to him as he died because, he said, he wanted to die "fully aware."

One thing appears sure, ashram or no ashram, the legend of Dr. Wolff seems certain to live on.

Letters to the Editor

More on the Ashram

Re article: June 12, "Efforts Under Way to Preserve Ashram."

I was delighted to read this article about the ashram built by my grandfather, Franklin F. Wolff (Franklin Merrell-Wolff). He and some friends began this project in 1930!

I must admit I was surprised that the author, Julian Lukins, didn't bother to interview me about this. I could have provided some rather interesting details as well as helped correct a couple of errors. For example, Wolff did not write 1,000 books! And, he was a professor of philosophy and mathematics with only a minor in psychology, having attended Stanford and Harvard and returning to Stanford to teach mathematics. He died at age 98 in October, 1985. And I would argue regarding the term "New Age Guru": he was adamant that he was not a guru and the present use of the term "New Age" didn't come into being until 1960-plus. He did his lecturing and student work from 1924 to 1958. Work on the ashram was stopped in 1950.

I am amazed and saddened that the Forest Service would once again consider demolishing this building! When my grandfather began building, it was because the Forest Service said it was necessary to have a building there if he wanted to be there in the summers. However, I have been assured that the town's people will do their best to support its preservation at least, and, perhaps and finally, as an Historic Monument. The term "Ashram" was a later term, it was initially called a school. What is now called World Religions on the college level was what was studied.

Wolff's last books have recently been republished by SUNY Press, and are being translated into French, German, Spanish and Russian! I am writing a biography and in that process have collected quite a lot of information about the Ashram. I live in Lone Pine three or four months every year and then return to Phoenix where I teach counseling psychology in a community college.

Thank you for printing the article. I hope it gathers interest.

P.S. He always had electricity with a generator!

Dorothy B. Leonard,
Lone Pine

EDITOR'S NOTE — In all his research on the subject, no one told Mr. Lukins that Mr. Wolff's granddaughter lives in Lone Pine on a part-time basis, or else he certainly would have relied on her for more accurate information. Thanks for clearing the record. Ms. Leonard