

BENNETT RANCH HOUSE

The home of Harvey and Frances Bennett was originally located at the corner of 2nd Street and Cherry Avenue and is the only remaining turn-of-the-century ranch house in El Toro. Harvey's father, Charles F. Bennett of Tustin, built the house about 1908. He had purchased the land to grow navel oranges. Charles Bennett constructed the house to provide a home for a live-in caretaker to oversee his El Toro holdings.

In 1910, Charles Bennett contracted pneumonia and his son, Harvey, left high school to become the ranch foreman. This was quite a sacrifice for Harvey who had planned to attend UC Berkeley. Harvey experimented with improving strains of citrus and developed several new species of oranges and lemons. He served on the Tustin Hills Citrus Associations Board, the Villa Park Lemon Association Board, and the Orange County Farm Bureau. Together with Raymond Prothero, Sr., Harvey worked to bring Metropolitan Water District water to El Toro for orchard irrigation.

Frances McDonnell of Santa Ana, with other high school girls, worked during the summers on the Bennett Ranch pitting apricots. This was how the girls earned money for their schoolbooks and clothes. Frances had known Harvey in high school, and they were married in October 1913 and spent their honeymoon at Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. Harvey must have been pretty convincing because Frances had already been accepted into the nursing program at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles.

After their marriage, Frances led a busy life raising six children, cooking, washing, and sewing for the family and ranch hands. She taught Sunday School at St. George's Episcopal Mission. Frances was a member of the Ladies Aide Society (which later became the El Toro Women's Club) and also the Santa Ana Ebell Club.

The house was built in the American Craftsman bungalow style popular at the time. The exterior was thrown stucco over chicken wire. The distinctive sloping roof line was known as an "airplane" roof, copied after a style seen by Charles Bennett's brother-in-law and probably inspired by the barnstorming air shows.

The house originally consisted of a living room, dining room, kitchen, 2 bedrooms, a bathroom where the hall closet is now, and three small rooms upstairs. The two back bedrooms were added and the bathroom was relocated about 1928. A kitchen service porch was also added and a fruit cellar was built under the dining room area for fresh fruit and preserves.

This is the way the original cement porch looked, complete with cobblestone pilasters. Frances Bennett set a fern on the pilaster with the missing upper column. In later years, Mrs. Bennett closed in the porch with glass windows and shelves in order to display her collection of glassware and souvenirs. In 1978, the house was moved to Heritage Hill Historical Park for renovation and restoration.