

# THE LAST PERFECT PLACE?

The legendary Bixby Ranch in Santa Barbara County has a new owner. What's to become of the majestic coastal property?

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## [Bixby Ranch](#)

There was much heavy sighing and some collective head-scratching when the Bixby Ranch, a majestic coastal property belonging to the family that once owned all of what is now Long Beach and parts of Irvine and Palos Verdes, was sold in January for close to \$140 million, a record for noncommercial real estate in California.

The 25,000-acre Santa Barbara landholding had been slumbering for nearly a century as a respected cattle operation, a rustic getaway for the Bixby heirs and their friends, a surfing spot of mystical isolation, a site of concern to archeologists and environmentalists, and a muse for artists and other casual visitors.

To many of them, the Bixby Ranch is the last perfect place in California. "The footprint of man is very light out here," says Bill Etling, a Santa Ynez Valley Realtor who grew up surfing the Bixby. "It's where you understand what California was all about before people ruined it."

"There's no place like it on this earth," says Santa Barbara County Supervisor Joni Gray, whose district includes the Bixby neighbor to the north, Vandenberg Air Force Base. "It's more beautiful than Yosemite or Yellowstone. It's the most beautiful place I've ever been."

Just who would buy the ranch was puzzling, largely because of a deal struck with Vandenberg. The base is the only place in North America routinely used to launch spy and weather satellites into polar orbits, from which they can map the entire globe. But what if one of those rockets crashed? Or, as did happen in 1986, a Titan rocket exploded seconds after launch, spewing a cloud of toxic fuel

into the air?

The Department of Defense was thrilled when the Bixby stayed a low-populated cattle ranch and grew anxious when the company indicated that it was planning to build more than 400 homes. The Air Force quickly approached Congress about putting a sock on this "footprint of danger." In 1992, the U.S. paid the Bixby Ranch Co. \$22 million to ban development on one coastal spread and severely limit it on another inland stretch, giving the rockets a safe passage zone over more than half the property. (Even now the Air Force is moving toward expanding its ability to launch satellites from the Bixby side of the base.)

There is some prime land still available for development, but it's zoned Ag 360 (one primary residence per 360 acres), not exactly helpful to a developer determined to build another Irvine by the sea. No wonder that it raised eyebrows when the ranch was sold to an investment group headed by L.A. developer Linda Miller, the point person for the expansion of Park La Brea while she was executive vice president for Casden Properties.

"I was in my gym in Malibu working out, and there were, of course, a lot of money people around," says Paul Sunderland, a sportscaster and former Lakers announcer. "Everyone was talking about the sale of the Bixby and speculating what might happen to it, what they would do with it."

What would you do with the last perfect place?

There must have been two kinds of people back then, before the country dissolved into civil warfare. There were the ones who clung to the centers of civilization, like bees. There were the others who, as soon as the living quarters got tight, took off to the next place where, for the price of a risk well-taken, they could look east, west, north and south and count it theirs.

The Bixbys of Maine were the latter. They'd had their fill of Massachusetts, landing with the pilgrim waves. They jogged north to the Arcadian state when it was still wild, and then began spreading west, until pretty soon you could ride from one Bixby house to the next in a matter of a day and make your way from the eastern shore to the heartland.

Llewellyn Bixby had already failed as a door-to-door book salesman when he and brother Amasa joined their cousins Thomas and Benjamin Flint in California in the early 1850s. The Bixbys and Flints, like just about everyone up north, were dabbling in gold mining. But it was proving more profitable to feed the miners. The men purchased a butcher shop, and they were soon thinking about farming and ranching. In 1852, Benjamin, Thomas and Llewellyn decided to "unite their fortunes for the undertaking of bringing to California sheep and cattle, more for the trip than profit," as recounted in "Adobe Days," a family history by Sarah Bixby Smith.

They bought the first portion of their flock in Illinois, eventually amassing 2,400 sheep, and headed for Central California. Along the way they haggled with opportunistic Indians, rescued stranded Mormons (for which they received a warm reception from Brigham Young), made a river crossing so precarious that they carried the sheep one by one on their backs, and then veered south when, fearing snow, they decided against a Sierra crossing. Ten months after they set out, the men arrived in San Gabriel. From there it was an easy amble north to the family headquarters near the present-day community of Hollister.

Now a serious ranching consortium, Flint, Bixby & Co. was on the hunt for grazing land, and it was there for the taking in Southern California, where people were scarce and a terrible drought from 1862 to '64 had broken many landowners. "In those days, everything was in some sort of rancho—there were 8,000 people and everything else was cattle," says ranch heir Preston Bixby Hotchkis.

By 1866, the company was well into acquiring tens of thousands of Southern California acres, including Rancho Los Cerritos and parts of Rancho Palos Verdes and the San Joaquin Ranch in Orange County. In 1878, Preston's great-grandfather, John W. Bixby, began leasing part of Rancho Los Alamitos. The entire property came up for sale in 1883 and, in league with banker I.W. Hellman, John Bixby acquired a third, where he settled with wife Susan and son Fred.

It was Fred Bixby who acquired the Santa Barbara County land, snapping up the 9,000-acre Cojo Ranch in 1912 after owner P.W. Murphy's grandiose plans for a steel mill and factory town collapsed. Twenty-seven years later, the neighboring 16,000-acre Jalama Ranch was added to the Bixby holdings.

Over the years the Bixby lands in L.A. County would be developed into the emerging communities of Long Beach, Seal Beach, Los Alamitos, Bellflower and Paramount. Fred was the only holdout; he kept his 3,500-acre share of the original Rancho Los Alamitos as a working ranch until his death in 1952.

Now you have two groups of people: those who have no choice but to live like bees, and those rich enough to live like the ranchers of old.

It's clear that Pres Hotchkis, Fred's grandson and retired chief executive of the Bixby Ranch Co., would have liked to keep the property. At times he seems as puzzled as everyone else about what the new owners will do. There's no getting around the Vandenberg restrictions, for one, unless they can prove there's not enough rocket activity to pose a threat.

On the other hand, he says, there are city dwellers who'll pay lots of dough for pristine spaces. Hadn't director/producer James Cameron, when he was owner of the 975-acre Edison parcel next door, approached the Bixby about buying a

"viewshed easement" so that no buildings would ever spoil his view? Hotchkis suggests dividing the land into several Santa Ynez Valley-style ranches of 1,000 acres or more, but with no fences, so that you could run cattle, which he calls natural "property managers."

Photos of galloping horses and a silver-trimmed saddle decorate the Bixby Ranch Co. offices in Santa Barbara. Hotchkis looks like a cattleman, tan, fit and inclined to smile slightly, not wide-mouthed and glad-handing like the people who do the buying and selling of land today. The ranching genes jumped over his father, an insurance executive and Metropolitan Water District director, to Pres, appointed to lead the Bixby Ranch Co. in 1966 with a mandate to get the most investment value out of the landholdings.

In L.A. and Orange counties that meant selling off pieces to developers "we had confidence in," says Hotchkis. But Santa Barbara, that was different. It seemed more sentiment than business to use the Cojo as home for the draft horses that had been his grandfather's passion and to build a herd of Angus crossbreeds that would be the envy of neighboring ranchers.

There was the watershed moment when Hotchkis, anticipating the effect it would have on Vandenberg, came up with the plan for hundreds of homes, two golf courses, two resort lodges and an equestrian center. The \$22-million payoff would have helped pay the bills for the new fences (65 miles' worth), cleaning out the springs (42) and other accouterments of a top operation. But there was no denying that running a ranch was a red-ink proposition.

"This is an agricultural area," Hotchkis says, "but it's hobby agriculture. It's not a business that supports you. The market for beef hasn't been going up as much as other things, and the middleman takes so damn much."

At the Cojo's historic adobe, the Bixby ownership is celebrated with a plaque. But the plaque's writer had not figured on just how many owners the ranch would have by the year 2006 (50, including the University of California regents). To many of them, keeping the land in slow-growth cattle ranching didn't make sense when it was worth so much cash. Over the objections of some family members, they moved to sell the entire property.

The younger generations wanted to keep the ranch—talk about great hunting and surfing—"but no one wanted to run it," says Hotchkis. "They all have their own lives. No one really wanted to put any money in it." And the world was closing in on the ranch. All those surfers coming in by boat, even helicopter! They had to maintain constant security, says Hotchkis. With the entrance to the ranch a good 30-minute drive from Highway 1 along a winding country road, local law enforcement couldn't respond promptly. The older heirs, who owned 60% of the company, were also dreading how much they would have to set aside for estate taxes and, well, it just made the sale inevitable.

Hotchkis stops to tell the story of when his grandfather, well after the Signal Hill oil discoveries had made the Bixbys richer, was asked what it took to be successful in ranching. "Well, having all those cattle rub up against an oil well or two helps," Fred replied.

Funny he should say this. Because lying just off the Bixby Ranch is the Santa Maria Basin, one of the largest untapped oil reserves in the West. There are reasons to believe the new owners are at least wondering how to reach it.

What's at stake? Picture a giant green bench facing the ocean. Where you would rest your back is a mountain range that has rippled in almost due west from Glendale. The seat is a mesa of such rolling ease and expanse as to induce thoughts of a nap. Where the seat ends—the bench's legs—is a 100-foot sandstone cliff to the beach.

As inviting as it can appear, the Bixby is a place of extremes. Here is Point Conception, a promontory so formidable that it's viewed as the dividing line between northern and southern California. To the south of the point, the coast runs east-west; above it, the coastline proceeds north-south. "Next to the islands of the channel, Point Conception is the most prominent and interesting feature between San Francisco and Lower California," opines the Thompson & West "History of Santa Barbara County."

Sailors were warned of its presence by a lighthouse—deeded to the U.S. government in 1881. Its wild weather drew comparisons to Cape Horn. "The wind and fog were often severe in Cojo," Merlyn Chestnut notes in "The Gaviota Land." "Gales have been known to blow for weeks at a time, and some claimed it blew 360 days out of a year."

Running east from Point Conception, the Santa Ynez mountain range continues the north-south divide, and the two areas on either side of this elevated border are, according to a 2004 federal study, "two of the most biologically diverse ecoregions in the world and have some of the highest concentrations of globally important, rare species in the country." There are nearly 1,400 plant and animal species on this stretch of coast, with 24 of them listed as threatened or endangered and another 60 considered rare or of special concern.

At the Bixby, they may live in one of numerous ecologies (closed-cone pine forest, chaparral, grassland, oak and riparian woodlands, coastal sage scrub, foredune and rocky intertidal habitat) that nurture species as prosaic (and endangered) as the red-legged frog and as exotic (and rare) as the ringtail, a lemur-looking mammal. There are the ornithological oddities—the greater roadrunner, loggerhead shrike and sage sparrow, which normally wouldn't come this close to the coast, nest here in large numbers. There are the last stands—the ferruginous hawks and burrowing owls that need wide open spaces, and the

Bixby Ranch is one of the few left on the southern coast. There are the numerous marine birds that stop at this place on their migratory routes, somewhere to rest where there are no people or boats or dogs.

And though the cattle have had impact—little of the native bunch grass remains and some of the oak and riparian woodlands have been disturbed—"there's precious little of the California coastal zone left where you have such a high density of native plants," says Mark Massara, an environmental lawyer in charge of California coastal programs for the Sierra Club.

A frequent visitor to the Bixby (he surfs), Massara finds its value "almost incalculable." But if there did have to be a price tag put on it, "we would ask the parties involved to consult us about conservation strategies." After all, the Hearst Ranch, the next largest coastal ranch after the Bixby, is now protected under a deal in which the family received hefty state grants and tax breaks while largely retaining ownership.

The federal government eyed the Bixby in considering the Gaviota coast for a national park. In a report presented to Congress in 2004, it determined that the area, which encompassed the Bixby and Hollister ranches, met all of the National Park Service criteria for national significance and should be included in the system. Massara was cheering for its inclusion but knew that formidable opponents were lined up against it in the affluent Hollister landowners. Sure enough, their hostility prompted the Department of the Interior to walk away. "Strong opposition from study area landowners makes it unlikely that effective NPS management could occur," the report said. The study, however, took comfort in the "good stewardship" of the Bixby family.

But that was coming to an end.

It would be discounted as mythology, if not for the handful of people on earth who have seen it—some of the world's great surf and no one there.

You couldn't get to those three amazing breaks off the Bixby Ranch unless you had a boat, or you could walk in from that other closely guarded surf paradise, the Hollister Ranch below it. Boaters such as Jan Robotham would launch from Gaviota or Morro Bay, enduring the bumpy ride, for the chance to surf Perko's or Cojo or Government's. But that got old, no shower on board or comfy place to nap.

Like others, Robotham bought into one of the 100-acre parcels at Hollister Ranch. Lots of people had done that for a chance to surf Hollister. But not everyone was willing to make that hourlong trek up the beach, toting a heavy surfboard, to get to the Bixby breaks. It was worth it to Robotham, her 9-foot longboard on her head, the one inscribed "For Jannie at Perko's," for her favorite break. She loved that break, its sweetness, not like the muscular stuff at Cojo or

the wildness of Government's, way out in the ocean off the point, where she "felt like part of the food chain."

"The water was colder, but it seemed clearer than at Hollister," she remembers of those two decades of pure bliss. "You could look down and see starfish and rays and otters." Plus, the vibe was better than at Hollister, where, even though the numbers were tiny compared to the real world, people would drop in on you. That didn't happen at the Bixby.

It was a place where "anything was possible," she says. "You could have seen a bear on the sand or cowboys moving cattle down the beach. If you saw something, you knew it was going to be special, because there was nothing up there." Like the time, exhausted from surfing, she curled up in a hole in the sand dug by wild pigs, laid her board on top and fell asleep. She woke up to a deer peering in her face.

"It was always about the scenery," she says of the Bixby sojourns, even when you became part of it.

Michael Drury is wrestling with the Bixby scenery in his painting, the one that shows the crescent of coastline that is among the most wondrous views in all of Bixbyland (it's the one continuously broadcast on TV, in the Land Rover commercial captioned, simply, "Pt. Conception"). He's not sure he's got the perspective right, that you get the sense of how monumental this place is, even though he's known for his huge canvases. "Very little is big enough around here for me to paint it," says the UC Santa Barbara-trained artist. "I paint the Bixby because it's heroic."

Drury first came to the Bixby in the 1970s to surf, when he worked security and maintenance at Hollister Ranch and was given the key to the gate separating the two properties. Once he left Hollister and started to paint for a living, he never surfed the Bixby again, because it was such a privilege to be there rendering those incredible landscapes above Point Conception, the ice plant in glowing magenta that spreads like a giant carpet by the old lighthouse keeper's home.

Because of the winds and the squalls that would tear through with no warning he had to come up with heavier canvases and weighted easels that wouldn't fly away. Still, the sand would blow into the paint, and you can run your hand over it and feel it. A Bixby original. The whole place is a work of art, really, and he's surprised there weren't more trophy owners bidding for it. Didn't someone just spend \$135 million for one Gustav Klimt painting?

After the announcement that Coastal Management Resources had purchased the Bixby, there was a lot of chatter in the local alternative press about the possibility the owners would drill for oil.

In light of a federal moratorium on new offshore drilling, attempts to reach the oil would have to be done by onshore directional drilling into the state-controlled tidelands (starting at the mean high tide line and extending three miles out), in which drills are run at a slant from land-based wells.

Hermosa Beach once entertained a plan for a directional drilling operation in its tidelands, but that was scuttled partly over community opposition and partly because of a risk assessment that pointed to the hydrogen sulfide odors and chance of explosions and fire. "It is possible to carry out these projects with low environmental impact," says Canadian-based Frank Bercha, who did the risk analysis. "You just have to decide whether to accept these impacts."

You would also have to fall under one of three exemptions to a ban on new tidelands drilling imposed by the California Coastal Sanctuary Act of 1994, says Doug Anthony, deputy director of Santa Barbara County's energy division. All seem highly unlikely: (1) The state and federal governments declare an oil and gas emergency. (2) You're tapping into federal drainage, such as Plains Exploration is doing at nearby Platform Irene, but there's still the hurdle of convincing the state that the lease is justified. (3) An existing lease, which the Bixby doesn't appear to have. Other than that, "you would have to get revisions of the state legislation," Anthony says.

Asked about the future of the Bixby, the new owners were circumspect. "We're sending out land planners, archeologists, ecologists, hydrologists, biologists," says respected land-use attorney Steven Amerikaner, the public face for the owners. "We're looking at perhaps a year of studying how best to use it."

Before the cowboys bonded with this land, the Indians held it sacred. Art Cisneros, one of the remaining elders of the Santa Barbara Chumash, recounts the tribe's belief that when the first humans reached the world, they asked themselves, "Where is the best place to be?" They settled on Point Conception. "This is the homeland of the first people who had the choice of the whole world," says Cisneros. "Pretty special place, isn't it?"

According to Chumash legend, it's also the portal to the next world. From here at the Western Gate, the souls would journey across the sea to Similaqsa, the land of the dead. It became, unwittingly, the first entry point for European settlers. At the time Juan Cabrillo discovered Point Conception in 1542, the Chumash who met him in their plank canoes were the largest Indian group in the state, ranging from Malibu to Morro Bay and well into Kern County. Hundreds of sites of cultural significance have been found on the Bixby Ranch, 12 of which—listed on the National Register of Historic Places—are at Point Conception itself.

The cultural significance came into play in the late 1970s, when a joint venture by PG&E and Pacific Lighting Co., then-parent company of Southern California Gas, received approval to build an LNG terminal adjacent to the point. The Chumash

and their supporters staged a sit-in on the Bixby Ranch. Market forces and seismic concerns may have been the most convincing impediments to the project, but for a brief while, its value to the Chumash culture was front and center.

Whether the Chumash, empowered by their bingo casino in Santa Ynez, will respond to any threats to their cultural landmarks remains to be seen. For now, everyone is waiting to see what will happen at the Western Gate.

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For more photos by William B. Dewey of the Bixby Ranch, go to [latimes.com/bixby](https://latimes.com/bixby)



The legendary Bixby Ranch in Santa Barbara County has a new owner. (William Dewey) Apr 21, 2007



Bixby landscape painter  
**Michael Drury.**  
(William Dewey)  
Mar 1, 2006



A ranch road cuts through mustard dotted fields.

(William Dewey)

Mar 28, 2007



The lighthouse at point conception. (William Dewey) Apr 21, 2007



Point conception, where the coastline takes a dramatic turn north.  
(William Dewey)  
Mar 10, 2005



Bixby ranch surfer Jan Robothom.  
(William Dewey)  
Mar 29, 2007



A cluster of buildings used in the Bixby cattle operation.

(William Dewey)

Mar 1, 2006



“There’s no place like it on this earth,” says Santa Barbara County Supervisor Joni Gray, of Bixby Ranch.

(William Dewey)

Mar 10, 2005



The rugged coastline of Bixby Ranch.  
(William Dewey)  
Apr 27, 2005



The surf breaks at government point.  
(William Dewey)  
Mar 1, 2006



Bixby Ranch heir Preston Hotchkiss.  
(William Dewey)  
Feb 12, 2007



Bixby is a place of extremes. Here is Point Conception, a promontory so formidable that it's viewed as the dividing line between northern and southern California.  
(William Dewey)  
Apr 28, 2005



An aerial view of Bixby Ranch.  
(William Dewey)  
May 13, 2007



The Bixby coastline twists and turns.  
(William Dewey)  
Apr 21, 2007