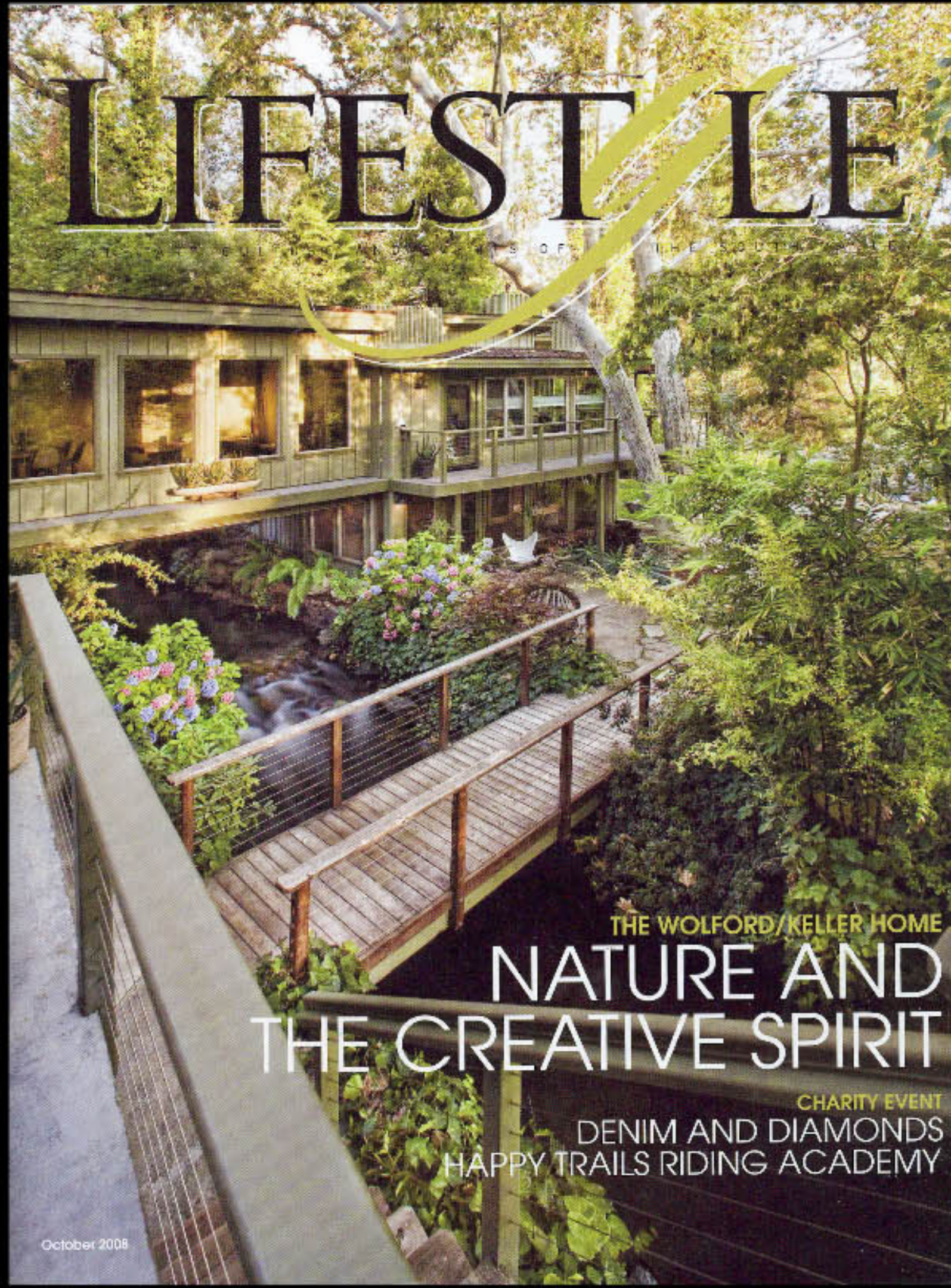


LIFESTYLE

OF THE SOUTH



THE WOLFORD/KELLER HOME

NATURE AND THE CREATIVE SPIRIT

CHARITY EVENT

DENIM AND DIAMONDS
HAPPY TRAILS RIDING ACADEMY

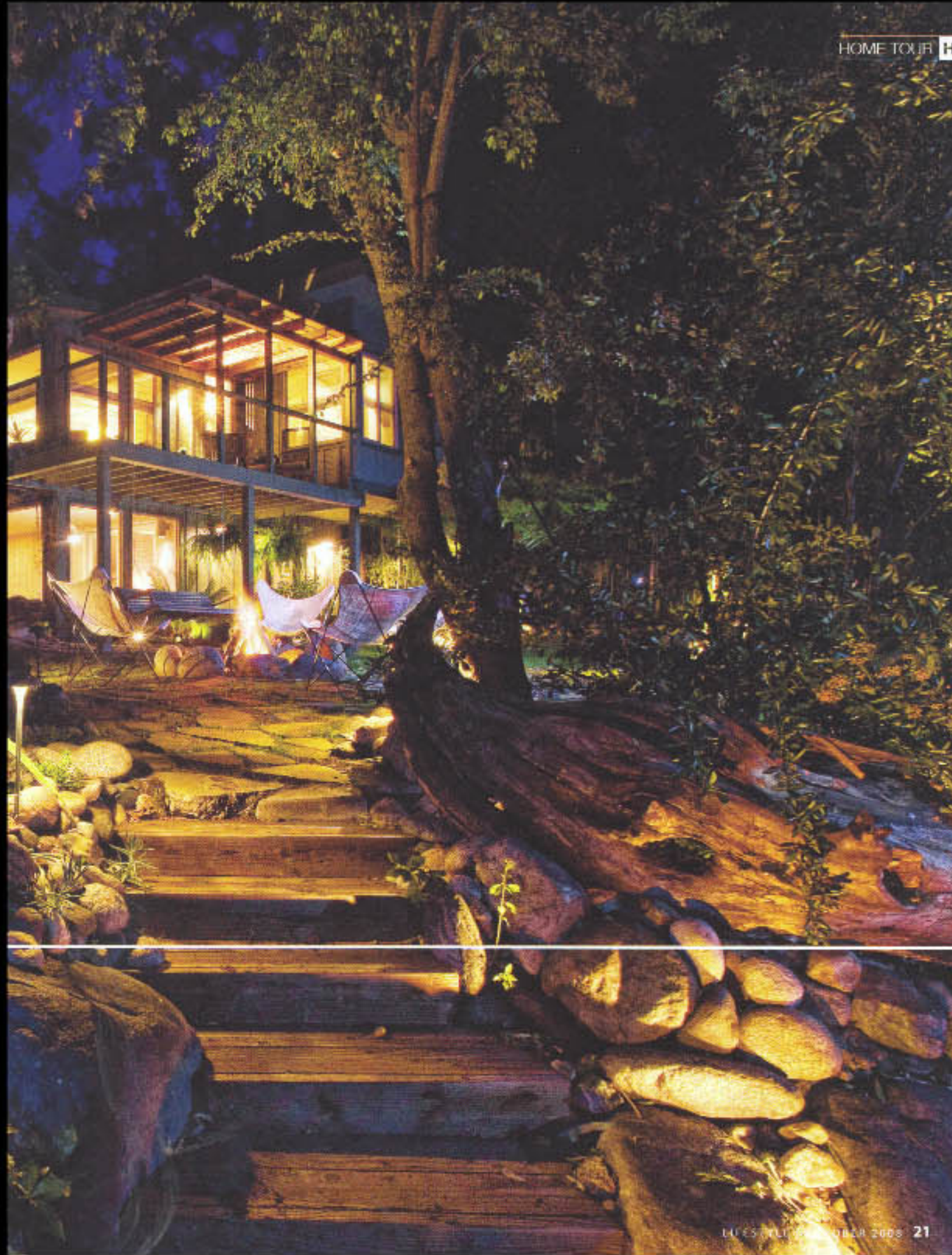
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BELOW: In the evening, a magical glow bathes the grounds of the Keller/Wolford home in Three Rivers.

in the flow

Wright-Influenced Sierra Home Channels Nature and the Creative Spirit

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Regular readers with sufficiently long memories will recall that *Lifestyle* featured an Arts & Crafts-style residence on the river ("A River Runs Through It," September 2005); the Harper/Mills home. But we might have saved that article's title for our current feature, because the Kaweah River doesn't just run through the Wolford/Keller property as in the prior story, it runs right *through the house*. OK, actually it runs *under* the house, to satisfy insurers and other quibblers. But "A River Runs Under It" lacks a certain ring. But trust us: The river runs right through this one.

What a spectacle results. "It's unusual to have Class 3-5 rapids going through your backyard," said Chris Keller, with understatement. The magnificent dining room and bar area's glass floor spans the river, producing a year-round live action nature drama flowing beneath, whether by the river's muted trickle of early October, or the roaring snowmelt of spring cascading explosively down from the High Sierras, or schooling trout lurking in summer's cool shaded waters. The home perches along the life source where herons, black bears, bobcats and trout all find their survival from the mighty Kaweah, whose name itself conjures local fauna: *Kaweah* is an ancient echo derived from raven's caw, an onomatopoeia to the ear of those Native Americans who inhabited this land for thousands of years — the indigenous Wukchumni and Shoshone.

The native Yokuts' voices are mostly now silent but the abundant wildlife persists, augmenting the local Three Rivers human population of 3,500 or so and more than a few rattlesnakes. "Living in nature and sharing the view with wildlife is one of the exciting things about being here," said Keller. "Anytime we spot a black bear swimming or fishing in the river, it's memorable. Living in the city, this is something you see on National Geographic, not from your balcony."

When first built, the home was merely a rustic one-room cabin. So the home's current state of glory belies those more humble origins. Acquired in the late 1940s by the late Elmer and Marjorie Cord Brandon (Happy 96th birthday, Marjorie!), the home's first visionary couple readily saw the cabin's potential as a home and art studio, just as the current occupants were so inspired. →

ABOVE: Frank Lloyd Wright was perhaps best known for his pronouncements about architectural unity with nature. His philosophies find full expression in this 1940s-era Three Rivers residence by Frank Robert, a Wright disciple who collaborated with the late Elmer Cord and his wife Marjorie (now Brandon).

BELOW: A glass-top bar and a glass floor offer a view down into the Kaweah River straight below, where trout and other creatures can often be seen in the slow waters of late summer.

Despite its obvious modesties, the Cords set about their mission with the help of friend and notable architect Frank Robert, a Frank Lloyd Wright protégé who designed the original structure. The couple transformed the rough-hewn place into one of the earliest Modernist homes built in Tulare County. Other such early Modernist Three Rivers residences also designed by Robert include the home of noted author Curt Sudrmak (*Donovan's Brain*; *The Wolf Man*), and the residence thought to be the first such Modernist home in the county for late noted sculptor Carroll Barnes, who had been Robert's fellow classmate at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy in Michigan.

After Mr. Cord passed away and Marjorie relocated, the home later underwent some changes that contradicted its clean mid-century modern lines and initial Modernist transformation. Some years of neglect followed, as well. But when Larry Jules of L.M. Jules Construction found the place languishing by the river, he set about launching its second act. Jules purchased the home, spending more than two years rebuilding its infrastructure. >



TOP: Mid-century classics, like a leather Herman Miller Eames-style chair, mingle with contemporary furniture pieces and rustic items like a burlwood settee in the Three Rivers master suite of Chris Keller and his partner, Charles Wolford.

MIDDLE: Neguchi era nodu: Mid-century Asian inflections are in full force at the recently renovated Keller/Wolford home in Three Rivers. A Kawesh River rock creates an impromptu Zen garden from a New Zealand wool rug in the living room.

BOTTOM: Natural materials abound in the Keller/Wolford home in Three Rivers, situated along the river whose muted trickle gives way to a roar in spring.

For Chris Keller and his partner, Charles Wolford, the timing couldn't have been better. "When we bought the home from him in 2005," Chris said, "the home had been re-plumbed, rewired and repainted. But it was unfinished in the sense that we found it before the interior designer had done too much," he recalled. "Let's just say, before it was taken in a direction that denied its mid-century architectural roots."

Keller and Wolford "re-wound" a few of the new design choices, as he puts it, like incongruous river rock that was added cosmetically over the original modern fireplace chosen by the Cords. But most of the new finishes were theirs to specify.

"For Charles and me, this was a perfect palette," Keller said. "We were able to come in and finish it to our tastes with Larry's help every step of the way. We basically added all the flooring: bamboo, seagrass, imported black slate from India, FLOR tiles, all the plumbing fixtures like Kohler sinks and toilets, the tiling in the bathrooms, all the lighting and of course all the furnishings — not to mention a lot of work outside in the yard."

In all, the renovation has taken more than five years.

The result is a home that Keller calls "modern rustic." With some Asian-inspired touches that were not uncommon to mid-century interiors, it's basically an eclectic mix of styles that fuse the past with the present, as he sees it.

"We tried to stay true to the mid-century roots of the house in the way we designed the interior but contemporized it with elements that reflect its unique rustic location," he said. That earthy characteristic can be seen in the various types of wood, including that on the ceilings, which are original to the house. "The kitchen/living room ceiling (and one of the bedrooms) was here in 1947 when Marjorie lived here. Larry sandblasted layers and layers of paint to restore the original and natural condition and color."

The dining room table was purchased at H.D. Buttercup in Culver City and is made of recycled Peroba Rosa, a native Brazilian hardwood. Wood for the table was reclaimed from abandoned buildings and barns in Paraná, Brazil. The dense, richly colored and textured wood is around 70 to 100 years old, according to Keller.

The Asian inflections in the materials are not mere coincidence. Keller and Wolford visited Thailand several years ago, and liked it so well they decided to stay nine months. At that time, the U.S. dollar was very strong and one could live well for very little. They chose an island in the Gulf of Thailand called Koh Samui, an idyllic paradise full of coconut trees and white sandy beaches. "We immersed ourselves in Thai culture, lived simply in a tranquil beachfront bungalow and recovered from spending so many years in cities. Those places have included Los Angeles (Chris) and Chicago, Portland, Amsterdam and Los Angeles (Charles). →

H HOME TOUR

RIGHT: Saarinen's famed "Tulip Chairs" start up the Three Rivers home's mid-century modern bent in the fell, molded plastic swoon.

During their time on Koh Samui, they fell in love with all things Thai – the cuisine, the landscape, the Asian characteristics in general. “We have traveled extensively throughout the world – Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Chile, and all over Asia including Cambodia, Vietnam, French Polynesia, Bali Indonesia, Singapore, China and Tokyo. But our travels to Asia, and especially our time spent living in Thailand, has had a tremendous influence on our design aesthetic. Asian-inspired design and architecture opened our eyes to the beauty of natural products like bamboo, woods and stone,” he said. Most of the design accents in their homes were brought back from travels.

While living on the island, they even adopted a stray Thai dog, said Keller. “Once we decided we would be in Thailand awhile, one day we walked into the Samui Dog Rescue (www.samuidog.com), a great nonprofit rescue organization. As we entered, the owner was holding a puppy that had just been brought in by some tourists who had found her on the beach eating rice out of trashcans,” he recalled. The couple was overwhelmed by hundreds of dogs in various conditions, each trying to get their attention. For dog lovers like Keller and Wolford, this was torture. So they left with that fortunate puppy.

Appropriately, they named her Samui, in honor of her homeland. But just as appropos, the island's name Samui itself is thought to derive from the Chinese *saboy*, for “safe haven.” And Samui has been their canine companion ever since. “She has traveled with us all over the United States and is probably the luckiest dog on the planet,” Keller speculated. She now enjoys her refuge and a better fate far from the waters of the Gulf of Thailand, along the cold, clear waters of the Kaweah.

Fateful twists occur closer to home, too, such as the day Visalia Marjorie Brandon showed up at the door bearing photos of a house that sprang from her and her husband's imaginations more than 60 years ago in a long-gone era whose design esthetics are lately enjoying a second life. Marjorie movingly told them about her life there in what was now their home, and how she and her husband had envisioned building an addition over the river – just as had finally been done.

Thanks to that ongoing resurgence of interest in mid-century Modern design by enthusiasts like Wolford and Keller (who first met when they both worked for a film and TV production company in Los Angeles and who have also remodeled their homes in Los Angeles, Amsterdam and Palm Springs), important structures like this are getting the respect they deserve in a region that is often more attuned to prior or quasi-historical styles. Several of those notable prior remodeling projects have landed as features in the pages of *Success*, *Vogue*, *Elle Décor*, and *Modern Living*, as well as *Lifestyle*.



Perhaps the home's most remarkable fate came in the spring of 1955. At age 96, Marjorie Brandon may be the best-qualified person around to recall what was a so-called 100-year storm, such as the one that erased a good portion of their handiwork on the grounds of the Three Rivers home, and also damaged a portion of the dwelling. But her visit was not as an ominous Cassandra, but as someone who wanted to share what her home and life had meant there with the new owners, who clearly appreciated her hand in its creation, as well as her visit, too. No wonder she was so moved when she told them of the vision for the addition, after having seen the whole place and her and her husband's handiwork nearly destroyed in the deluge of '55.

If the proximity to the river is enough to give one pause, so were Keller's reservations about living in a town the size of his high school in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. But Wolford, although born in Merced, also spent much of his youth in a small Texas town, so he welcomed the change, which was perhaps a return to his roots, of sorts. “Coming from L.A., then the desert and to Three Rivers, we weren't sure what to expect,” said Keller. “What surprised both of us was how friendly the neighbors were. During the first few months after moving in, I had to grab a sheet of legal paper and start writing down names of all the neighbors who introduced themselves. So I filled up almost a full page. Living in L.A., no one knows their neighbors, so it was refreshing,” adding that where they come from in Texas, people wave and are generally friendly. “In many ways Three Rivers has that same small-town charm,” Keller said.

Relocating has been made easier by their close proximity to Visalia and its conveniences. But also, the modern wired era enables Wolford to work mostly from home as the director of broadcast advertising for a Boston-based ad agency, traveling to the East Coast only a few days a month, while Keller, a writer, has found the peace to finish a memoir he is seeking to get published. “Three Rivers is an ideal writers' and artists' retreat. There's something about the sound of running water that is calming and inspiring. I draw from the same well of creativity as Marjorie did so many years ago.”

