Angels watched over Santa Rosa's Fountaingrove

Angels are a very big deal in America today. Not just since John Milton, or maybe even since Michelangelo planted a flaming sword at the gates of Eden, there has been much attention paid to the concept of what Time magazine defines as "lightbrow spirits, free of time and space and human weaknesses."

When a magazine like Time does a cover story on angels, as it did in December, you can be assured this is a force in our society. But it was not our first notice that angels were going to be big in the 90s.

Tony Kushner's award-winning Broadway play, "Angels in America," had already raised the issue of guardian angels, of personal caretakers not of this world. Several of my acquaintances, in fact, have confided an interest in the phenomena of angels. I know at least one woman, a college instructor, who attended a weekend conference on the subject. And I can almost guarantee most of us have friends who, if they chose to share, could tell of personal encounters.

Even those who are not ready to believe, hesitate to scoff. Philosopher Mortimer Adler, as quoted in the magazine, has written of "the intriguing idea of minds without bodies — especially superior minds freed from the frailty and limitations of perishable bodies." More intriguing, perhaps, the more out of control our individual lives seem to be.

SO WHAT has all of this to do with local history — which is a Sunday tradition in this space? We know better, certainly, despite the enthusiasm of the early settlers, than to try to make a case for Sonoma County as the site of the home of the Suncup. It doesn't mean we don't have our angels.

It is interesting to note that another December issue of a national magazine — this one the New Yorker —

"The intriguing idea of minds without bodies — especially superior minds . . ."

MORTIMER ADLER

wrote of playwright Kushner's sojourn in Sonoma County (even if, as you will see, the New Yorker writer's geography was skewed). Kushner is quoted as saying he wrote the second part of his "Angels in America," while spending "an incredible eight days at the Russian River in April of 1981." After completing the play, the New Yorker critic tells us, Kushner "threw his belongings into a box and drove to the Napa Valley toward San Francisco." Sigh. If regions can have their own special angels, Napa must have two.

Was it a vacation cottage on the Russian River? This is not impossible. There was a time, in the 19th century, when Sonoma County (Santa Rosa, specifically, which is not going to please west county residents) was something like the Angel Capital of the country.

What I'm talking about is Fountaingrove.

THOMAS LAKE HARRIS, the leader of the Brotherhood of the New Life, established his "home center" which he called Fountaingrove, on a hill north of Santa Rosa in 1875. Harris was an expert on the subject of angels — perhaps, in the light of recent interests, more than a century ahead of his time.

As the Father and Pivot and Primate and King (his self-imposed titles, used separately and together) of the Brotherhood, he was the author of a complex theology based on nearly every religion the world had ever known. Referred to by one scholar as "an ecclesiastical octopus," Harris gathered the threads of Christianity, Eastern mysticism and pure spiritualism and wove them into his own theology, which he preferred be known as "theocentricism" rather than as a religion.

FROM THE 1860s until his death in 1896, Harris had up to 700 followers around the world — mostly in the United States, Britain and Japan. Some 50 years

after his death, the last "official" member of the Brotherhood was reported to be living in Washington, D.C.

The faithful believed Harris was the link between God and man and Fountaingrove was headquarters for a new world order that would be the salvation of mankind. Harris taught his chosen followers, only those in the Inner Circle, the gift of Internal Respiration, also known as the Divine Breath, and told them this practice could advance Brotherhood members upward through a series of seven spheres to the Celestial Sphere (a concept borrowed from the Swedensborgians), where they would dwell in oneness with God. Ascendancy to this ultimate reward depended upon angels.

HARRIS' Celestial Sphere, to which all his followers aspired, was peopled with angels. He was a prolific writer of both prose and poetry, printing volumes of both on the printing press he had installed in a special building between his manor house, which was one of the most elaborate and expensive dwellings in the county, and his winery, which produced the first Sonoma County wine to be sold on the East Coast and in Europe.

Much of his prose was about angels. His Fountaingrove house was important but his "real palace," he wrote, was in "interspace." All of his poetry, by his own testimony, was dictated to him by the highest-ranking angel in his elaborate system. She was his mate, or wife, in the Celestial Sphere. He called her Queen Lily of the Concupial Angels. Harris, who was married three times in his earthly life, instructed his followers to anchor marriage on Earth to save themselves for the "counterparts" he promised awaited them in the Celestial Sphere. Harris, having attained this level, was generous in sharing the descriptions of his wonders with his followers. His counterpart, the Lily Queen, according to his writings, had borne him two children.

If HARRIS was around today, a Time magazine reporter would probably have come to call. While his works may not have the credibility of Billy Graham's best-selling book, "Angels: God's Secret Agents," Harris' elaborate cosmic plan certainly would have warranted some attention.

In the late 1800s, he did not. It would be fair to say, I think, that Harris hid his angel lights under a bushel. The first accounts of Fountaingrove in the

"My real palace is in interspace."

THOMAS LAKE HARRIS

Sonoma Democrat in the 1870s described Harris as a wealthy Eastern gentleman who had chosen Santa Rosa as his home and built an expansive estate on which he entertained important visitors.

The citizens of Santa Rosa, including the Episcopal minister, several physicians, the district attorney and most of the merchants, dined often at Fountaingrove. When Harris' reputation was impugned by a Boston writer, the pillars of the city rallied to his defense, signing a petition supporting him as a respected member of the community.

In 1886, when the first history of the county was published, Harris provided the writer with information about the Brotherhood that listed, in simplified form, several of the tenets of his faith. But nothing about angels.

Santa Rosa in 1880 wasn't ready for the Lily Queen.