

# Krutch Land to be Built Up: Krutch Land to House Medical Complex

by Tony Davis

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Weather/2B  
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## Tucson & Arizona

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Tucson  
Citizen B

# Krutch land to be built up

## Late naturalist's home to become a medical complex

By TONY DAVIS  
Citizen Staff Writer

On the south side of Grant Road just east of Swan Road is a wall of commerce: "EXXON SAFEWAY PETER PIPER PIZZA WAL-GREENS FIESTA MEXICAN FOODS."

Across the street is a wall of crenate, several hundred yards thick. Well back from the road, a modest red brick house is surrounded by mesquite, palo verde and prickly pear. To one side, a shopping cart

and a disconnected toilet and refrigerator.

Holes dot a rear picture window. Inside, bits of glass are scattered on a carpet in a room with empty wooden bookshelves. A ground squirrel scampers across a patio and a jackrabbit ducked behind a cactus.

From 1952 to 1978, this was home for the late Joseph Wood Krutch, a naturalist, author and critic. Krutch brought the desert to millions of Americans via books, magazine articles and television. An ar-

dent preservationist, he watched Tucson grow into what he called a "sloturb."

Now, progress will visit the Krutch homestead. Within 45 days, construction will begin on a medical complex there. Later, the house will be torn down.

Stewart Gross, a vice president for the Leo C. Isenberg Co., a Kansas City, Mo., firm that is handling sales and leasing for it, said it will be a "first-class facility offering the maximum medical services available." Full details were not avail-

able. Landscaping plans are not complete, but Craig Isenberg, also a vice president for the Isenberg company, said the developers will try to save what is "worth saving." A friend of the Krutch family said the yard has some cactus that he collected and planted.

Those connected with the complex said Krutch's memory, too, will be preserved. This was part of an agreement made with Krutch's

KRUTCH, Continued Page B8



Citizen photo by Glass Capers

Pampas grass screens one side of Joseph Wood Krutch's old house.

Friday, April 27, 1984

Tucson C

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From Page B8

widow, Marcelle, when she sold the house in 1980.

The complex will be named the Tucson Medical Plaza, "in memory of Joseph Wood Krutch." An atrium will have an area, and probably a plaque, dedicated to him. Marcelle Krutch, who now lives in the Bay Area, will review the memorial plans, Gross said.

Reached at home, the widow, now 88, said she has no feeling about the house being torn down.

"I came here and bought another house," she said. "I'm not the kind of person that worries too much about the past."

In 1952, Grant Road in front of the Krutchs' house was dirt. During floods, water ran over the road and up to the couple's front door. When the Krutch house went up, said Marcelle, one could not see a light from there to the Santa Catalina Mountains.

Krutch, then in his late 50s, had spent the previous three decades as an urbane, New York City intellectual. During his life, he wrote or edited 34 books. He was a professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University and drama critic for the liberal magazine, "The Nation."



Citizen photo

The late naturalist and author, Joseph Wood Krutch

Asthma and a dwindling interest in the theater brought him here. "The Happiest Years" was the title of a chapter about his life in Tucson from a 1980 biography of Krutch.

To eastern friends who asked if he missed New York's cultural pleasures, Krutch noted in his 1962 autobiography, his answer was, simply, "No."

Each morning, he spent a few hours writing. In the afternoon, he read or explored the desert on foot, while wearing a large straw hat and baggy trousers and with a shirrtail flapping behind him, wrote Krutch's biographer, John Margolis.

"The desert became a temple where the former agnostic, now a pantheist, went to worship," Margolis wrote.

An original Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum trustee, Krutch wrote that the desert was to him a source of mystical experience. It could strike when a rabbit popped from a bush or when a flower opened.

"God looked upon the world and found that it was good," Krutch wrote. "How great is the happiness of being able, even for a moment, to agree with him."

Intellectually, Krutch was forever out of fashion. During the optimistic 1920s, his book "The Modern Temper," a bleak analysis of the human condition, provoked someone to write that if he believed what he said, "Why won't you hang yourself?"

During the 30s, many of his liberal friends religiously embraced Communism. He did not. He wrote that the world needs to be saved, "but it is less evident that it needs to be Saved."

During the 50s and 60s, he attacked man's worship of technology and what others called progress. In 1965, he wrote that

Tucson was becoming an "anti-city."

"Everything looks improvised, random, unrelated to everything else, as though it had no memory of yesterday and no expectation of tomorrow," he wrote. "One can only breathe the gas fumes and revel in the glow of neon."

Maurice Wohlgelemler, a Columbia University English professor who is writing a second Krutch biography, said Krutch preferred to sit behind his house rather than in front, to avoid seeing encroaching civilization.

"My five acres are still a sort of an oasis despite the efforts of real estate agents to persuade me to sell," Krutch wrote shortly before his death in May, 1970.

Krutch died of cancer at home, in a bed specially set up so he could see the mountains. Wohlgelemler said that Krutch despised hospitals and, having been hospitalized for surgery shortly before, had not wanted to go back.

Marcelle Krutch, however, said her husband did not dislike hospitals more than anyone else did. He just wanted to die in the peace of his home, she said.

In his last two weeks, while under round-the-clock nurses' care, he went outside each day to fly a kite, she said.

"I suppose I am dying," Krutch said on his deathbed, according to Margolis' book. "It is not as bad as I thought."

Today, Krutch's old property is part of 70 undeveloped acres along Grant — one of the largest stretches of desert left within the city limits, except for newly annexed areas.

This week, the owners of one parcel to the east and south broke

ground for an 18-story hotel, a nursing home and doctors' offices. The owners of a second parcel to the west will break ground in June for what eventually will be a complex of 11 office buildings, said city planner Walter Tellez.

Gross, of the Isenberg firm, said, "All I know is that when he (Krutch) lived, Tucson was an entirely different city than it has been in the last 15 years and than it will continue to be." He added the development will treat the desert better than many builders have north of River Road.

Louis Parrish, a Tucson builder and the medical plaza's building contractor, said that while not opposed to growth, he does not like the air to get dirty and the streets to be crowded. He would not, he said, want a hospital built in Oro Valley, where he lives.

"But Tucson is so much cleaner than other cities," he said. "I guess it's like what somebody said about democracy. It's not a very good system of government, but it's the best one we have."

North and west of Krutch's property, a mesquite grove lines a wash. This area has two owners. One has plans to develop it, the other, according to Tellez, does not.

On Tuesday, there was competition for the ear here between autos, bulldozers and doves. A coal-black male phainopepla leaped into the air from a bare mesquite branch. A Wilson's warbler, yellow with a black cap, faded through the branches of a second mesquite.

A female hummingbird, with green back and white chin, tantalized the air with wings in characteristic blur. She hung in one spot for a few seconds, fled to a mesquite and flew back to midair for a moment. Then she was gone.

The Krutch property on May 20, 2021, at 5099 E Grant Road, Tucson:



Inside, there is indeed an atrium as mentioned in the 1984 news article; but no memorial or plaque dedicated to Joseph Wood Krutch could be found.



Not everyone agrees that The Atrium is a good place for a memorial to Joseph Wood Krutch. English professor Robert Rowley wrote in *The American Scholar* in 1995 that he thought The Atrium, "with its lush interior garden, is hardly the spot for a memorial to a man who came to revere the austerity of the Sonoran Desert:"

Joseph Wood Krutch died on May 22, 1970.

Unlike Thoreau, whose Walden still remains, no evidence exists at the site of Krutch's former residence to suggest that he ever lived on a five-acre parcel of Sonoran Desert near the intersection of Grant Road and Swan. His modest, mortar-washed brick home was torn down years ago, replaced by the buildings of modern "progress" that in the latter years of his life he had come so much to despise. Here is a volcanized stone mall, the Crossroads Festival Center—an example of architecture unfit for the desert environment. Here, too, is the Hotel Park Tucson, a gigantic complex catering to convention visitors. Between the two buildings is another—The Atrium—a gray concrete box with rows of mirror windows that reflect the desert sky. The Atrium stands at the southern end of Krutch's old property. The owners of The Atrium were to commemorate Joseph Wood Krutch by erecting a plaque in his honor. No such plaque has ever gone up. This is probably for the best, since The Atrium, with its lush interior garden, is hardly the spot for a memorial to a man who came to revere the austerity of the Sonoran Desert.

Professor Robert Rowley may have a valid point. But it seems to me that to leave the estimable Joseph Wood Krutch's residence without any commemoration is wrong. There is a Joseph Wood Krutch Cactus Garden at the University of Arizona, but typically writers are commemorated "in place" - particularly when they wrote about that "place" as a core of their writing. It is indeed an irony that most of the places that Joseph Wood Krutch wrote about have been paved over, channelized, turned into what he called "sloburbs." But if we don't have



any way of keeping that memory alive, we will not have a any way of comparing what “progress” gives us with what the past had provided.

The Atrium has a tiny outdoor cactus garden at its pedestrian entry way. Perhaps this would be a better location for a commemorative plaque or information sign out Joseph Wood Krutch, his writings, and his celebration of the Sonoran Desert:

