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IN THE INTEREST OF
PRESERVING AND
RESTORING THE
MODEST AMERICAN
20TH CENTURY HOME,
THE BUNGALOW,
AND THE RICH LIFESTYLE
THAT IT AFFORDS

AMERICAN BUNGALOW

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IT STARTED WITH A SQUARE GRAND PIANO. We were determined to find a house with a living room big enough for the 1871 Chickering grand that was languishing under a pile of books in a spare bedroom. “Just take a look at this house to get an idea of what’s on the market in your area,” our agent said on the drab day in March 1999 when we agreed to meet for a walk-through.

The stucco-clad exterior seemed starkly simple. A low-pitched, bungalow-style roof pressed down on the second-floor bay windows. The front porch with its sturdy pillars, spanning just half the width of the house, broke the symmetry of the facade. The broad panels of casement windows promised lots of light—essential during the nine months a year of Pacific Northwest gloom in Portland.



STENCILS AROUND THE DINING ROOM WERE APPLIED BY THE OWNERS USING TRIMBELLE RIVER STUDIOS DESIGNS. DINING ROOM FURNITURE WAS HAND CRAFTED BY THE FURNITURE CRAFT WORKSHOP IN PORTLAND, BASED ON LIMBERT COMPANY DESIGNS. THE SQUARE GRAND PIANO, SHIPPED TO PORTLAND AROUND THE HORN FROM BOSTON IN 1871, NOW HAS A PLACE OF HONOR IN THE LIVING ROOM.

The Saga of House #14 BY JIM HEUER



Once we walked in the door, though, we realized that the outward simplicity harbored an expansive interior. Passing through the small vestibule directly into the spacious living room, graced with an inglenook at one end (albeit without a fireplace) and a massive fireplace (without an inglenook) at the other, we realized that there was space here for *several* grand pianos. Indeed, the current owner's concert grand sat at one end of the room. Pillars like none I'd ever seen framed the inglenook, and built-in

bookcases extended all the way to the gracious triple-fold French doors leading into the dining room.

Despite dreary out-of-place Victorian draperies, woodwork slathered with dull and dimly dark varnish, and a disheartening neglect of basic maintenance, we were tempted to say, "We'll take it!" right then. What sealed the deal, though, was the master bedroom on the second floor, with dimensions rivaling the living room's and its own substantial fireplace. Here, clearly, was a





THE PUZZLING INGLENOOK WITHOUT A FIREPLACE — NOW UNDERSTANDABLE BECAUSE IN THE FIRST VERSION OF THIS HOUSE, THESE WINDOWS HAD A SPECTACULAR VIEW OF MT. ST. HELENS, MT. HOOD, AND THE BROAD WILLAMETTE VALLEY, WITH THE LEWIS AND CLARK EXPOSITION GROUNDS JUST BELOW. THE BOOKCASE IN THE FAR SIDE OF THE INGLENOOK WAS A 1927 REPLACEMENT OF THE EXPECTED BENCH SEAT.

perfect house in which to live and entertain—and, ultimately, to restore.

We took it.

Our efforts to discover the house's origins and history and to restore much of its original interior character soon began. As it has turned out, they carried us further than we originally anticipated—to a new appreciation of its architect and a broader understanding of the architectural history of the Craftsman era in Portland.

Our first attempts at house research, though generously assisted by members of the local preservation group, the Bosco-Milligan Foundation, led us only into a thicket of dead ends: old building permits lost or destroyed, lax permit enforcement in the city's early decades; and an apparent nonchalance about identifying architects.

At first, all we knew about its history was what our agent had told us: it was built in 1906, about four years before Craftsman homes began appearing in Portland in large numbers. It wasn't until we happened on a photograph on page 27 of Paul Duchscherer and Douglas

Keister's *Inside the Bungalow*—of “An Inglenook ... by noted Portland architect Emil Schacht” that took up all of one end of a living room—that we had even a clue about who might have designed it. That inglenook was strikingly similar to ours, even to the unusual columns framing the opening. Either our house had been designed by Schacht, we thought, or a builder who was familiar with Schacht's work had borrowed his style.

It took us more than a year to find the answer, which finally turned up among hundreds of Schacht's drawings in the Therkelsen Collection at the University of Oregon's Special Collections Library in Eugene. After a long day of searching, we came across the drawings for “House #14 for Russell and Blythe” depicting the plan of our house precisely, with just one difference: left and right were reversed.

Schacht, we learned, had been commissioned by Russell and Blythe, two local businessmen, to design a group of “modern” showcase houses for a newly platted tract, Willamette Heights, on a hill above the grounds of the planned 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, Portland's

widely promoted world's fair. Like countless other developers, Russell and Blythe were betting that the exposition would bring a flood of new residents to the city's rapidly urbanizing agricultural trading hub. House #14 was one of more than a dozen homes Schacht designed for the tract, tapping into the ideas of the English Arts and Crafts architects and those of Gustav Stickley and the American Craftsman movement. While the buildings were going up, Russell and Blythe used their local business and civic connections to engineer a regular streetcar tour from the gates of the fairgrounds to their new neighborhood. Thousands of the 2.2 million visitors who attended the fair must have taken the ride six blocks up the hill to see these new homes.

Young Harry Nicolai, whose father's company was supplying millwork for the homes and who himself went on to become one of Portland's most important entrepreneurs, admired Schacht and asked him to design a house for him on a lot in Irvington, across the Willamette River, which bisects the city. Ever thrifty, he chose an existing design—#14, the most modern of the Willamette Heights homes. Construction began right after Nicolai bought the land in September 1905 and was completed the following January. For reasons now unknown, but perhaps to capitalize on the housing boom triggered by the fair, Nicolai put the house on the market in June. It took a long time to sell—it may have been *too* modern for the tastes of the day—and the several spec homes Nicolai built soon thereafter were more conservative.



Dry Run

By the fall of the year we bought the house, we had begun assessing how to take it back to its Craftsman roots. We decided that our big “dry run” for major restoration would be the breakfast nook—once the “Butlery” as named in the drawings.

Over the years, a succession of owners had painted the beautiful fir tongue-and-groove paneling, glued cardboard over that, then applied seven layers of wallpaper in a desperate attempt to make a warm and inviting space, something we soon found the original paneling did



remarkably well. Spurred by an agreement to participate in the May 2001 Irvington Home Tour, in which 1,200 curious ticket holders would troop through the house looking at our restoration work, we pressed on through 2000 to complete the room. Digging paint out of hundreds of crevices, sanding out gouges and scratches harboring recalcitrant paint, and finally finishing the woodwork with four coats of hand-mixed orange shellac, we completed the work just days before the tour.

VIEW INTO THE DINING ROOM FROM THE BUTLERY-BECOME-BREAKFAST NOOK. THE PHONE IS A 1937 VINTAGE UNIT. THE FIR PANELING WAS COVERED WITH SEVEN LAYERS OF WALLPAPER PRIOR TO RESTORATION.





NATIVE AMERICAN AND ARTS AND CRAFTS POTTERY MINGLE ON THE FIREPLACE MANTEL, WHOSE STRONG HORIZONTAL LINES ECHO PRAIRIE STYLE DESIGNS. THE CHAIR AT RIGHT CAME FROM THE BOARD ROOM OF THE ROCK ISLAND LINES RAILROAD.

Multiyear Restoration Project

With that warm-up behind us, we turned to the multiyear preservation plan we developed later that year when we nominated the house for the National Register of Historic Places and applied for participation in Oregon's Special Assessment of Historic Properties program. (The better candidate for the National Register listing would have been the original House #14 in Willamette Heights, but a 1950s remodel of that house had eliminated it from consideration.) The biggest part of the work was the restoration of the living and dining rooms in 2002. We remodeled the kitchen in 2003 and finished the planned interior restorations for the second floor last fall. As of early 2006, the restoration was about 75 percent complete.

Given the near-total destruction of the Pacific Northwest's old-growth forests, we were determined not to use newly cut old-growth Douglas fir to replace missing woodwork. A local millwork supplier filled the bill with old-growth wood cut from 100-year-old timbers from a demolished industrial water tank. As in 1905, each board was hand selected for the beauty of its grain.

In the living room, skilled plasterers recreated the seamless sand-finish ("rough under the float") plaster on the ceiling and walls above the plate rail. Period-appropriate "milk paint" was an ideal alternative to the original calimine paint — better, really, because its velvety texture and thinner film allow more of the sand texture to show through, just as the hand-mixed orange shellac has brought out the luminous grain of the Douglas fir woodwork, stained, as called for in the original drawings, to the "color of fumed oak."

What's left? The big question remains, "What about the stucco?" Our exploratory stucco removal has revealed shingles, nearly black with asphalt preservative, under the almost two-inch-thick metal-lath-reinforced cement stucco that extends nearly 40 feet from the ground to the peak of the roof. Removing it would be a major task and is not required under the preservation plan, but it would be a huge step toward the restoration of an important Craftsman house.

The Sometimes Painful Realities of Research

Tracking down the provenance of historic homes in the Portland area is tough, especially for homes like ours that were built prior to the summer of 1906.

Nearly all building permit files at City Hall in Portland were destroyed in the 1920s by a fire. What wasn't destroyed then was thrown out in the 1950s. As a result, there is no single source for determining who the architects were for the city's historic buildings. Even if the records had survived, it wasn't until 1908 that the building permit process started to be rigorously enforced; many buildings before that simply had no permits. The plumbing permit process started around 1907, and while those permits survive, they rarely mention architects.

The records in the County Tax Assessor's office all show a "date built," but only a very small percentage of those dates were entered at the time the buildings were built. Most of the pre-1930 dates were added by tax assessors in the late 1920s who went from house to house looking at the structure and basically saying, "Hmmm. That looks like it was built in, let's see, maybe 1910." Many of the build dates in the tax records are off by as many as 10 years or more.

In 1984, the City of Portland created its Historic Resources Inventory, listing several thousand buildings, but for many of the listings, no architect was identified—and many thousands more historic homes, including ours, were simply overlooked.

That leaves searching through multiple sources: contemporary news articles in *The Oregonian* (Portland's major daily newspaper since 1854) and references in the *Portland Daily Abstract* or *Pacific Builder and Engineer*. Neither of the latter two publications is available for the period of our house's construction, so that left *The Oregonian*, which is only very sketchily indexed for those years.



A brute-force search through *The Oregonian* microfilms did produce a photo of the house in the Sunday real estate section for January 14, 1906. But there was no mention of the architect in the photo caption. By the time we found that, we had a copy of the inventory of Schacht drawings in the Therkelsen Collection, and two of the homes pictured on that same day were known Schacht homes based on the index of drawings, but there was no mention in the Therkelsen index of a house for Harry Nicolai.

We contacted Schacht historian Patricia Sackett Chrisman after we determined that our house was a Schacht design so as to get input from her for our National Register nomination. Patty's 1989 M.A. thesis in Historic Preservation at the University of Oregon, "A Partial Inventory of the Work of Emil Schacht," relied heavily on the Therkelsen Collection. It was she who brought us to realize the importance of Schacht's "House #14" in Willamette Heights, of which our house is a nearly identical copy. That prompted us to dig further into the Willamette Heights history and, ultimately, to understand how important Emil

Schacht was in Portland residential design of the period.

In her thesis, Patty identified approximately 180 Emil Schacht buildings, of which about 120 or so then survived. One of the missions we set for ourselves after we put our house on the National Register was to expand Patty's inventory. We have since added nearly 100 homes and commercial buildings.

That is progress, certainly. But because of the unfillable gaps in the early records, there are quite a few important historic homes in Portland, as there undoubtedly are in other cities, whose architects will probably never be identified.

Jim Heuer is a logistics and transportation consultant in private practice. He and his partner, Robert Mercer, are preservation enthusiasts and volunteers at Portland's Architectural Heritage Center. This is the second Irvington neighborhood home they have restored.



Emil Schacht's Heritage

In previous lives, we had both been interested in architectural preservation, but that interest flagged as mid-life crises and making livings took precedence. This house project changed all of that.

Once we pinned down the architectural attribution to Schacht, we discovered that he was one of the most under-appreciated architects of his day. The standard histories of Portland architecture dismissed him as largely irrelevant; his last important commission was listed as the

Oriental Building for the Lewis and Clark Exposition, even though his most important buildings came in later years: the Portland Police Bureau (1912), several major downtown office buildings, and his distinctive Craftsman Style houses.

Setting out to revive his reputation, we began by looking for buildings and houses that researchers in the 1980s had missed. We managed to expand the known list of his buildings in Portland from just over 180 to nearly 300.



Resources

HISTORIC PLYWOOD,
ELECTRICAL SWITCHES AND OTHER
PARTS:

**Aurora Mills
Architectural Salvage**
14971 First Street,
Aurora, Ore. 97002
503 678-6083
auroramills.com

GENERAL CONTRACTING,
WOODWORK AND WINDOW
RESTORATION:

**Craftsman Design and
Renovation**
1235 S.E. Division Street,
Suite 203A
Portland, Ore. 97202
503 239-6200
craftsmansdesign.com

REPRODUCTION LIGHTING:

**Rejuvenation
Portland Retail Store**
1100 SE Grand Avenue,
Portland, Ore. 97214
503 238-1900
rejuvenation.com

CUSTOM-MILLED SALVAGED
OLD-GROWTH DOUGLAS FIR
WOODWORK:

Creative Woodworking NW
1036 SE Taylor
Portland, Ore. 97214-2527
503 230-9265
creativewoodworkingnw.com

RECONSTRUCTION OF STAIR
LANDING AND OTHER
PRECISION WOODWORKING
ASSEMBLIES:

**Gideon Hughes Furniture
Artist**
Portland, Ore.
503 233-1639

DINING ROOM STENCILS:

**Trimbelle River Studio
& Design**
P.O. Box 568
Ellsworth, Wis. 54011
715 273-4844
trimbelleriver.com

CUSTOM CRAFTSMAN
FURNITURE:

Black River Mission
P.O. Box 146
Milford, N.Y. 13807
607 286-7641
blackrivermission.com

CUSTOM CRAFTSMAN
FURNITURE:

**Furniture-Craft
by Walt Heck**
4507 NE Fremont St
Portland, Ore. 97213
503 287-5685



To celebrate our discoveries, we held a party for owners of Schacht-designed homes.

Our research has now carried us beyond Schacht to other important Portland architects of the Craftsman era. We are continuing to discover Portland's trove of Craftsman Style treasures and the talented designers who created them. All because we agreed to "take a look at that house." 