

1990
FIRST PRIZE
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FRANK WOLFE
AND
THE PRAIRIE STYLE
IN
SAN JOSE

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INTRODUCTION

The most significant architect practicing in San Jose during the first quarter of this century was Frank D. Wolfe (1863-1929). He was the area's most talented designer of the California bungalow. Many of his designs are what give character to some of San Jose's most prominent neighborhoods including the Naglee, Hanchett and Palm Haven areas. He was involved, in various roles, with six projects in Santa Clara County which have earned national recognition by their inclusion in either the National Register of Historic Places or the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Most significantly, Frank Wolfe introduced the influence of the Prairie School to the South Bay area and helped make San Jose one of the important West Coast locations for this primarily Midwestern style. The Prairie School was born in Chicago in the 1890's and its members developed America's only indigenous architectural style. The movement was a regional manifestation of the international revolution that swept through the visual arts at the turn of the century. It flourished from 1900 - 1915 under the leadership of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. The work of the Prairie School was popular and quickly spread to other parts of the country, mostly by its being published in architectural and popular magazines.

The primary characteristic of a Prairie house was its emphasis on the horizontal line. The building's forms were usually simple and cubic. Roofs were commonly a low-sloping hip, or flat, and extended into a generous overhang. Continuous horizontal wood or stucco bands were used to tie together various elements such as door and window trim or edges of balconies, porch railings and planter boxes. Stucco was the most common exterior finish though brick and horizontal wood board and batten were also used. Casement windows, unusual for that time, were organized into strips and featured leaded glass or wood muntins in geometric patterns. Tile, terra cotta or metalwork was sometimes used in a geometric (Wrightian) or efflorescent (Sullivan-esque) design.

Frank Wolfe, despite his accomplishments, remains virtually ignored in local historical and architectural studies. This essay is an attempt to consolidate information about the man and his work which has appeared in various scattered sources. It also includes the most comprehensive inventory yet compiled of Prairie Style buildings in San Jose. Although I suspect Wolfe was responsible for most of these designs, I wasn't able to confirm that and so have included the unattributed Prairie Style buildings in a separate chapter.

THE EARLY YEARS
(1863-1899)

Frank Wolfe was born in Fremont, Ohio in September 1863. After graduating he moved from his home state to Newton, Kansas where he worked for the architect W.L. Ross. By the age of 25 he had decided to move West and in 1888 relocated to San Jose. He first appeared in the 1890 edition of the San Jose directory, listed as a contractor and builder.

Wolfe established his architectural practice in 1895. There is some evidence that he may have inherited the practice of Joseph McKee. McKee, one of San Jose's most prominent architects of his time, retired in 1894. His last office, at 153 E. San Fernando St., was Wolfe's office during 1895 and 1896. McKee built many homes in Naglee Park and even more would be built there by Frank Wolfe. In addition to moving into McKee's office, in 1895 Wolfe also hired one of McKee's former employees, Charles McKenzie.

Charles S. McKenzie was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1874. His father Donald McKenzie, a cabinet maker and draftsman, moved the family to San Jose while Charles was still an infant. McKenzie attended San Jose's public schools graduating from high school in 1888. He inherited many of his father's constructive and creative abilities. In addition to his architectural work Charles produced many fine

oil paintings.

Wolfe moved the office in 1897 to the Spring Building at 85 W. Santa Clara St. where he stayed for the next three years. During this time McKenzie proved himself particularly valuable to his employer. In 1899 he was offered and accepted Wolfe's proposal of a partnership.

WOLFE & MCKENZIE
(1900-1911)

Wolfe & McKenzie established their offices in the Smout Building at 67 W. Santa Clara St. where they would stay for the duration of their partnership. During the next decade they developed an excellent reputation as primarily residential architects building over 100 homes and several commercial buildings throughout Santa Clara County.

Their first significant project was a residence and carriage house built for Willard Griffin in the Los Altos Hills. Griffin, a shipbuilder, headed a company that packed, canned and dried fruit. For him they designed an interesting brown shingle residence with leaded glass windows, a generous porch, tall thin dormers and a roof with flared eaves which gave the building a Japanese quality (Fig. 1). This may have been something Griffin requested as he had an interest in Japanese architecture. He returned from a visit to Japan in 1906 with some craftsmen who built a shrine near his home. The Griffin Residence and Carriage House are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are now a part of the Foothill College Campus. The school's Fire Department occupies the carriage house.

An important opportunity in the evolution of Wolfe & McKenzie's practice came in 1905 when they were asked to supervise the construction of Gilroy's City Hall (Fig. 3).

San Francisco architect Samuel Newsom, who with his brother Joseph was responsible for the Carson House in Eureka, designed the City Hall in an unusual interpretation of the Mission Revival style. Whereas Wolfe & McKenzie's earlier work showed an affinity for Craftsman and Japanese houses, after working on Newsom's City Hall elements of the Mission Revival would appear frequently in their residences. They did such an excellent job at supervising in the field that more and more out of town architects began using their services for buildings constructed in the San Jose area. One example of this working relationship is the San Jose Elks Club building.

The Gilroy City Hall was used until 1967 and came close to being demolished. The building was saved and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. It serves as the office and museum of the Gilroy Historical Society.

That Wolfe & McKenzie were quite successful is evidenced by the fact that a book of their designs was published in 1907. The book featured plans, estimates and photographs of 98 of their homes built over the previous six years. The styles they drew from ranged from Colonial to Craftsman to Queen Anne. A few of the homes even contained suggestions of the Prairie Style which would eventually dominate Wolfe's work.

The multitude of styles represented in the book was a reflection of not only the personal tastes of their various clients but also of Wolfe & McKenzie's willingness to produce designs which reflected these different tastes. Some insight

into the architects' approach to their work can be found in their introductory statement found at the beginning of their book:

"It has always been our chief aim in planning our clients' homes, to follow their ideas as nearly as possible, helping them as much as we can by suggesting, illustrating, etc., and not holding ourselves to one idea or design; we have thereby obtained a large number of different plans and designs, which we are pleased to present in the following pages."

Another part of the Introduction shows their attention to detail and the fact that they thought of their buildings as works of art.

"In placing this Book of Designs on the market, we do so knowing that it will help those contemplating building, and we sincerely hope that in building from these plans they will be followed accurately and not changed so as not to lose their proper lines and proportions."

In fact, not unlike Frank Lloyd Wright, Wolfe & McKenzie were not beyond altering photographs of their buildings to improve their visual presentation. Over one-third of the designs presented in their book have received curious little projections at their roof peaks which give the designs an Oriental or artistic quality.

The book is an excellent source for determining what could be considered the Wolfe & McKenzie style. Many of the homes feature predominately hipped roofs, usually in combination with a gable to accent a particular element, and a small centrally located hipped dormer. Entry porches with round or squared Tuscan columns are common as are second floor balconies or roof decks. Single or twin corner

pavilions are frequently used many times featuring squared projecting bays with tightly spaced brackets below. Quatrefoil or cameo windows were often used as accents, as were garlands.

A day's drive through the older neighborhoods of San Jose and Santa Clara will show that literally hundreds of homes could be directly or indirectly attributed to Wolfe & McKenzie. They certainly were the architects most responsible for giving character to the area's residential communities during the period of 1900 to 1910.

One of the largest concentrations of Wolfe's work can be found in the Hanchett Residence Park. The 77 acre tract, bounded by Park Ave., Race St. and the Alameda, was sold in 1859 by Henry Louis Naglee for \$6,142.00. The land was developed into the County Agricultural Park and featured a one-mile horse track, a quarter-mile velodrome for bike racers and various concessions and displays.

The park was used as the County Fairgrounds until 1901 when it was sold to the Peninsula Land Development Company. They began its conversion into a residential subdivision. In 1905, local railroad magnate Lewis E. Hanchett purchased the tract and continued the development of what then became the Hanchett Residence Park.

Hanchett, along with real estate developer T.S. Montgomery, created a state of the art subdivision. After the tract was surveyed in 1908, the park was laid out by San Francisco landscape architect John McLaren, whose resume included the planning of Golden Gate Park. It featured

gently curved roads with concrete gutters, curbs and sidewalks, modern septic tanks, circulating water and electric street lights. According to a real estate brochure of the time most of the residences were to be designed by Wolfe & McKenzie.

The Hanchett Residence Park contains one of Northern California's finest collections of bungalows and is still one of San Jose's most desirable neighborhoods. After Wolfe & McKenzie disbanded, Frank Wolfe continued to build there with his son Carl and possibly with his last partner William Higgins. Hanchett Park was annexed to the City of San Jose in 1925 and was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey as "an excellent example of a carefully planned California subdivision of the early Twentieth Century."

In addition to their residential work, Wolfe & McKenzie built several commercial buildings in Santa Clara Valley including San Jose's Abstract Co. Building, the Wenger, Knapp & Clark Building, the O.H. Hale & Co. Building, the Sperry Flour Co. Building, the Santa Clara County Hospital and the Farmers' and Merchants' State Bank in Mt. View.

Their business contacts were certainly helped by their membership in several local fraternities. In addition to Wolfe's membership in the Knights of Pythias and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, both partners were members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. This last membership contributed to their being selected to design the Odd Fellows Hall in Santa Maria.

The Collins School, Cupertino's one-room schoolhouse

designed in 1889 by Joseph McKee, was remodeled in 1908 by Wolfe & McKenzie. Another addition in 1914 brought the building to its current four-room size. The school was closed in 1921 upon the formation of a consolidated school district and when Homestead Road was widened in 1959 it was moved from its original corner location to its present site. The Collins School was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey and is now part of the Cupertino de Oro Club.

Wolfe & McKenzie dissolved their partnership in 1911 after a successful 11 year career together during which they had earned an outstanding reputation in the Santa Clara Valley. The reason for their break up is not known. The fact that they both continued to live and work in San Jose suggests that they may have had some difference of opinion. They may have just grown tired of each other or McKenzie may have felt he was being held back by the older Wolfe. Perhaps it was that McKenzie couldn't understand Frank Wolfe's growing fascination with a new progressive style of architecture that was then emerging from the American Midwest. Soon after McKenzie's departure Wolfe's work began showing the influence of the Prairie School.

BUILDINGS

1901 Willard M. Griffin Residence & Carriage House
12345 S. El Monte Rd.
Los Altos Hills

1905 Gilroy City Hall
Monterey & Sixth St.
Gilroy
supervised construction

1908 Collins School Addition
20441 Homestead Rd.
Cupertino

Residence
158 Tillman Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Lewis E. Hanchett Residence #1
1257 Martin Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Lewis E. Hanchett Residence #2 (project)
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Residence
1249 Martin Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Residence
1225 Martin Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

San Jose Abstract Company Building
74 N. First St.
San Jose

Santa Clara County Hospital
San Jose

Wenger, Knapp & Clark Building
San Jose

O.H. Hale & Company Building
San Jose

Sperry Flour Company Building
San Jose

Elks Club Building
San Jose
supervised construction

Farmers' & Merchants' State Bank
Mt. View

Odd Fellows Building
Santa Maria

Residence
444 N. First St.
San Jose

Residence
629 N. First St.
San Jose

Residence
277 N. Fifth St.
San Jose

Residence
698 S. Seventh St.
San Jose

Residence
52 N. Eleventh St.
San Jose

Residence
55 N. Eleventh St.
San Jose

Residence
98 S. Eleventh St.
San Jose

Residence
133 S. Twelfth St.
San Jose

Residence
198 S. Twelfth St.
San Jose

Residence
255 S. Twelfth St.
San Jose

Residence
75 S. Thirteenth St.
San Jose

Residence
173 S. Thirteenth St.
San Jose

Residence
45 E. Julian St.
San Jose

Residence
801 S. Winchester Blvd.
San Jose

Residence
986 Bellomy St.
Santa Clara

WOLFE & WOLFE
(1912-1916)

There were two other events besides Charles McKenzie's departure that coincided with Frank Wolfe's adoption of the Prairie Style. The first was the entrance of Frank's son Carl into his office. The second was Wolfe being commissioned by Fremont and Cora Older to design their home in Cupertino.

Carl J. Wolfe was first listed in the 1904 edition of the San Jose Directory as a student. Upon his graduation in 1907 he entered into a brief partnership with another family member, Jeremiah Wolfe, a contractor in San Jose since 1890. It seems Carl wasn't cut out for construction and soon was working as a draftsman and ultimately in 1909 as an architect. He went to work for his father in 1911 and the following year, when they moved into new offices in the First National Bank Building, he was made an associate.

Perhaps the most significant commission of Wolfe's career was the home he designed for Fremont and Cora Older. It is possible that Fremont was the person responsible for exposing Wolfe to the work of the Prairie School and more specifically of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Fremont Older (1856-1935), like Frank Lloyd Wright, was born in Wisconsin, coming to California as a boy. In the 1890's he became the city editor of the San Francisco Call.

He went to the Bulletin in 1897 when the Call was purchased at auction by Claus Spreckels. The following year Claus' son John D. Spreckels was placed in charge of managing the paper.

After the 1906 earthquake many of San Francisco's more prominent citizen's began thinking of moving south where life would be much simpler and hopefully safer. Fremont Older was no exception. He wanted a country home where he could entertain his distinguished circle of friends which included writer Lincoln Steffens, attorney Clarence Darrow, banker Rudolph Spreckels and former San Francisco mayor James Phelan. He began telling his friends of his idea to set up a "cooperative community of intellectuals" somewhere in the Santa Clara Valley.

Although Darrow never seriously considered joining Older's community, James Phelan did. (It was Older who first encouraged Phelan to run for mayor of San Francisco in 1896.) Eventually, Phelan abandoned the idea of going in on the project with Older, purchased 160 acres in the Saratoga foothills in 1911 and began his Villa Montalvo project. He commissioned John McLaren to lay out the grounds.

Older purchased 160 acres a few miles from Phelan in the foothills of Cupertino. Fremont and Cora were looking to build something much more rustic and informal than Villa Montalvo, although their ranch also had its own name, "Woodhills". It's possible that they were referred to Frank Wolfe by John McLaren who was familiar with his work in the Hanchett Residence Park.

For the Olders, Wolfe & Wolfe designed something unlike

anything ever done by Wolfe & McKenzie. Woodhills was completely stripped of any of the picturesque qualities of Wolfe's previous work. The house is a collection of shingled cubes with no overhangs and flat roofs, some of which serve as sun decks. Although not done purely in the Prairie Style, with its flat roofs, cubic massing, rustic materials and casement windows, the Older residence certainly was a step in that direction. Woodhills is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey.

The fact that Woodhills is so different from the work of Wolfe & McKenzie suggests that the Olders had strong ideas of their own about how they wanted their home to be designed. There were two reasons why Older would have been aware of Frank Lloyd Wright and his work at this time. First of all, in 1909 Wright left his wife and six children, sailing to Europe with the wife of a client. The affair appeared in all of the country's major newspapers and if Older wasn't aware of Wright before then he certainly was by 1910. Also, in 1912 Wright was involved in the design of a skyscraper for San Francisco which would have housed the offices of the Call.

Frank Lloyd Wright was most likely brought into the Call project by his associate on the job, Los Angeles architect Harrison Albright, who at the time was handling most of John Spreckels' developments in Southern California. Wright's son, John Lloyd Wright was at this time working for Albright. Perhaps Albright felt intimidated by the scale of the project

and brought Wright in to assist. Wright had worked for six years in the offices of Adler & Sullivan, who designed many of the world's first great skyscrapers.

Regardless of their method of discovery, Wolfe & Wolfe were certainly impressed with Wright's work. From 1912 on Wolfe's work showed, with differing degrees, the influence of Wright's Prairie houses. The first building to show this influence was Frank Wolfe's own house at 595 Brooks Ave.

Over 40 Prairie Style buildings were built in the San Jose area, about one-fourth of them have been verified as Wolfe & Wolfe designs. Almost without exception those buildings built from 1912 - 1916 were single family residences that featured flat roofs, cubic massing and stucco exteriors. Although the exteriors of their buildings reflected the appearance of Wright's designs, Wolfe & Wolfe never seemed able or willing to explore Wright's more revolutionary concepts regarding a building's space and floor plan.

The most widely published of Wolfe & Wolfe's work is the Peter Col residence in the Hanchett Residence Park. The one-story bungalow features flat roofs, geometric leaded glass windows and decorative stucco trim. The design proved very popular and was featured on a San Jose postcard of its time. (Fig. 4) The Col Residence was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Variations on the Col design were built at 148 Race St., 1147 Minnesota Ave. and 2662 Monterey Rd. The house on Minnesota was the home of Paul Clark, the first mayor of

Willow Glen. The Monterey Rd. design was built for Frank Holt and during prohibition served as a speakeasy.

Carl Wolfe was not listed as his father's associate or employee during World War I. From 1916 to 1919 things seem to have slowed down quite a bit and Frank Wolfe practiced on his own, moving his office to the Auzerias Building. In 1919 he moved out of his Prairie Style bungalow and down the street to the old family house at 1060 Bird Ave.

BUILDINGS

- 1912 Fremont & Cora Older Residence
"Woodhills"
22800 Prospect Rd.
Cupertino
- 1912 Frank & Nellie Wolfe Residence
595 Brooks Ave.
San Jose
- 1913 Robert B. Jones Residence
1115 Lafayette St.
Santa Clara
- 1913 Peter E. Col Residence
1163 Martin Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose
- 1915 Frank Holt Residence
2662 Monterey Rd.
San Jose
- 1915 Wolfe Apartments
179 Park Ave.
San Jose
demolished
- 1915 Paul F. Clark Residence
1147 Minnesota Ave.
San Jose
- Apartments
99 E. Julian St
San Jose
- Residence
"The Macomber"
Paicines Ranch
Hollister

Residence
1208 Martin Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Residence
1151 Sierra Rd.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Residence
1299 Yosemite Ave.
Hanchett Residence Park
San Jose

Residence
148 Race St.
San Jose

WOLFE & HIGGINS
(1919-1926)

In 1919 Frank Wolfe entered into a partnership with W.E. Higgins of Santa Clara. Their office continued to be located in the Auzerais Building. Although Wolfe & Higgins practiced together for seven years, the author was unable to find any record of their work. There are some Prairie houses in San Jose that, if built in the 1920's may be the work of Wolfe & Higgins. These designs are listed in the next chapter on unattributed Prairie Style buildings.

Carl Wolfe returned to his father's office in 1922. After four years, Carl was once again made an associate, this time in anticipation of his father's retirement. Frank Wolfe retired in 1927, although the firm of Wolfe & Higgins continued to practice into the 1930's with his son in his place.

Poor health was most likely the cause of Wolfe's retirement. He lived his final years with his wife Nellie in the house he built for them in 1920 at 925 Plaza Dr. When he died in 1929, Frank Wolfe went to his final resting place assured that he had been a major contributor to the quality of architecture in the Santa Clara Valley.

THE PRAIRIE STYLE IN SAN JOSE

The San Jose area has over 40 Prairie Style buildings, making it one of the most significant locations for this style on the West Coast. The buildings can easily be divided into two groups. The first group appears to have been built from 1910-1920 and features flat roofs, cubic massing and stucco exteriors. These buildings were most likely the work of Wolfe and Wolfe. The buildings in the second group are also finished with stucco but their massing is less ambitious and their roofs gently hipped. These homes could have been built in the 1920's or 30's and may be the work of Wolfe & Higgins.

BUILDINGS

Residence
1225 Hanchett Ave.

Residence
1312 Yosemite Ave.

Residence
480 Saratoga Ave.

Residence
1311 McKendrie St.

Residence
1009 Villa Ave.

Residence
85 Humboldt Pl.

Residence
130 Humboldt Pl.

Residence
747 State St.

Residence
665 Coe Ave.

Residence
696 Coe Ave.

Residence
925 Clintonia Ave.

Residence
936 Clintonia Ave.

Residence
846 Plaza Dr.

Residence
901 Plaza Dr.

Residence
935 Plaza Dr.

Residence
551 N. Third St.

Residence
122 N. Fifth St.

Residence
178 N. Sixth St.

Residence
509 N. Sixteenth St.

Residence
766 N. Seventeenth St.

Residence
790 N. Seventeenth St.

Residence
99 S. Fifteenth St.

Residence
310 S. Fifteenth St.

Residence
402 S. Fifteenth St.

Residence
403 S. Fifteenth St.

Residence
310 S. Sixteenth St.

Residence
245 S. Seventeenth St.

Residence
519 E. Taylor St.

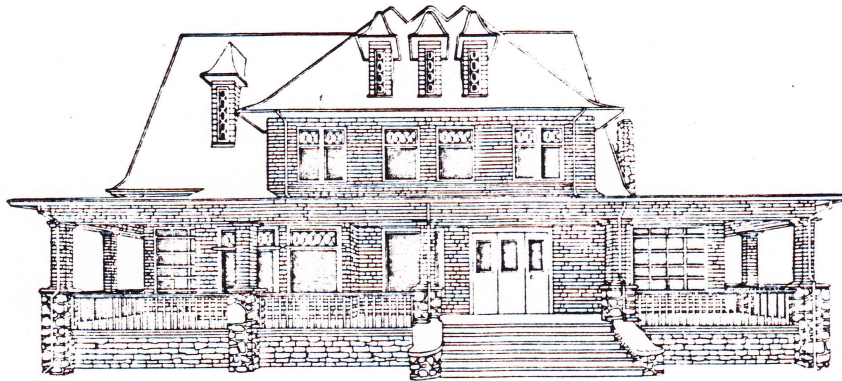
Apartments
79 W. Devine St.

Willow Glen School
1425 Lincoln Ave.
demolished

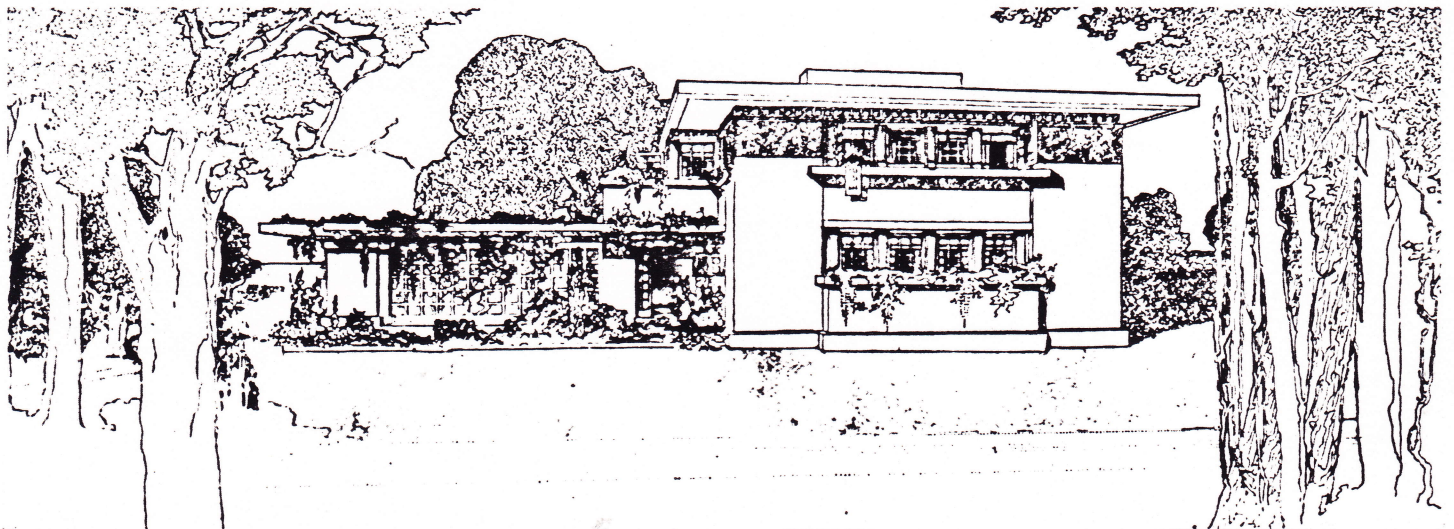
Residence
1439 Newport Ave.

Residence
1461 Newport Ave.

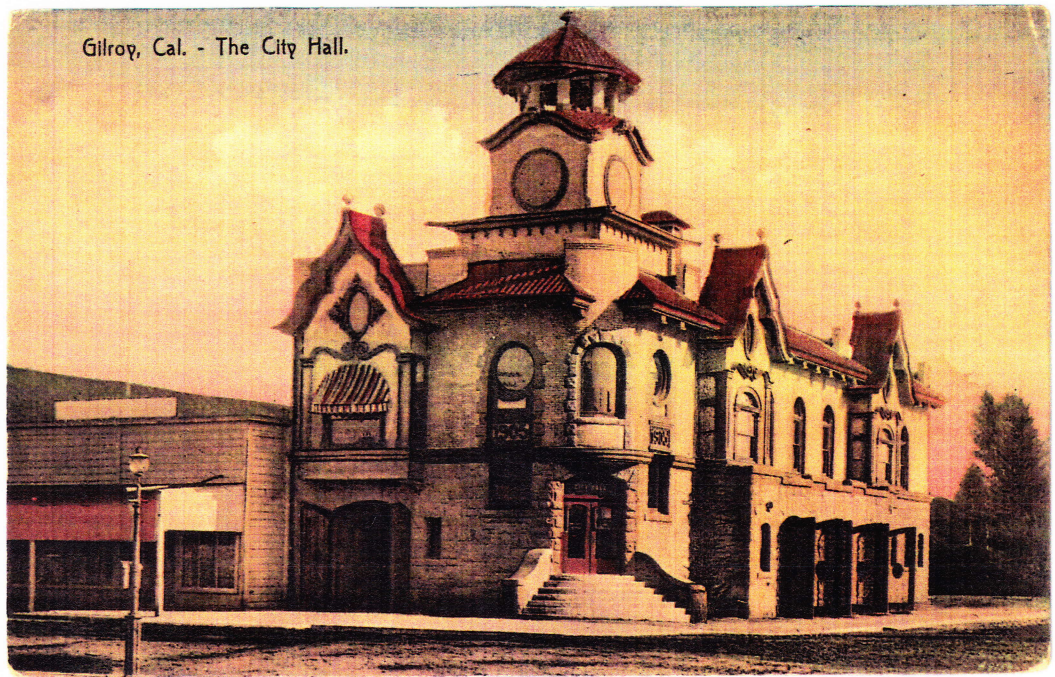
Residence
1028 Ramona Ave.



1. Willard S. Griffin Residence (1901)
 Los Altos Hills, California
 Wolfe & McKenzie

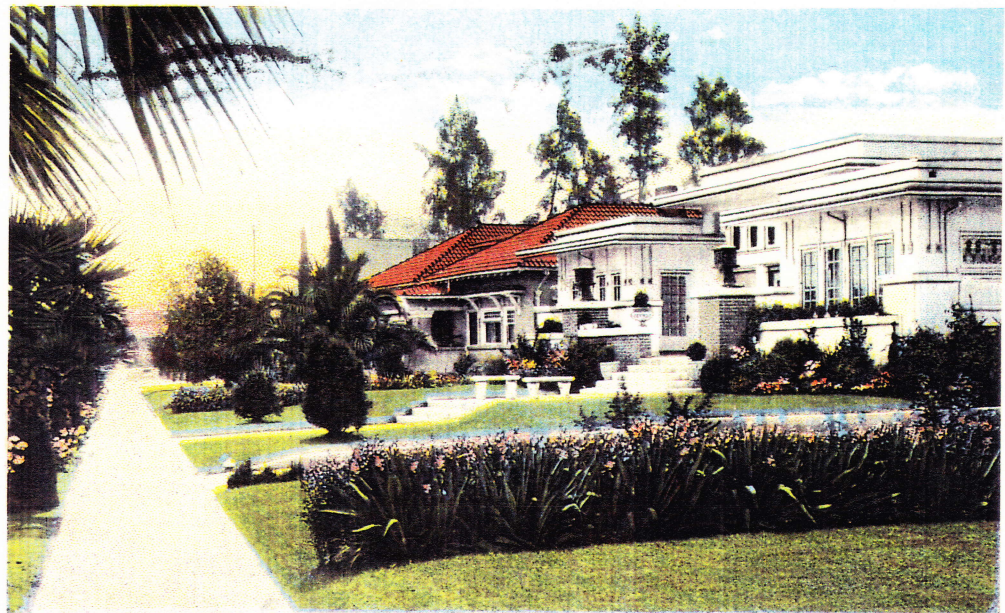


2. "A Fireproof House for \$5,000" (1906)
 Frank Lloyd Wright



Gilroy, Cal. - The City Hall.

3. Gilroy City Hall (1905)
Gilroy, California
Samuel Newsom/Wolfe & McKenzie



A RESIDENCE STREET, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA.

4. Peter E. Col Residence (1913)
San Jose, California
Wolfe & Wolfe

NOTES

1. The author was unable to identify any projects that Frank Wolfe either built or designed between 1890 and 1899 although Clyde Arbuckle has written that in 1895 an A.F. Wolfe designed San Jose's Grace Lutheran Church at Second and Julian Streets.
2. At the time this essay was written (April 1990) the Griffin Residence was under the threat of demolition by the Foothill-De Anza Community College District who needs the land for office space.
3. The Prairie Style buildings in San Jose most resemble the cubic/flat-roofed appearance of Wright's "Fireproof House for \$5,000" (Fig. 2) published in the April 1907 issue of the Ladies' Home Journal. Another publication which helped to spread Wright's work across the country was his article, "In the Cause of Architecture" which appeared in the March 1908 issue of the Architectural Record. This was Wright's first mature statement regarding his idea of an "organic" architecture and featured 55 pages of photographs and drawings of his work from the previous 10 years.

Less likely, but still possible, was that Wolfe & Wolfe acquired one of the portfolios of Wright's work that was published in Berlin in 1910 and 1911. Copies of the publications could be purchased directly from Wright and they were advertised for sale in the Architectural Record in January and February of 1913.

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