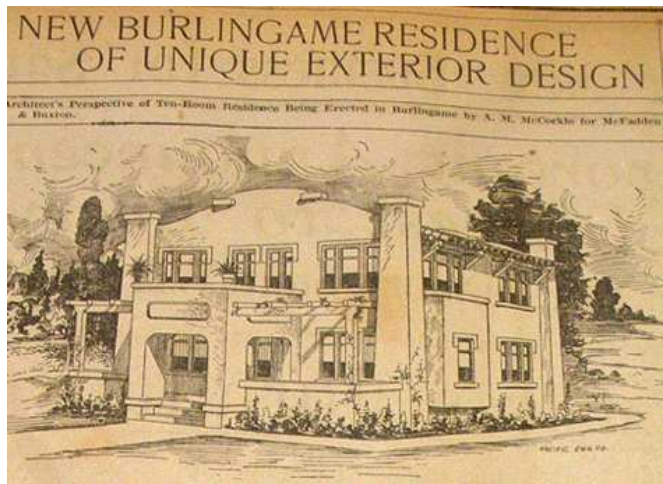


ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK SPECIAL SURPRISES OF 3048 LAUREL STREET

By Art Bowen

In 1995, after receiving notice of an accepted offer on a 3-bedroom house in Burlingame, my realtor Sharon Brand and I conducted a walk-through/inspection prior to opening escrow. My dreams of owning a home in Burlingame were quickly crushed when Sharon pulled me outside and informed me that while she certainly could use the commission, she couldn't, in good conscience, allow me to purchase that house because of the level of disrepair and the financial strain it all but guaranteed to put me and my wife through for years to come. I was heartbroken.

As we stood at the curb, I gazed down the street and spotted a crooked "For Sale" sign on the front lawn of 3048 Laurel St. Sharon, who was equally disappointed, suggested we take a look at it. It was a Short-Sale and had been on the market for one year to the day with no reasonable offers. My wife and I knew from the start, even with a reasonable offer, we could never afford to buy that house, so we made an "unreasonable" offer which was quickly accepted. As short sales are known to go, 6 months later, we closed escrow and were handed the keys. The second home built in Burlingame in April of 1912 was now ours.



3048 Laurel St. was built by Archibald McCorkle and was originally purchased by Nathan and Edith Cottee. The home was a two-story plastered exterior Mission Revival structure with a Craftsman signature. The main feature of the facade is a large broken arch. What sets this home apart from many is the four cornered pillars that hug the basic structure like miniature towers, a design borrowed from Spanish fortress architecture. Craftsman style touches are evident in the bracketed deep eaves of the roof and the twin pergolas flanking the main entryway.

Sharon made me aware of a number of exceptionally preserved photographs of many of the Burlingame homes on file at the San Diego History Center. I also had the pleasure of meeting the late Don Covington, a noted Burlingame historian. He set me on the path to getting my home listed as a San Diego historical landmark.

After several years of research, I was able to identify and contact more than a half dozen previous owners of the property. Unfortunately, the one family that eluded me was the original Cottee family. One day, my wife suggested I look them up in the phone book. After years of searching County records and countless trips to the San Diego library's California Room, I of

course discounted that suggestion as ridiculous, but to satisfy her, I opened the phone book and wouldn't you know it, there was an Art and Phyllis Cottee living in El Cajon.

Still refusing to believe original Cottee descendants were literally at the end of my index finger, I called the number and left a brief message on an answering machine. I asked if they may possibly be related to Edith and Nathan Cottee or be familiar with the house at 3048 Laurel St. My wife and I then left for a movie. Three hours later we returned home and discovered a message on my answering machine from Art Cottee. He said, "Hi Art, this is Art Cottee; we always thought that house had burned down...those were my grandparents. Please give me a call, I would love to talk to you about it."

I was beside myself. I immediately returned his call. He was as excited as I was. He told me he was 67 years old and as a little boy, he used to visit his grandparents, Nathan and Edith Cottee almost daily. He said his cousin Hazel is the one I really needed to talk to and he gave me her number. I called Hazel immediately. Hazel was equally as excited about talking about the house. She told me she was 76 years old, had lived in the home as a very young girl of 10 and had vivid memories of it. After a brief conversation, we arranged a meeting at my home one week later. Before we hung up, I told her the San Diego History Center provided me with a very clear 11x14 photograph depicting several girls, presumably young girls from the neighborhood, posing for a photograph on the porch of my house. The History Center put the date of the photo at 1912. Hazel said she was especially anxious to see that photograph.

One week later, Hazel and her husband arrived. She stepped out of the car and began to pace back and forth, fixated on the house and not uttering a word. Her husband said, "Leave her be, she'll be fine." Several minutes later, I asked Hazel if she would like to go inside. She smiled, shook my hand and said, "Yes, I would like that very much."

The moment we stepped inside, a flood of emotions swept over her. She was like a child in a candy store pointing at everything, unable to finish one sentence before beginning another. She talked about how as a child, she and her cousins would hang on the sliding pocket doors, they would stick their heads down in the laundry chute which dropped between the walls from an upstairs bedroom into the downstairs laundry area and how she and her aunts would form a line in the kitchen from the sink to the china cupboard to put dishes away, pointing to the exact cupboard. Hazel couldn't remember exactly what the kitchen flooring or ceiling looked like as a child, but she does recall lying on the floor in the kitchen and staring up at the ceiling. She recalls the floor was always very cool and the ceiling had some sort of pattern on it. I suggested it may have been a ceramic floor and possibly a tin ceiling. She said that was very likely.

Hazel pointed to a peculiar closet connecting the kitchen to the stairwell leading up. At the time I purchased the house, it was being used as a pantry. She remembered it to be a phone room and recalled how the phone used to have a loud ring to it and all the girls would run to that room to answer it.

Prior to leaving, she asked to be shown the photo of what I described as local neighborhood girls posing on the porch. She stared at the photo then looked up at me and asked when the it was taken. I told her 1912 or 1913. With eyes welled up, she pointed to the young girl on the far left in the photo and said, "That girl right there is 14 years old...I know because my mother was born in 1898 and that is my mother." It was a very touching moment, especially since she said she had no photos of her mother at that age. She described the other five girls as her aunts.

Remembering the many things Hazel recounted about that house, I set out to bring those features back as best I could. One year later, while searching online, I read an architectural salvage crew in Bangor Maine was demolishing a 100-year-old bank building and they were selling off perfectly preserved original ceiling tins. I purchased 200 square feet and installed

them on my kitchen ceiling. During that same time period, I crawled under the house and discovered a cut wire leading from directly under the area Hazel called the phone room. I followed the wire to a remote corner under the house. It lead me to a deteriorated one gallon sized burlap bag. Inside the bag I found a crumbling Western Electric Blue Bell dry-cell telephone battery which were in use a decade into the start of the 20th Century. That find motivated me to seal off the pantry and turn it into a phone room, complete with a working vintage phone and phone memorabilia on the walls.

I also removed the oak flooring in the kitchen and replaced it with custom designed one-inch hex shaped ceramic tiles. When it's hot out, my dog loves to spread out on it because it is always cool to the touch.



Later that same year, the City of San Diego approved my request to add my house to the rolls of historic homes in San Diego. I invited Art and Phyllis Cottee to the celebration and took their photo next to the bronze plate bearing their name. Art said he believed he was the last male Cottee and was extremely pleased to see his name will live on long after he's gone. It was a heartfelt proclamation.

As I studied the original photos of the house taken in 1912 as well as those provided to me by Hazel, I discovered a number of cosmetic changes to the outside of the house had taken place over the years. The original structure had three 5-foot long oval indentions cut into the plaster on all three sides of the protruding front balcony and every window had very pronounced "eyebrow caps" over the top extending slightly down the sides. All of these significant features were removed, presumably in the late 70's when the house had been re-stuccoed.

I hired the best stucco finisher I could find. I provided him a photo from 1912 and instructions to bring the house back to that original look. Thirty minutes into the project, he called me outside and said he had a surprise for me. As his co-worker began to dig a hole in the side of the stucco balcony in order to re-form and re-plaster the 1 1/2 inch deep oval figures, he discovered the ovals were still there but were stuccoed over and covered with a 3-foot wide decorative foam piece in order to hide the imperfections.



Three weeks later, after all the cosmetic changes were made, 3048 Laurel St from 1912 was back.



In 2003, while reluctantly demolishing the original failing single car garage to make room for a larger, more practical one, I discovered two small pieces of tin hidden inside a wall behind a piece of rotted plywood. Each measured approximately two square inches in size. One had a symbol of a bell with a raised date of 1918 and a 6-digit number stamped along the bottom. The other had a symbol of a Poppy dated 1917. It too had a serialized number along the bottom. The 1918 tin appeared to have been used for BB gun target practice because of the two prominent BB dents in the center. With no clue as to what these items were, I tossed them in my desk drawer where they sat for two years.

One day, while surfing the Internet for old California license plates to decorate my garage wall, I stumbled across a website displaying both of these tins. They were riveted to 1917 and 1918 porcelain license plates. Just as the plastic stick-on year tabs are used today to identify a vehicle's registration year, these tins were used in the early part of the century for the very same purpose.

I called California DMV in Sacramento hoping they could tell me anything about them. A clerk informed me they no longer maintained records that far back. He did say however, a prior employee who has since retired was an avid collector of license plates and as a parting gift, the Department gave him what they believed to be the last book containing owners plates dating that far back.

I contacted that employee and explained to him what I had found. He asked me for the 6-digit serial number at the bottom of the 1917. He said he will call me in a day or so if he finds anything. Less than an hour later, he called back bubbling with excitement over his findings. He said the 1917 license plate tab was assigned to a 1916 Touring Car belonging to Nathan and Edith Cottee who lived at 3048 Laurel St; my address!

I recently contacted Art Cottee to tell him of my find. I started by telling him how I had to demolish my garage to house my restored 1960 convertible Cadillac. Before I got a chance to discuss the registration tins, we got into a lengthy discussion about old cars. It turns out Art Cottee is a Board Member of the local chapter of the Antique Automobile Club of America. I agreed to join him as his guest at the next meeting.

I went on to tell him the story of the vehicle registration tins. I could hear the excitement in his voice as I relived the story of finding and researching them. When I brought up the issue of the BB dents on one of them, Art said, "Oh my, that's from my father." His father used to own a BB rifle and from time to time, he would sneak off to the garage for target practice. It was at that moment I realized what I had to do. Those items were a direct and tangible connection to Art Cottee's past...they belonged to him and he should have them.

I had both registration tins professionally mounted and framed and on June 7th, 2010, I stood before an audience of old car enthusiasts and Art Cottee's peers and surprised him by presenting him with that gift from his past. He said that was one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for him and he thanked me.

When Lori and I bought this home, we knew we stumbled on something very special. Six months after moving in, on New Year's Eve 1996, we exchanged wedding vows and rung in the new year filled with joy, gratitude and excitement over our future in our new beautiful home.

