

Once Upon a Time in North Park

If Walls Could Talk

By Katherine Hon

Do you ever wonder what stories your Craftsman home could tell of its former owners? Did someone famous in San Diego history walk down your halls, cook in your kitchen, and entertain guests in your living room? Do you think there's no way to find out? Good news! There's a wonderful research library close by in Balboa Park with all the tools and information that you need to uncover the history of your own home in San Diego. North Park is particularly rich with houses built in the early 1900's. The ongoing historical survey found that there are 7,200 structures built before 1960 in Greater North Park, with about 60% of them built between 1921 and 1930. That's a lot of stories, and if you want your walls to talk to you, the San Diego Historical Society Research Library (formerly the Archives) is the place to go.

The Research Library is located in Casa de Balboa, at 1649 El Prado, Balboa Park, one floor below the San Diego Historical Society Museum of San Diego History. The Research Library is now open Wednesday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, year round. The expanded hours are part of an effort to make the collections more accessible to the public.

The Guide to the Public Records Collection printed in *The Journal of San Diego History*, Volume 47, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001) notes:

“Today, the library collections of the Archives -- books, serials, ephemera and other printed materials -- are the most complete source of published information available for the study of San Diego history. Even larger in size and scope are the non- print materials -- manuscripts and public records. Manuscript collections exceed 3,600 linear feet of material, documenting all facets of San Diego history.”

Many of these materials, including *The Journal of San Diego History*, can be searched on-line on the San Diego Historical Society website (www.sandiegohistory.org). The Web site was begun about six years ago and is continually being updated.

The *City Directories* are a good place to start learning your home's story. These books list names, addresses, and owner/resident occupation from the 1870's to 1984. Homes were often held by a single owner for many years, and it can be fun to see the career progression. For example, the humble bungalow of this article's author was first listed in 1921 as owned by Harry Kelly, a detective with the San Diego Police Department. In 1925, he was a Sergeant, and in 1934, he became Chief of Detectives.

The Historical Society Research Library has many other public records to help you uncover your home's story. *City Lot Books* from 1890 to 1930 present yearly assessments of property values, and also contain the name of the property owner, the

value of improvements on the property, and the mortgage number. *County Deeds*, which are arranged chronologically from 1850 to 1950, contain both rights and easements transferred to the county and city, and also the transfer of title between private individuals. *Bills of sale* from 1878 to 1931 show the sale of personal property with the name of the purchaser cross referenced to the name of the seller and date.

Mechanics Liens from 1869 to 1931 are records of claims or liens against property for the costs of construction. They include the names of contractors, the services performed, and listings of the materials used. You may find a history of architectural changes in these records.

Perhaps your neighborhood is a topic of the many scrapbooks in the Research Library's collection. A previous owner of your home may be in the Biographical Files, or may be discussed in the more than 1,100 taped and transcribed interviews in the Oral History collection, started in 1956.

Need an illustration for your home's story? There are close to 2.5 million images, from daguerreotype to digital, in the Booth Historical Photograph Archives at the Research Library. The earliest photos date from the 1870's. The *Guide to the Photo Collection* is printed in Volume 44 Special Edition (Spring/Summer 1998) of *The Journal of San Diego History*, which is searchable by key words on the web site.

This is just a brief summary of the diverse resources available in one amazing place for you to discover your home's story, and the rich history of our North Park community.