



ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK YOU NEVER KNOW UNTIL YOU LOOK

By Chuck and Sofia La Bella

My daughter Sofia and I love a mystery. We love a puzzle with a thousand pieces. We live to untangle the spaghetti. And so when we read an article recently in the Uptown News about 28th Street and the historic significance of the builder of our home, we decided to find out about the house, the builder and the original owners. Our journey took us to a different San Diego. We moved into our home in April 2004. We always suspected that it was a special home just by its feel. We had no idea how special its original occupants were and how much they contributed to San Diego.

In 1916 Robert Blair, the original owner and developer of “Blair’s Highland Addition,” sold Lots 4 & 5 to Miguel and Ella Gonzalez. These were only the second lots to be sold along 28th Street. In 1916, Miguel and Ella had a home built on lots 4 & 5. The 1920 Census records show that Miguel was a merchant and Ella a homemaker. They lived in the home with their five young sons, a nanny and a nursemaid. This is where our journey began...with a merchant, his wife, their children and a household staff.

With just a name and an address we headed off to the San Diego Historical Society (now the San Diego History Center) research library at Balboa Park. After several trips and numerous hours of research, we discovered a wealth of information. Indeed, it turns out that Miguel was not simply a “merchant” but was a founder of the Mexicali Brewing Company, the President of the Bank of Baja California, the President of the Mexicali Malt Company, the Commercial Co. of Baja California, and the Commercial Distributing Co. By searching the City directories from the early 1900’s, we discovered that his wife, the former Ella lbs, was the daughter of German parents who came to Mexico in the 1800s. Ella and her sister Matilde were both born in Mexico. The lbs family came to the U.S. in 1885 and lived on 20th Street in San Diego. Her father’s entry in the 1909-10 San Diego City Directory provided a clue as to how Ella and Miguel may have met. George lbs’s occupation was listed as “Curios, Tia Juana.” A photo we were able to locate in the Historical Society’s archives shows a street scene in Tijuana. Front and center is a store with a sign: “Miguel Gonzalez, Curios Shop.” A mere coincidence? We think we found the Gonzalez-lbs connection.

The 1900 directories gave us a deeper insight into the lbs family. It listed Ella as a student and Matilde as a teacher at the “Sherman Heights School.” We next discovered (with the support and assistance of the Historical Society’s wonderful staff) the marriage certificate for Miguel and Ella. This document, fascinating in itself, provided yet another wonderful and surprising link to the house on 28th Street. Ella and Miguel were married on July 23, 1910. The marriage license and certificate was completed and signed by “W.E. Crabtree, Minister, Central Christian Church, San Diego.” That same day we found the tax records from 1916 when the Gonzalez family began to pay taxes on 2829 28th Street (lots 4 & 5 in Blair’s Highland Addition). We had the entire page copied, which recorded the owners of record from 1915 through 1919. We were so happy to find these records; however, we only really focused on the Gonzalez entry. Well, some weeks later we were looking at the tax records and looked at the owner of the adjacent home on the corner of 28th and Palm (lots 1,2 & 3). The owner was none other than W.E. Crabtree—the Minister who married Miguel and Ella in 1910. The records confirmed that the Crabtree home

was the first built on 28th Street in 1913. The Gonzalez home was the second home built along 28th Street in 1916. Another coincidence or an explanation of how Gonzalez and his wife located on 28th Street? We believe that it was no coincidence that the Gonzalez and Crabtree families lived next door to each other.

From the Historical Society we stopped next at the County Assessor's Office to locate deeds and determine dates. Once armed with that information, which took days, a great deal of patience, and a lot of squinting at microfilm, we wandered over to the California Room at the Central Library. (Given the budget cuts the library's hours are somewhat restricted. However, their helpful staff more than made up for the restricted hours.) There we were able to locate several articles on the Gonzalez and Ibs families. From this we were able to fill in many gaps in our research and trace the family trees for the Gonzalez and Ibs families. We also stumbled upon the significant contributions the Gonzalez and Ibs families made to the San Diego community.

When Miguel and Ella bought lots 4 & 5 from Robert Blair in April 1916, deeds contained restrictive covenants. These covenants prohibited the property from being owned or occupied by anyone other than "a member of the Caucasian Race." This restriction was a standard provision in the deeds we researched all along 28th Street in Blair's Highland Addition as well as the other Additions in the area. To be sure, the deeds routinely included provisions that prohibited the ownership or occupancy of the property to ever vest in anyone other than a member of the Caucasian Race. The deed to Miguel and Ella in 1916 is of significance since it modified the standard restriction to allow ownership by someone of the "Mexican Race." Indeed, the deed provides:

"That the legal title to said premises shall never be conveyed to, or shall never vest in any person other than a person or persons of the Caucasian Race, except a person of the Mexican Race, and that no person other than a person of the Caucasian or Mexican Race shall ever be allowed to become a tenant in or on said premises, or any part or parcel thereof. "

This departure is the first and the only one we were able to find in the deeds for properties along 28th Street in Blair's Highland Addition. In this regard Miguel Gonzalez broke through a barrier as a successful Mexican businessman. For that reason alone, this property is of profound significance in our view.

The Gonzalez family engaged Edward F. Bryans to build the original structure in 1916. But the Gonzalez family outgrew the original home, and in 1919 Blair sold adjacent lot 6 to Miguel and Ella. The deed restricted the use of lot 6 to building an addition to the existing home. Gonzalez had Bryans build the addition to the original home. As far as we can tell, this was the first "addition" built on 28th Street. Bryans completed the two-story addition sometime in 1927. We know this because we found an application for water service dated January 1927 which was signed by Bryans himself on behalf of the owner "Ella Gonzalez."

Shortly after the addition was completed, Ella passed away leaving Miguel and their five sons. The 1930 census records Sofia was able to locate show that by 1930, Ella's sister Matilde had moved into the home. Taking a chance, we researched the name Matilde Ibs, and found out that she was a very accomplished scholar and patron of the arts. We located her obituary and were able to confirm that after Ella's death, Matilde moved into our home and raised Ella's five children. We also discovered that Matilde was a member of the first graduating class at Stanford, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and a lifetime member of the YWCA. Matilde lived in the home at 2829 28th Street until she passed away in October 1960. Her service was held at the home. A few years later the Gonzalez family sold the home. But from 1916 through 1960, a member of the Gonzalez or Ibs family lived in the home.

The Gonzalez boys—whom Matilde raised in the home on 28th Street—were accomplished San Diegans as well. Each boy went to either Stanford or Harvard. Union articles we were able to find confirm that four of the boys served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Each of

the boys had “lbs” as their middle name. Michael lbs Gonzalez graduated from Harvard Law and became a member of the venerable firm of Luce Forward here in San Diego. He died in 1997 and his obituary recited a long list of contributions he made to the community.

Our one disappointment was that we were unable to locate any old photos of the home as it looked in 1916. After several trips to the Historical Society and talking to neighbors, we gave up and resigned ourselves that there were no photos of the home from 1916. All in all we were satisfied where our research had taken us. Little did we know that there was yet another twist of fate that would put us in contact with the Gonzalez family and an old image of the home.

As a lawyer I receive about a dozen requests each day announcing a course or a service that someone is offering to make the practice of law easier. On June 2nd I received a solicitation from a professional fiduciary Michael I. Gonzalez Jr. It couldn't be, not a relative of Miguel and Ella. Well, it turns out that Michael is the grandson of Ella and Miguel. He is the son of Michael lbs Gonzalez. Not only did we connect, but also after an exchange of e-mails, Michael provided me with a photo of a painting of the home shortly after it was built in 1916. He also sent me a photo of his Aunt Matilde with his father and uncles. It was the perfect end to our research. Fate, luck, chance or something helped with this final connection. Michael wrote that he was a little choked up reading all the facts and documents we had uncovered and thinking about the days gone by on 28th Street. He told me that as a child every Sunday after church at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, “the whole Michael Gonzalez family—four girls and one boy—would visit with Auntie Matilde and have Sunday dinner with her.”

Oh the stories our home has to tell! We are just happy we uncovered a few.



Painting of 2829 28th Street, courtesy of Michael I. Gonzalez, Jr.



Current photo of 2829 28th Street, courtesy of Katherine Hon