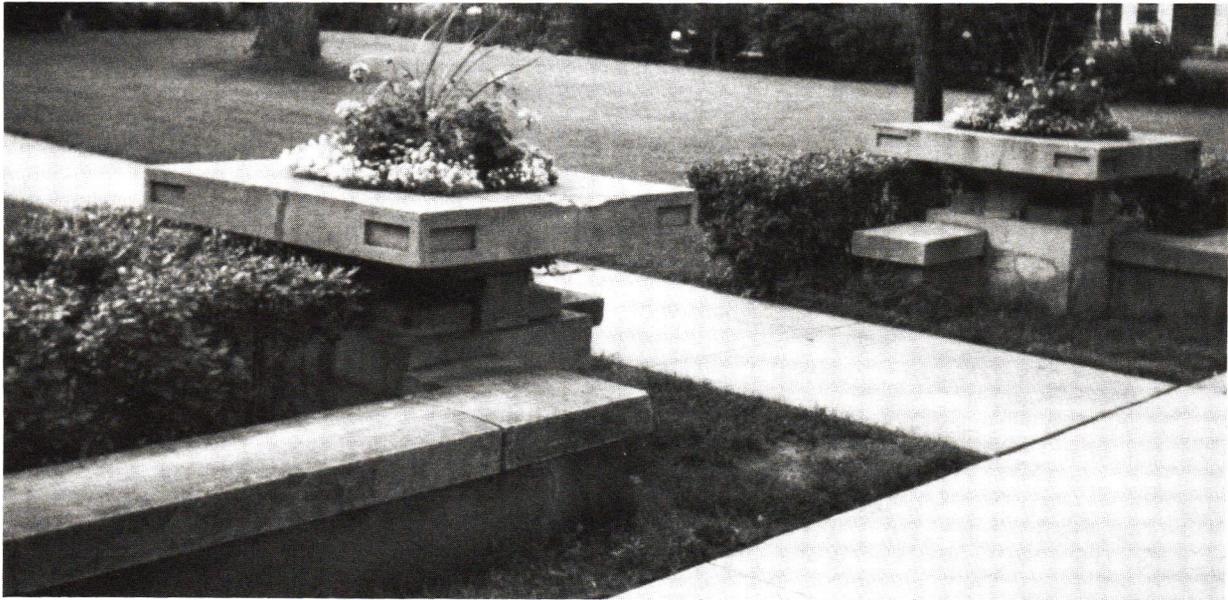


The
**PRAIRIE
SCHOOL**
Review

Volume IX, Number 3

Third Quarter, 1972

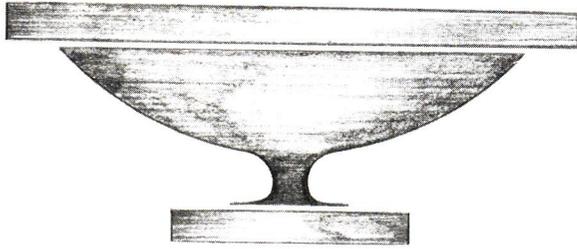
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ABOVE: The entrance to the Henry Salzer house in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The urns are an adaptation of those so often used by Wright and his other contemporaries around the turn of the century. Prairie School Press Photo.

COVER: The Henry Salzer house by Percy Dwight Bentley. This house is one of the largest designed by Bentley and is still maintained in excellent fashion by its present owners. Known as "Shangri-La" by local neighbors, the house is one of many designed in and around La Crosse, Wisconsin by Percy Bentley. Photo by W. R. Hasbrouck for The Prairie School Press.

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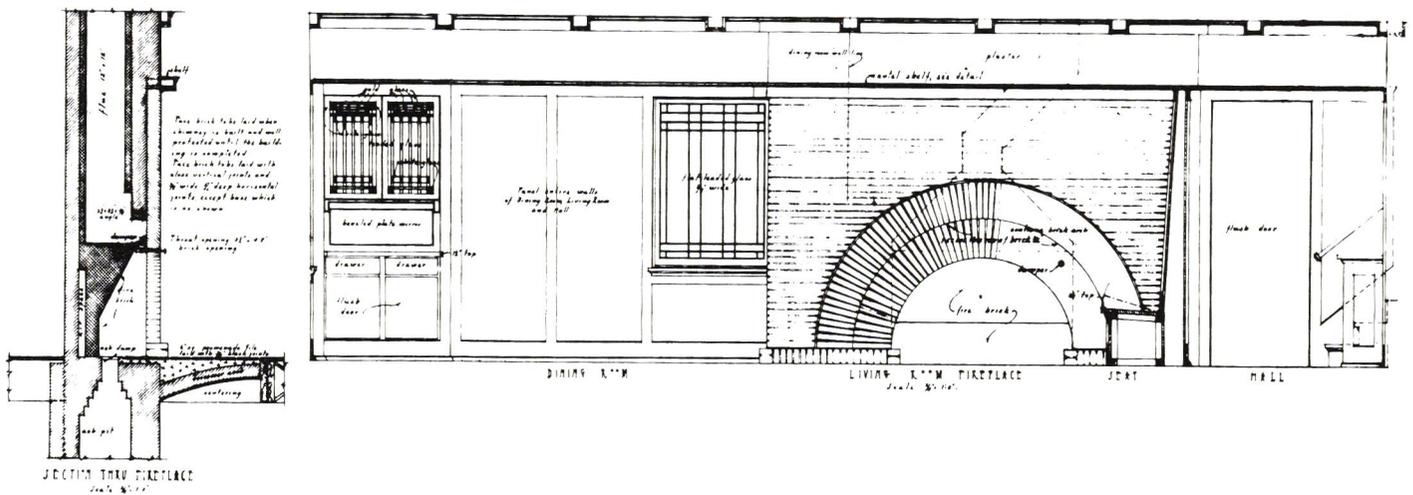
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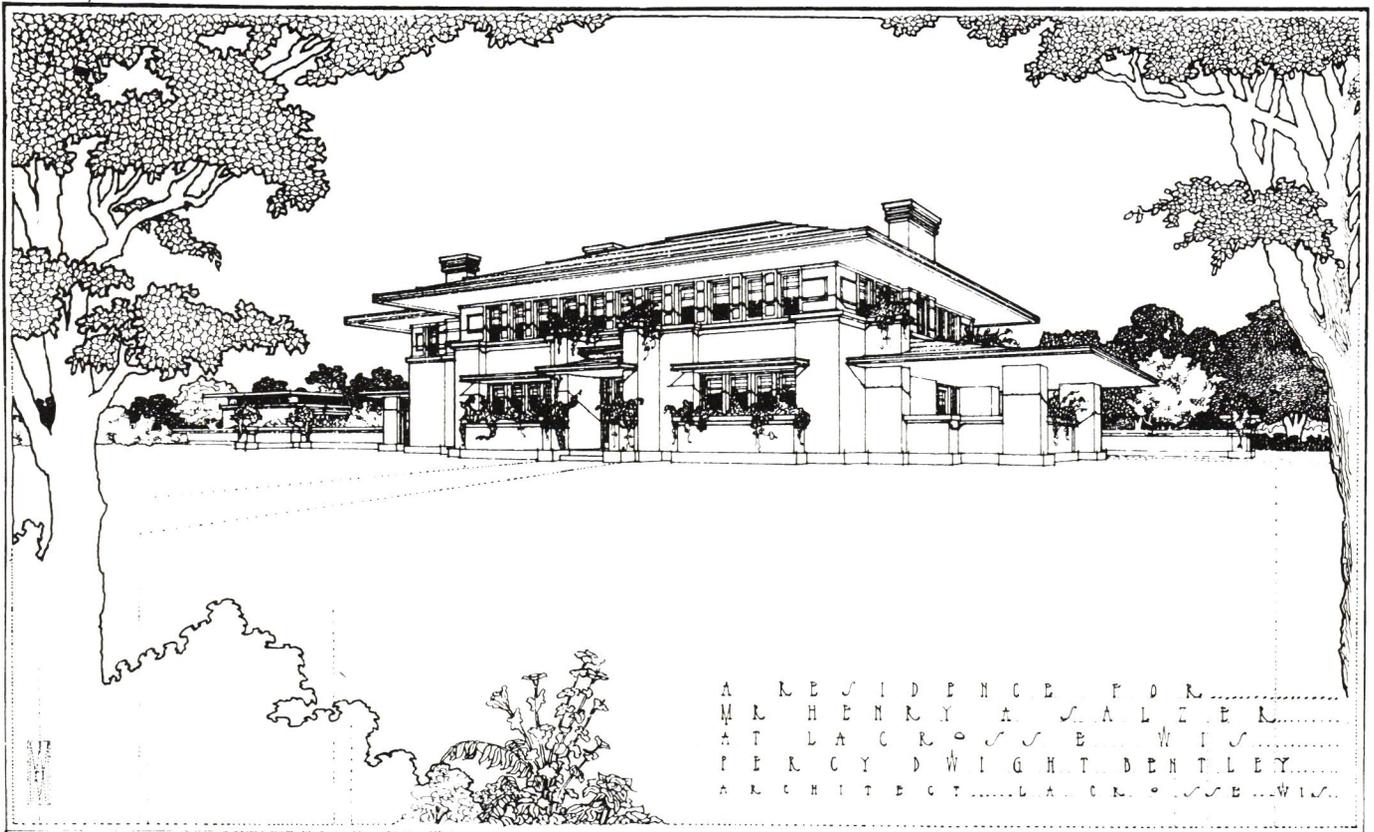
From the EDITORS

*The major articles for **The Prairie School Review** are selected by your editors several months in advance of publication and the last words written for each issue are those on this page. The proofs of the type for H. Allen Brooks' lead article were read and returned for correction the same day we received notice that Professor Brooks would be one of two recipients of the Alice Davis Hitchcock Book Award for the most distinguished work of scholarship in the history of architecture published in 1971 and 1972 by North American scholars. Brooks' book is, of course, **The Prairie School, Midwest Contemporaries of Frank Lloyd Wright**. We congratulate Dr. Brooks and thank him for his many contributions to our own efforts.*

*Our comments on **The Prairie School** have already been published in a review for **The Architectural Forum**. Two comments from that review bear repeating. We wrote that the book "... is the finest study of architectural history this writer has ever read..."; but we ended the review with "It is not the last word. It is a definitive work which will stimulate those who read it to even more extensive examination of the roots of modern architecture." These two sentences are really a statement of policy of **The Prairie School Review**.*

Our field of interest is steadily broadening. The history of the development of modern architecture is a complex subject. Our work has been confined to a segment of time and stylistic character largely because of a personal interest. One follows the path most familiar. The vast wealth of unknown material we have found (most still unpublished) merely strengthens our determination to continue.

H. Allen Brooks has contributed much to the study of architectural history. We like to think our efforts paralleled his. Scholarship is a means to an end; it is also an end in and of itself.



*This is a rendering of the Henry A. Salzer house, designed in 1912 by Percy Dwight Bentley. From *The Western Architect*.*

Percy Dwight Bentley at La Crosse

by H. Allen Brooks

*The author is professor of fine arts at the University of Toronto. He received his undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College in architecture, after which he did his graduate work at Yale and Northwestern Universities. He took his doctorate from Northwestern in 1957. A past president of the Society of Architectural Historians, he has held numerous major appointments in the academic world. His articles have been widely published, and his most recent contribution is his book, *The Prairie School*.*

Bentley's early career in La Crosse, Wisconsin, was well removed from the metropolitan mainstream of Midwest architectural ideas, and precisely for this reason it has, for us, a two-fold interest. First, it presents the early practice of an architect who, although initially indebted to the inspiration of others, soon exhibited a profound grasp of these ideas and demonstrated his ability to assimilate and reinterpret them, adding his own inventive qualities, and imbuing them with a freshness and mastery of proportions which belied the youthfulness of the designer. Second, Bentley's work in remote La Crosse offers penetrating insights into several issues basic to our understanding of the Prairie School —

issues such as sources of inspiration, architect/client relations, and the knotty problem of the precipitous demise, about 1914-1916, of the school itself.

Percy Dwight Bentley (1885-1968) was born at La Crosse, which is an attractive small city located on the east bank of the Mississippi below Winona. Brewing and manufacturing interests fed the prosperous economy and made possible a rich and varied architectural heritage extending well back into the nineteenth century. Few Midwest centers have so much to offer the architectural historian but, alas, La Crosse has hitherto been largely overlooked.



This house at 237 South 10th Street in La Crosse, Wisconsin is a splendid example of the type of residential construction being done in the mid-nineteenth century. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.

Bentley was the son of a banker. He attended school in La Crosse before entering Ohio Wesleyan University where he was a non-graduating member of the class of 1907.¹ Thereafter he twice enrolled at

1 Although Bentley maintained that he was a graduate, the alumni records indicate that "Bentley attended Ohio Wesleyan University from 1903-07 but did not graduate."

The author wishes to thank Ken Roberts, Marion Card Donnelly, Robert Warn and Phyllis D. Bentley for their cooperation and timely assistance in helping to gather material used in this article.

This type of house preceded the work of Wright and his contemporaries. It stands between the more ornate earlier nineteenth century houses and the work of the Prairie School of the early twentieth century. Brooks photo.



Armour Institute (now IIT) but never completed a year's work.² "Our mornings," Bentley writes, "were spent at the Art Institute and afternoons out at Armour. The office of Frank Lloyd Wright was in a building almost directly across Michigan Avenue from the Art Institute so I frequently saw him with his cape, cane and low crowned broad brim hat. Louis Sullivan was in an office not far from Wright's. I became very much indoctrinated with both, so when I opened my office in La Crosse it plainly showed in most of my work, which was mostly residential."³ In spite of this youthful adulation, Bentley never met the masters, nor did he apprentice with others among the Prairie School; his training was mainly with Wells E. Bennett in La Crosse.⁴ His knowledge of the Prairie School came from observation; he taught himself what he did not learn in school and had not learned while working for others.

By 1910 Bentley was practicing in La Crosse, as indicated by the blueprints for the Bartl house.⁵ Very briefly, it seems, he was in partnership with William Bajari, but this quickly terminated and Bentley took on Otto Merman "as a green draftsman, but with a lot of talent and ability."⁶

Edward C. Bartl, a brewer, must have requested a small and efficient house, one basically conservative and in the mainstream of architectural design. He probably wanted something like the four-square house which Will Kennicott, in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, wanted, a neat box with a porch across the front, a patch of lawn and a regular sidewalk. This

2 Bentley never claimed to have graduated from Armour (contrary to statements in various obituaries), but he spent less time there than one might suppose. The alumni records indicate that "Bentley enrolled in Armour in September 1906, left some time thereafter, and re-entered on September 5, 1909. He left Armour on January 21, 1910; he did not receive a degree."

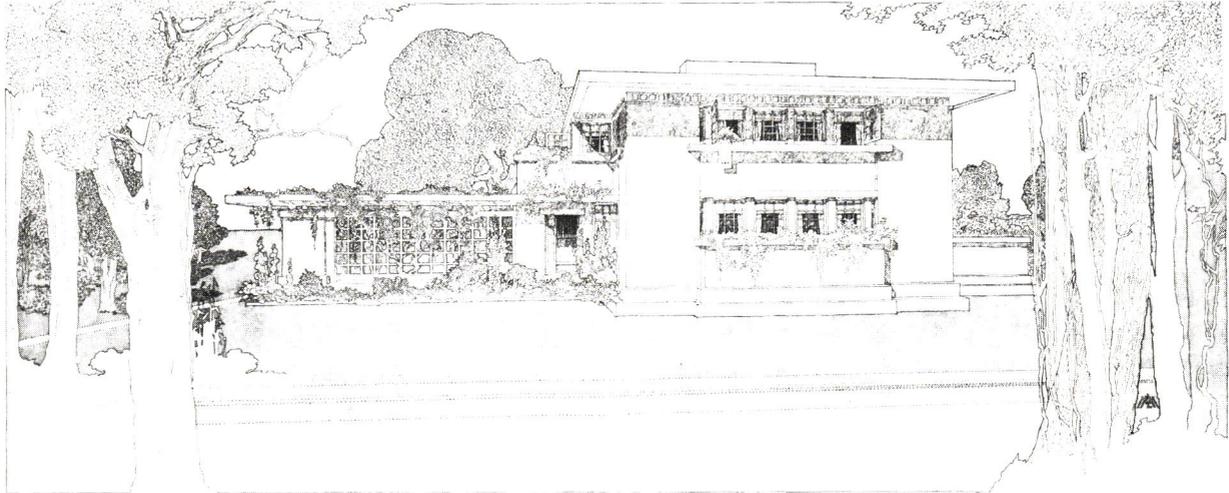
3 Letter written to Robert Warn, 24 August 1965. Quoted with the writer's permission.

4 From 1907 to 1909, apparently, he worked for Wells E. Bennett in La Crosse, that is, during the period he was not at Armour Institute.

5 Bentley did not date his blueprints. Dates, therefore, were obtained from the Assessor's Office (which records the year built), and occasionally are modified (earlier) on the evidence of publication dates or other pertinent data supplied by the owners.

6 Letter of 24 August 1965, *op. cit.* The quote continues: "When I decided to go into partnership in St. Paul I turned over my La Crosse office to Otto Merman and I believe he did very well, though he passed away not too long thereafter."

Of William Bajari I have discovered little. Bentley's references to this partnership are contradictory, indicating that it was formed either in 1907 or 1910, the latter date being more likely.



ubiquitous vernacular type we know too little about; it is so common that the historian has passed it by. Its roots go deep into the nineteenth century and perhaps beyond; it was not an isolated product of the American Midwest. A local example is the splendid bracketed house of 1861 at 237 10th Street South in La Crosse with its spindly porch supports, generous windows, and thin, deceptively slab-like roofs which terminate atop a cupola—the littlest box of all. Closer to the time of Sinclair Lewis, however, is a house across the river on route 16; (near Lewis' fictitious town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota); this is as thin and crisp as its predecessor, but cleaner, purer, and more contained. With its roof more obviously hipped, porch more solid, windows regularized but reduced in size, it has the hallmark of a minuscule opening in the center (second storey) of the facade. It is to this dull and lifeless design (which is meritorious in expressing the lightness of its balloon frame), that Frank Lloyd Wright imparted style. On it he bestowed order, harmonious proportions, and strip windows to reflect the more open, continuous treatment he intended for the interior. This much heralded design, published by the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1907 as "A Fireproof House [constructed of concrete] for \$5000" is, in light of the above discussion, not half so revolutionary and original as we have been taught to believe. It is merely a re-worked version of the commonest Midwest house,⁷ just as George W. Maher's Peters and Farson houses (Chicago and Oak Park) were, a decade earlier, exploring similar ground. Another example is the 1894 house at 133 S. 14th Street La Crosse

⁷ A re-working which includes the assimilation of Wright's own earlier work, specifically Unity Temple.

Frank Lloyd Wright's project for "A Fireproof House for \$5,000", was never actually built as intended in concrete. Several similar designs were done in wood and stucco. This drawing and a description of the project was published in the Ladies' Home Journal of April, 1907.

which, as Maher's work of that period, is more solid and substantial than its less expensive counterparts. The popularity, among both architects and clients, of the Wright and Maher designs is therefore more readily comprehended; the house type is not a highly personal work of a single architect but rather a characteristic form common to the main stream of American architectural design.

Typical of the houses in La Crosse being built in the 1890's is this one done in 1894. It is located at 133 South 14th Street. Brooks photo.





Percy Bentley built this house at 238 South 17th Street in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1910 for Edward C. Bartl. This is a view from the northeast. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.

With this in mind the Bartl house can be appreciated in a new light. It owes much to Wright, but probably owes more to Walter Burley Griffin because of its emphatic corner piers topped with windows that rap around the corners (rather than windows in centrally grouped bands). Nor was Bentley unaware of the vernacular source, as the little square windows in the center of the second storey suggest; these do not appear in earlier Wright designs. The facade articulation (lap boards over the piers and porch, rough sand plaster for the basic box) is Bentley's own, as is the ingenious stair tower set 45° to the angle of the house and extending out to the edge of the broad hipped roof. Here the windows are vertical (but somewhat obscured by storm sash in our photo), their bottoms resting at the mid-storey landing. This arrangement is striking on the interior, flooding light, and opening a view, diagonally across the living room. It is a pleasant staircase to ascend, offering unexpected vistas.

8

The plan is only 30 x 35 feet in size (plus the now enclosed porch). It adapts Wright's *Ladies' Home Journal* project of 1907 while adding to the interior a high backed bench to visually divide the space and create a small hall; a folding wooden screen separates the living and dining rooms. The superb Richardsonian fireplace, and the cypress beamed ceiling, have unfortunately been painted over, and the window seat and screen removed (the latter, however, only to the basement). But the cupboards,

built within the thickness of the corner piers, happily retain their splendid glass, inset with gilt and iridescent blues and greens. The detailing and craftsmanship are superb throughout, indicating an architect as gifted in this capacity as in controlling the total design.

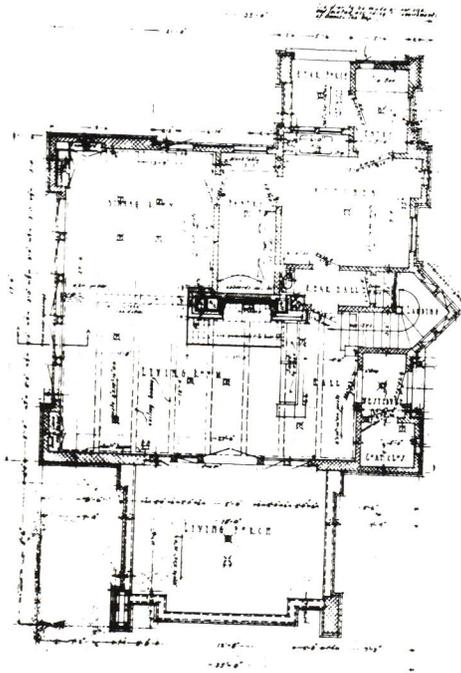
The Alois A. Fix's of Tomah, Wisconsin, were much impressed when they saw the Bartl house. They had wanted one similar to those being published by the Midwest school, and as Bentley came well recommended and had, they heard, studied under Wright, they commissioned him to design their home.⁸ It was built at 1403 Kilbourn Avenue, Tomah, in 1912, utilizing brick instead of wood for the exterior piers and porch.

⁸ Information obtained in conversation with Mrs. Alois A. Fix, 17 May 1966.

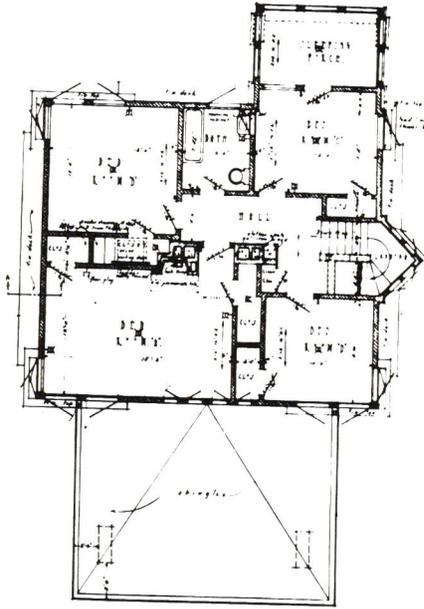
Bentley's house for Alois A. Fix is very similar to the Bartl house. It was built later in the town of Tomah, Wisconsin at 1403 Kilbourn Avenue. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.



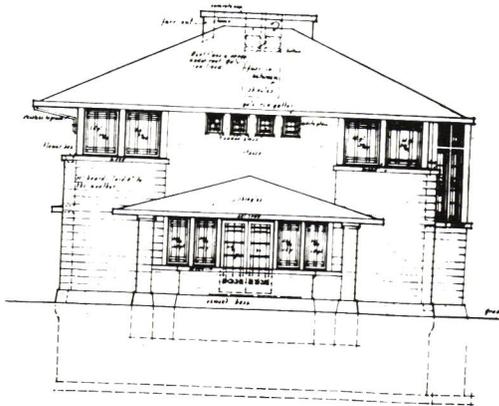
Plans for the Bartl house.



...FIRST FLOOR PLAN...

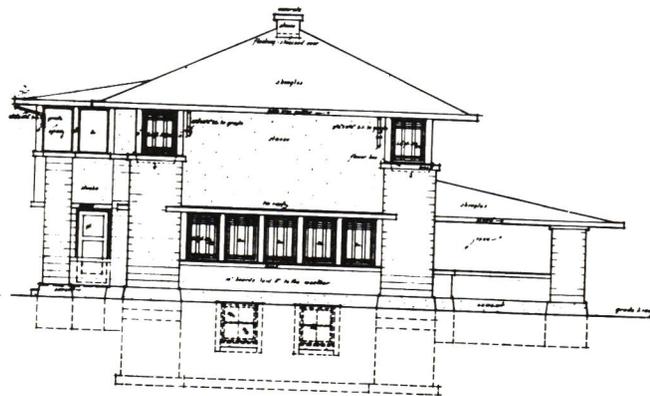


...SECOND FLOOR PLAN...



...FRONT ELEVATION...

Southwest Street

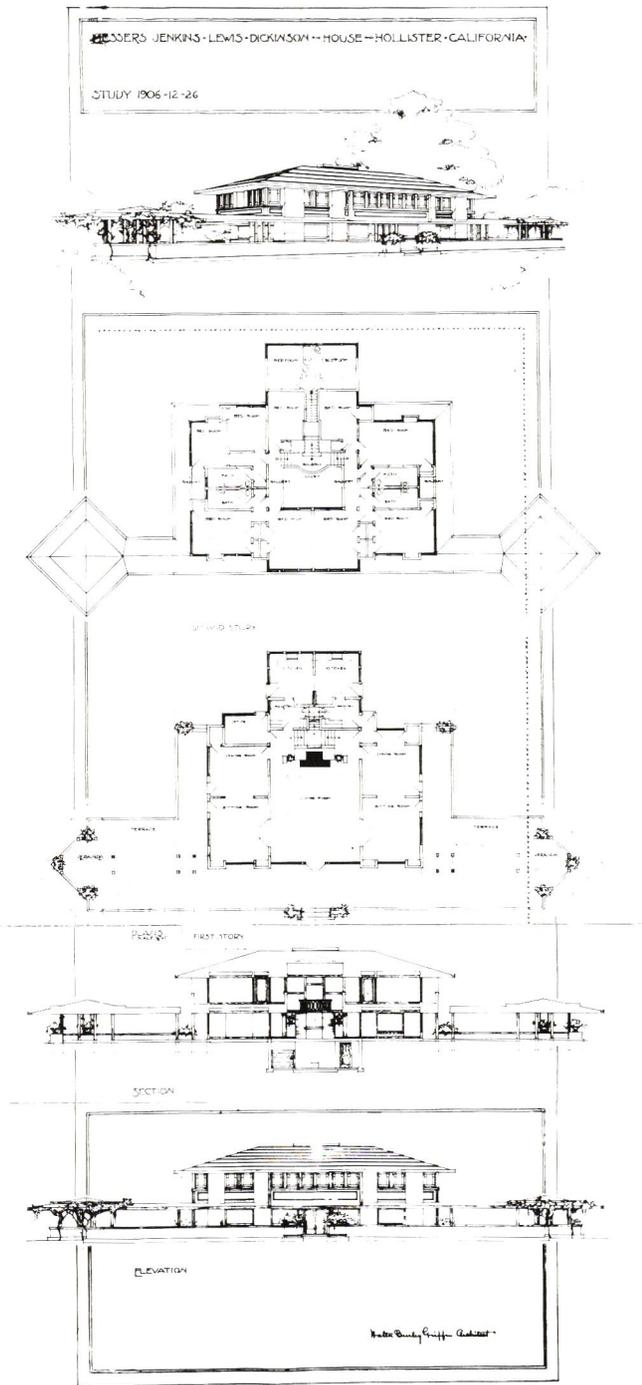


...SIDE ELEVATION...

East of Street

North of Street

From the drawings prepared by Bentley.



For Henry Salzer, a seed merchant, Bentley built a home in 1912 which is not only significant architecturally but, perhaps more importantly, provides telling evidence concerning the vexing problem of why Prairie School architects lost their clientele. Bentley recalls that "Mr. Salzer had clipped two or three house sketches from magazines, in the Wright trend, which seemed to meet his fancy. Of course being a great admirer of Wright I was very pleased and used my influence to encourage him with the result that, after several sketches, a sketch following the Wright pattern was adopted."⁹ But Mrs. Salzer was not pleased; she wanted something colonial (shades of Carol Kennicott in *Main Street*). A compromise was therefore reached with her will prevailing for the interior design, and that of her husband for the exterior. There is, therefore, a central hall with staircase, a living room on the right, and dining room, den, and kitchen on the left. The center doorway and end chimneys are the external features necessitated by this plan.

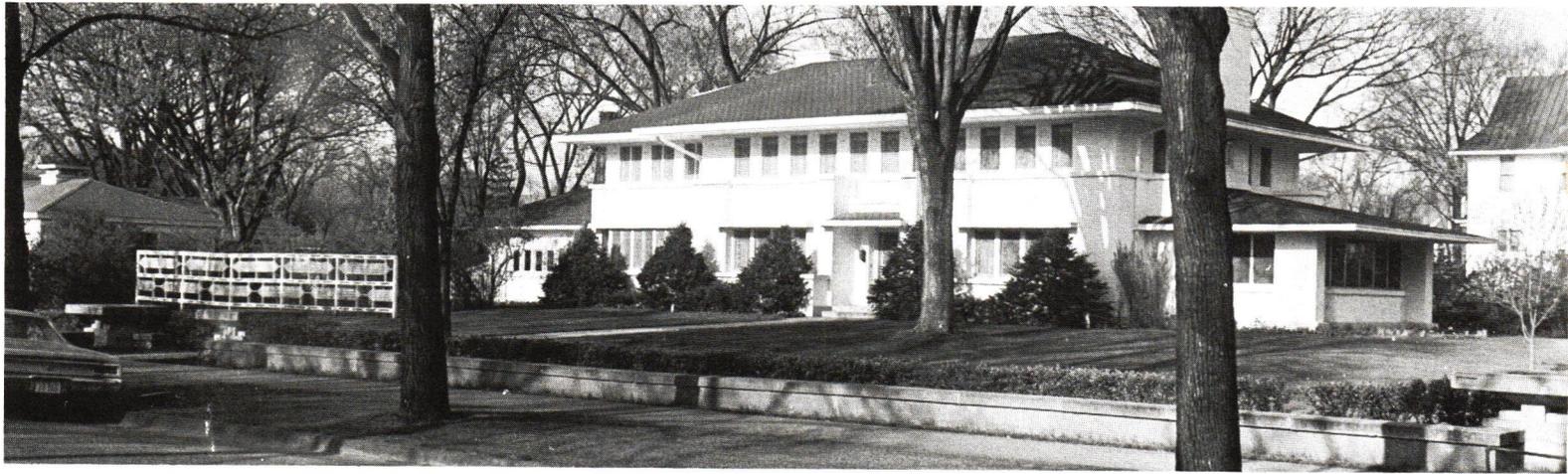
The schism infused in this design is foreboding. Fortunately Bentley was not a purist; Wright would have rejected the commission. In the Salzer's case there were two strong minds; if Mr. Salzer had acquiesced the house would have been colonial — as Bentley's Scott house built some years later. For the architect this posed new problems: during this first phase of womens lib, then called the feminist movement, he found himself (when designing a house) confronted with two clients instead of one as had been more typical in the past. And because Prairie School work was not generally accepted by the newly established mass media homemaker magazines which catered to the liberated middle class housewife (nor did the new profession of interior decorators have much sympathy for a Prairie School architect whose design presented a *fait accompli* for the interior), the female client propounded, for the architect, a new set of demands. She was being educated, through all the forces in our society, to adhere to certain uniform ideals of taste, and these were quite different from those preached by the Prairie School.¹⁰ For these architects, therefore, the time for decision was near: to acquiesce to the client's wishes; to retire; or to leave the domain of residential design.

The rendering by Otto Merman is more faithful in its representation of the Salzer house than are

9 Letter to the author dated 16 January 1963. Quoted with permission.

10 These sociological considerations have been discussed at some length in my book, *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 1972.

Walter Burley Griffin designed this project for Messers Jenkins, Lewis, and Dickinson in 1906. It was to have been built in Hollister, California. Griffin exhibited it in the 1907 Annual Exhibition of the Chicago Architectural Club. Drawing courtesy of the Art Department, Northwestern University.



photographs which show the painted house as it stands today. Drawn in the style of Marion Mahony, the perspective indicates a concept closer, in many respects, to Griffin's work than to Wright's — in spite of Bentley's quoted remarks.¹¹ It also demonstrates the importance of color contrast in the scheme — in unifying the parts, and emphasizing the horizontals. To quote the accompanying published text, "the entire exterior of the house, except the horizontal belts, is pebble dashed, the belt moulds being run in cement with a carpet float finish. The exterior is devoid of curves and mouldings. . . The house is stained a deep cream, with the horizontal projecting belts brown. The roof, which is of cypress shingles, is stained a moss green."¹² The fireproof construction was of hollow tile for the walls, with slab floors of hollow tile and reinforced concrete joists.¹³

Although the plan is typically colonial in layout, the interior decoration did not follow suit. "I prevailed," says Bentley, "on the Salzers to employ George Niedecken of Milwaukee to handle the interior decorating, a man thoroughly acquainted with Wright and his associate as delineator and interior designer for years. It worked out, I believe, extremely well. We designed the living and dining room furniture, the rugs and stair-runner, and all of the draperies throughout plus, of course, the color schemes. The lighting fixtures were made to order also. It was naturally a great thrill and source of satisfaction to be given such a free hand."¹⁴ Unfortunately these original items are now dispersed.

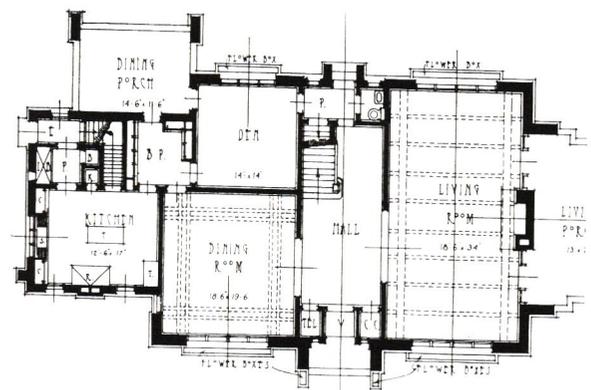
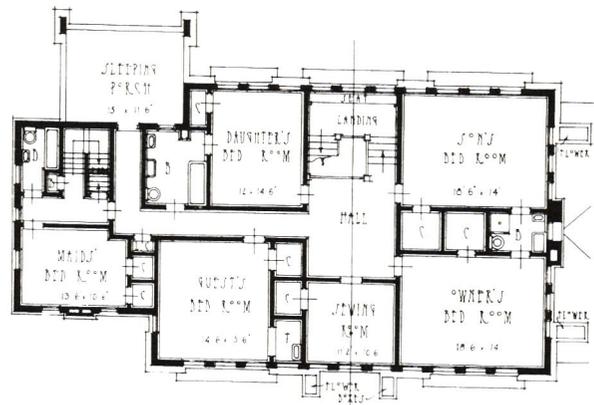
11 The design bears comparison with Griffin's Jenkins, Lewis, Dickinson house project of 1906 which was exhibited at the Chicago Architectural Club in 1907. Bentley's design, however, does not have the same rap-around corner windows, nor is the rhythm of the piers quite the same.

12 *Western Architect*, 18, December 1912, p. 129.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

14 Letter of 16 January 1963, *op. cit.*

The completed Henry A. Salzer house is at 1634 King Street in La Crosse, Wisconsin. It was built in 1912. Brooks photo.

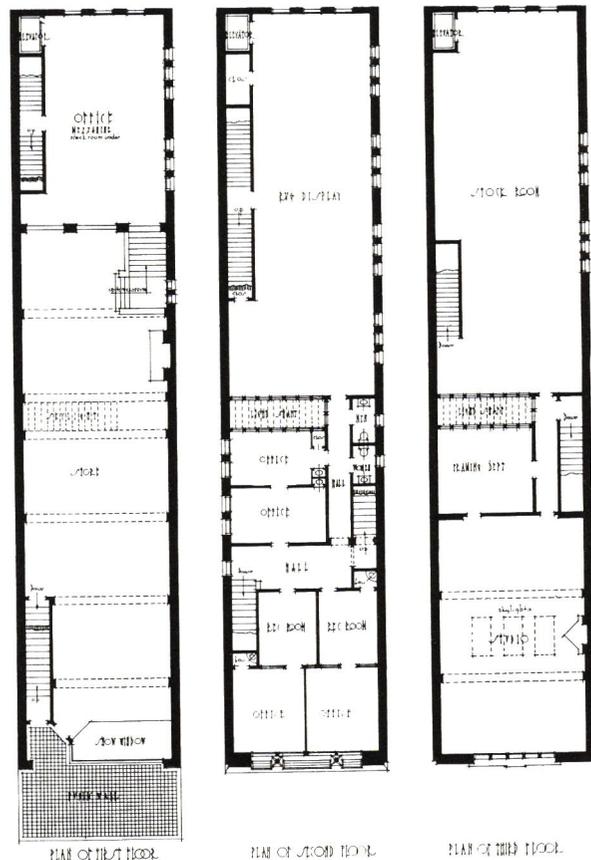
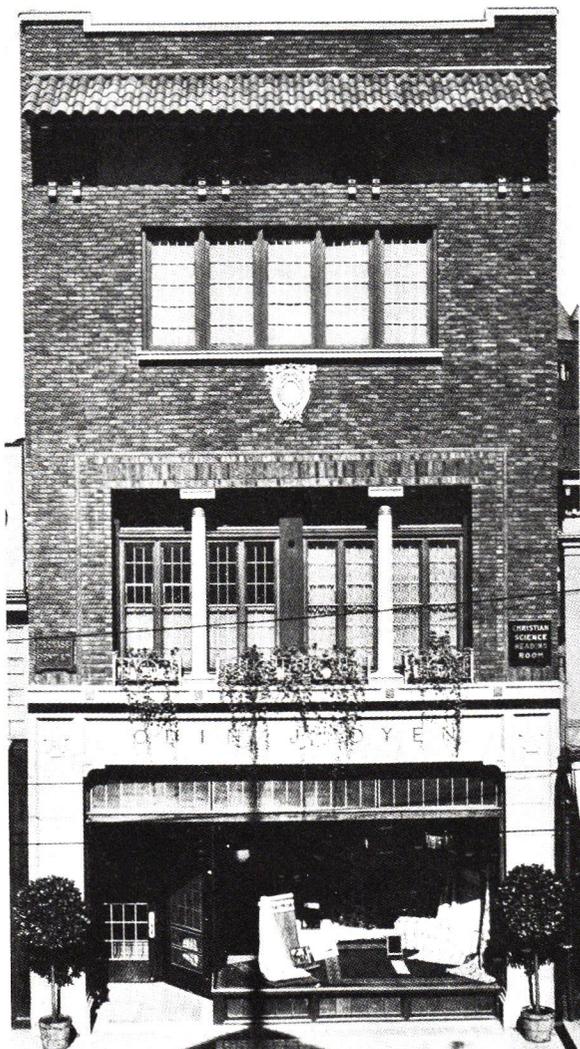


Plan of the Henry A. Salzer house. From The Western Architect.

Several structures were completed by Bentley in 1913 including four houses and a three storey store and office building on Main Street. The Odin J. Oyen Building, which the *Western Architect* illustrated in November 1913, was stone faced on the first storey with brick above, perhaps recalling Sullivan's choice of materials at the Wainwright Building, and the same architect's work may also be suggested in a directness and sharp-edge quality which pervades the entire design — as well as in the pair of slender columns set in the second storey window. Yet here, as in the previously discussed houses, one is struck by the individuality of the design, and its total impact, rather than by any impression of its indebtedness, however weak or strong that may be. Indeed, the creation of sharp, clear forms, precisely detailed, seems to be emerging as a basic characteristic of Bentley's designs.

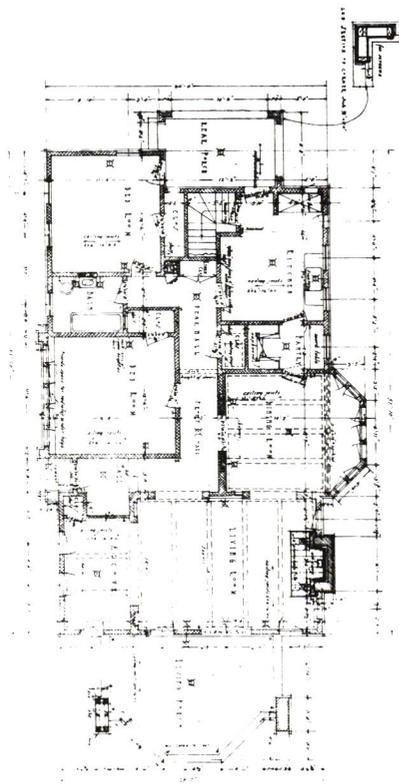
Nearly contemporary with the Oyen Building are two residences built by Bentley for Dr. H.H. Chase

and Henry G. Wohlhuter at 221 and 223 S. 11th Street, La Crosse. These adjacent one-storey bungalows are virtually identical in plan, except reversed, with a common service area in between. Horizontal lap boards, exposed 8" to weather, sheath the walls below the windows, while rough plaster with wood trim is used above. The low, broadly overhanging roofs were originally shingled, with four triple courses establishing forceful horizontal lines. In both scale and proportions these buildings are most pleasing, their repetitive horizontals lending strength and unity to the design. The plans, of necessity, are compact, with the porch of the Chase house, but not that of its neighbor, enclosed and integrated with the living room. Unfortunately the present storm sash obscures the delicate leading of the windows. The initial inspiration for these houses may well be the Paul L. Mueller studio in Minneapolis, designed by Purcell and Elmslie, or possibly the W.A. Glasner house by Wright.

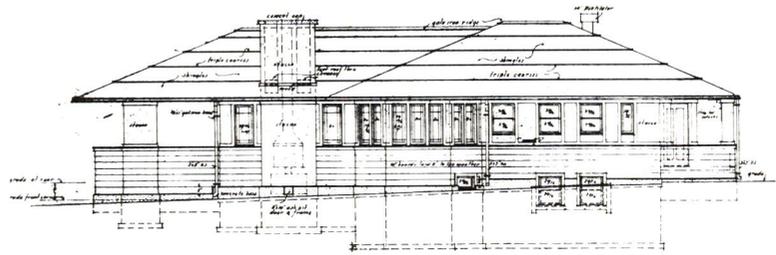


Plans for the Odin J. Oyen Building. From *The Western Architect*.

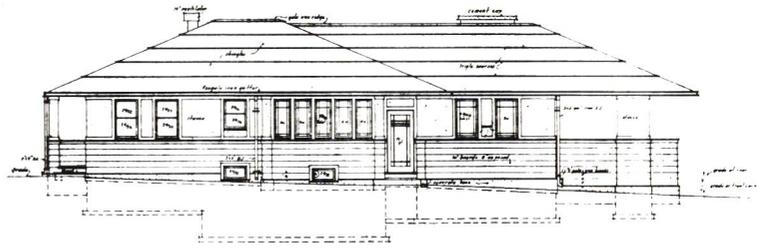
The Odin J. Oyen Building located at 507 Main Street in La Crosse, was designed by Bentley and completed in 1913. Photo from The Western Architect.



Plan of the Wobluter house.



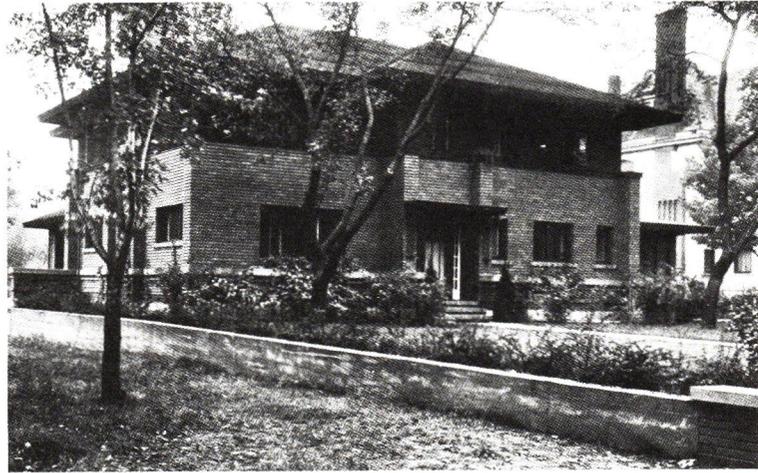
South elevation of the Henry G. Wobluter house.



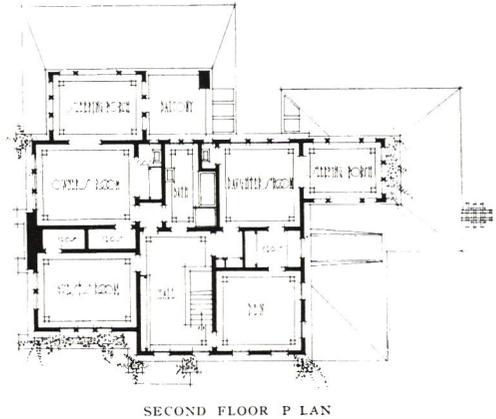
North elevation of the Wobluter house.

Dr. H. H. Chase's house is seen here with just the edge of the roof of the nearly identical Henry G. Wobluter house showing at the right. The Chase house is at 221 South 11th Street and the Wobluter house is at 223. Both were built in 1912. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.

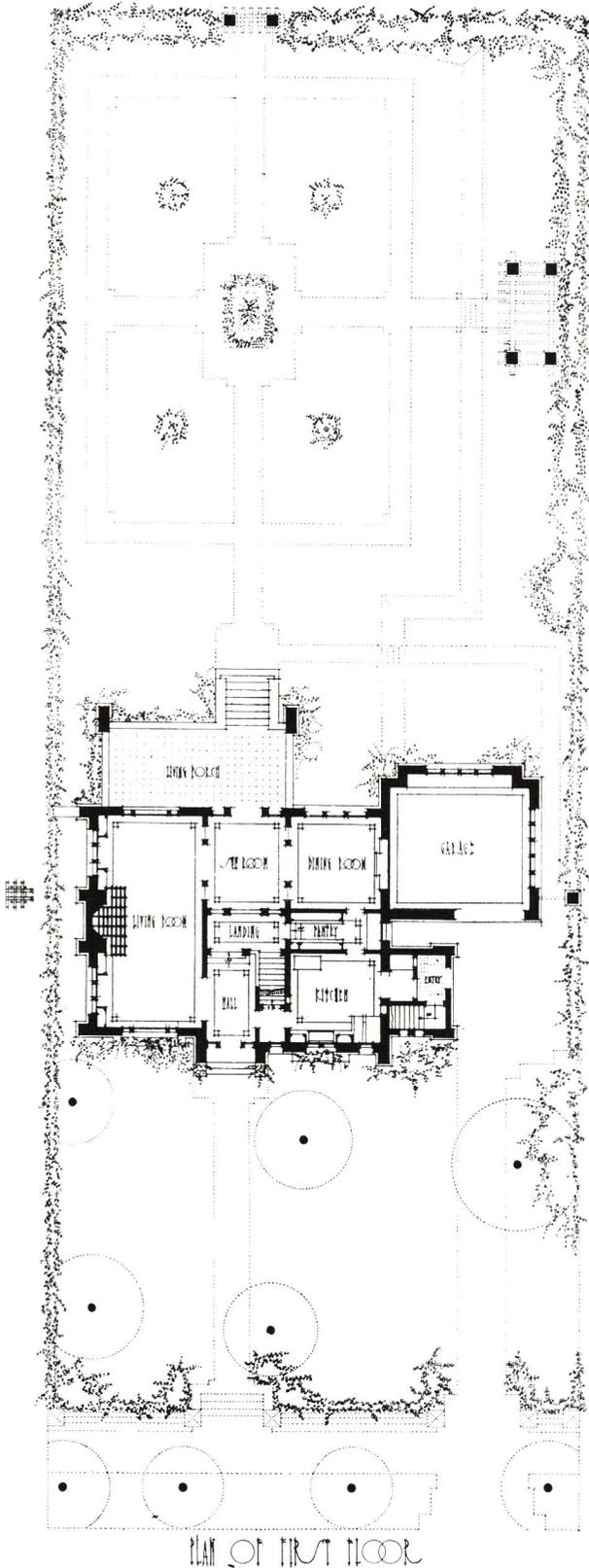




Bentley built this house for C.J. Felber at 1408 King Street in La Crosse in 1913. This is a view from the street. Photo from *The Western Architect*.



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



PLAN OF FIRST FLOOR

We show here the plans for the Felber house including the garden. Plans from *The Western Architect*.

In nearby West Salem, at 346 No. Leonard Street, Bentley built a house for Dr. Guy Wakefield in 1913 and the same year completed one for C.J. Felber in La Crosse. With the latter, published by the *Western Architect* in January 1914, one is less conscious of a particular source, Bentley by now having assimilated his immediate inspiration and made the design very much his own. The Felber house, which is of brick, indicates a preference for certain tight, narrow forms such as the piers beside the entrance (cf. the Salzer house) and at the corners, while the stone and cypress trim of the garden facade establishes crisp, horizontal lines which impart a lighter effect than the harder, less fractured front elevation which, rightly, is the more formal of the two. The plan, open and axial only along the line of the dining, sun, and living rooms, is most interesting for its staircase, the landing of which overlooks the sun room and garden beyond.

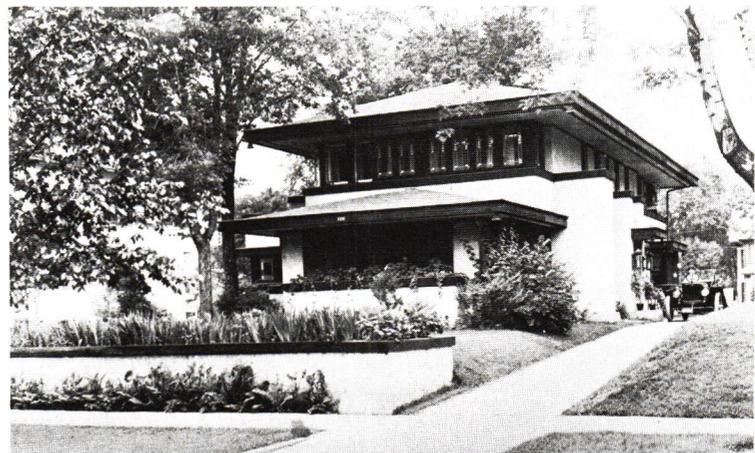


*The garden facade of the Felber house. Photo from *The Western Architect*.*

By 1914 Bentley's withdrawal from La Crosse was underway, as indicated by the blueprints of the Emil T. Mueller house which read "Percy Dwight Bentley Charles Alfred Hausler Architects St. Paul & La Crosse." Hausler, who was of German descent, had the larger and more diversified practice with some 8 or 9 draftsmen in his St. Paul office. With Bentley's move to the Twin Cities, Otto Merman was left in charge of local operations (although he occasionally assisted at St. Paul when work pressure was particularly heavy); eventually he succeeded to Bentley's La Crosse practice.¹⁵

For brewer Mueller, Bentley designed a very comfortable home. Its long, narrow shape reiterates the configuration of the lot, and its siting takes full advantage of the slight ground rise which exists on either side of this straight Midwestern street. The original retaining wall, in both design and materials, served as an adjunct to the house, establishing in the foreground the tones and rhythms that are picked up and repeated in the house. How important this is to the architect's concept is demonstrated by two photographs the one showing the house in its original state, and the other after the retaining wall was rebuilt, the porch enclosed, and the house repainted. So great is the visual change that, until a careful comparison is made, one assumes that two

¹⁵ Bentley may have designed other La Crosse buildings, and the problem still remains of identifying work executed by Otto Merman. The Daniel McMillan house of 1920 (1222 Cass Street, corner of 13th) is generally attributed to Bentley yet I am skeptical whether this house (and especially its interior) represents his work. In the absence of documentation, I would propose that it (as well as its westerly neighbor at 1212 Cass Street) were designed by Otto Merman.

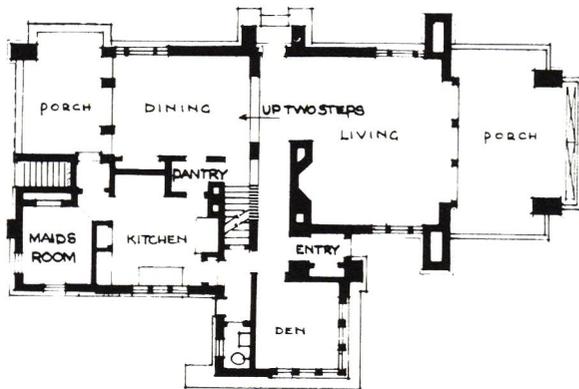


Here is an early photograph of the Emil T. Mueller house designed by Percy Dwight Bentley and Charles Alford Hausler. It was completed in 1915. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Kenneth Dahl.



The Mueller house as it appears today from the southeast. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.

entirely different designs are illustrated here. The long north wall (right side as viewed from the street) reiterates an interior axis which runs the length of the house along that side; the exterior piers punctuate the room divisions and emphasize the entrance. The south (left) is more abstractly composed with the block-like den, which projects from the side, being locked into the central mass by a slab-like chimney which repeats the vertical accent of the corner pier.



Plan of the Emil T. Mueller house. Drawn by James Acland.

The plan is clear yet pleasant in its variety. Unobtrusively the interior is divided laterally by a multi-purpose hall which connects the two entrances, the main one at the south between the den and fireplace mass, the other beside the driveway. Although it separates the living and dining rooms, it spatially participates in both, the demarcation succinctly stated by the two step change in level, and by the more confined space between the backside of the Roman brick fireplace and the staircase. Quartered oak, hand rubbed to a rich, honey-colored finish, and sand plaster are the basic materials of the interior, and nowhere is the superbly matched and crafted woodwork design more evident than in this hallway. Massive oak planks, banded with thinner strips at either end, create an open screen beside the stairs, and restate, in thickness and design, the solid pier nearby. Oak trim is used throughout, as for the continuous ceiling band of the hall and living room, and for the overhead beams of the dining room. The light fixtures are integral with the design, as is the splendid leaded glass of the windows, and the book cabinets of the den.

Quartered oak was also extensively used in the M.L. Fugina house of 1916 which, thanks to continuous occupancy by the same family, has not been altered by redecoration. Therefore the original color scheme is still evident with its tan, sand finished walls set in conjunction with rubbed, honey-colored oak and the yellow-brown brick of the fireplace — where the horizontal joints are raked and the deep-

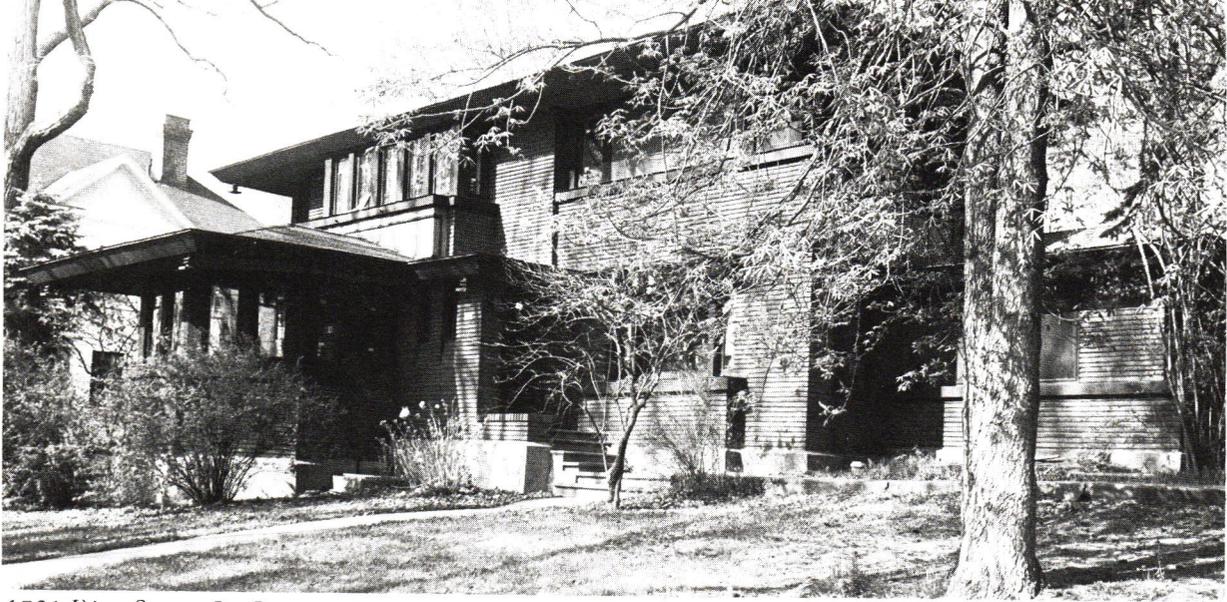


This is a view of the interior of the Mueller house. At the end of the hall is the den which is just off the entry. Brooks photo.

set mortar gilded to add richness to the design. The exterior material is also brick, with raked horizontal joints, and here the walls have a hard, planar surface with sharp, precise edges and angles. The cruciform shaped building, in common with Bentley's other work, is perched on a solid, forward-set foundation, height being emphasized here because the house, located in the hamlet of Fountain City, Wisconsin, overlooks Main Street to the majestic Mississippi River in the background.

The choice of architect, as Mrs. Fugina informed the author, was that of her husband who had seen several Bentley buildings in near-by La Crosse. He took her to see them, she thought they were rather unusual but with a certain appeal; Bentley was given the commission.¹⁶ Such concurrence, however, had not typified the Salzers' deliberations a few years earlier, nor did it when the Argyle Scott's built at

¹⁶ Information obtained in conversation with Mrs. M.L. Fugina, 17 May 1966.



1721 King Street, La Crosse, in 1920.¹⁷ Mrs. Scott, according to both Bentley and his draftsman Sherwood Wing,¹⁸ insisted on a colonial design, and Mr. Scott deferred to her wishes. The architect complied, producing the design illustrated here. It is a stately, substantial house such as the architect himself later came to admire, yet it is far from archaeological in its adaptation of borrowed forms. Instead of overlapping clapboards, for instance, the siding consists of flush boards separated to create strong horizontal shadow lines which the average viewer would read as the clapboard's lip; equal freedom and inventiveness is to be found in the treatment of the Palladian doorway. Indeed it is a strong, well conceived design throughout, indicating that Bentley's power to assimilate and invent transcended any limitations of name-designated styles, and grappled with the more basic problem of style itself.

The real misfortune of the Argyle Scott design lies at a deeper, less personal level, one which affected the entire future of American architecture as well as that of the western world. For here one finds clients turning their back on a more original phase of creative thinking, and choosing to revive and reform, rather than to build upon, the past. That the choice rested with the client, and not the architect, and that the demands were often set by the media-educated housewife rather than the business-man husband, is substantiated in other instances.¹⁹ In this context Bentley stands as a typical case study — except that his ability to survive, professionally, was

17 Because the author was unable to locate the blueprints for the Fugina and Scott houses, it is not known whether Bentley was in partnership when these houses were designed. The earlier (1914) Mueller house was a partnership commission (with Hausler), so presumably these latter houses were also.

18 Sherwood Wing, whom the author interviewed in 1966, worked summers for Bentley before the war, and then for a short while thereafter.

19 Discussed in my *The Prairie School, op. cit.*, especially pp. 265, 291-92, 317-18, 337-39.

Bentley designed this house for M. L. Fugina at 348 Main Street in Fountain City, Wisconsin in 1916. Photo by H. Allen Brooks.

far greater than most.²⁰ Others proved less flexible, and less tolerant of the fluctuating demands of taste.

Bentley's prowess as a designer was considerable. When we realize that he had little professional schooling, and a short apprenticeship, it is quite remarkable that in the first four or five years of practice he could design buildings of the caliber of those completed by 1914. They show a grasp and understanding of basic concepts which transcend his occasional sources; they are clear, precise statements which display a matter-of-factness about the nature of the house and its setting, and of the materials from which it was constructed.

20 Bentley's withdrawal from La Crosse was a gradual affair as he teamed up with first one and then another architect in the Twin Cities while continuing to accept commissions in La Crosse where, for some years, he maintained an office. In 1919 he was still listing (with the Ohio Wesleyan records office) his business address as La Crosse, but in 1921 listed it as St. Paul. The exact dates of his partnerships with Hausler and with Charles E. Bell are not known. In 1936 he left the Midwest, practiced in Hood River, Oregon, and then (1939) settled in Eugene where he practiced until he retired on 1 January 1961, a month short of his 76th birthday. He died in Eugene on 2 February 1968. A late work (1960) of which he was particularly proud is The Village Green (a hotel-motel complex) at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

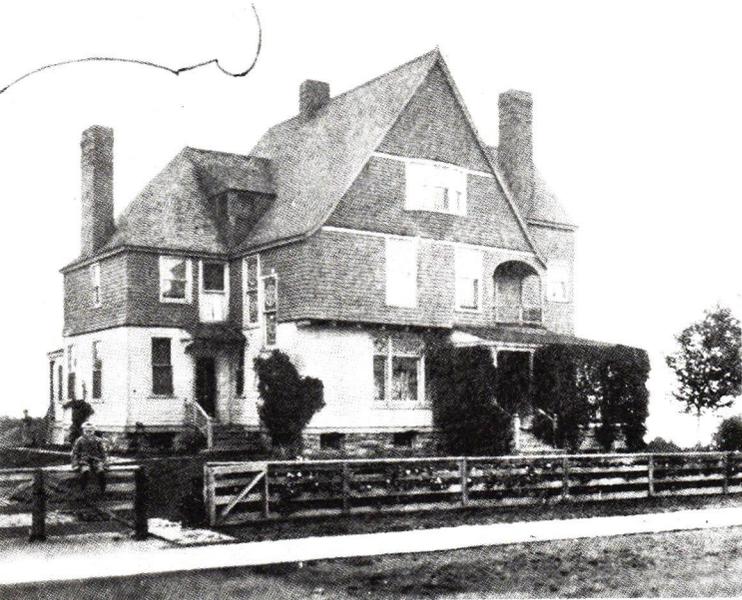
In 1920 Percy Dwight Bentley designed this house for Argyle Scott. It is located at 1721 King Street. Photograph by H. Allen Brooks.



John Wellborn Root and the Julian M. Case House

by Leonard K. Eaton

Leonard Eaton is professor of architecture at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. His articles have appeared in numerous journals and his two latest books are *Two Chicago Architects and Their Clients Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Van Doren Shaw* and *American Architecture Comes of Age*, both published by the MIT Press.



John Wellborn Root, Julian M. Case house, Marquette, Michigan, 1886-87. Photo from Marquette in 1900. (ed. Stanley D. Donon, Chicago, 1900).

While John Wellborn Root is unquestionably best known as an architect of large commercial buildings, a surprising amount of his practice consisted of residential work. Moreover, in his theoretical writings he gave extended consideration to its problems. In one of the fugitive papers, which Harriet Monroe quoted at length in her biography of her brother-in-law, he wrote

What sort of a town is the house to be in? How wide are the streets it faces? Where do the

Side Elevation. Photo by Carrol K. Eaton (1972).



prevalent winds blow from? How much hot and cold weather has the town? How much rain? Which way is south? How far from the street is the house to stand? Has the town smoky or clear air? What are the native building materials? What is the character of the workmen likely to be employed? Is the occupant of the house a student? a family man? a public man with many friends? one who has many guests? who gives many entertainments? Is he a man fond of display, or one who shirks it and rather prefers the simplicity of solid comfort? These and many other questions will suggest themselves, and being answered will, when added to suggestions obtained from the client, point out very plainly the general solution of the problem.¹

The considerations in this passage might be amplified from other sections of Root's writings, but they are certainly sufficient to indicate the high seriousness with which he regarded domestic architecture. When the historian reviews the admittedly incomplete list of executed work in Miss Monroe's volume, he is, in fact, struck by the large quantity of residential building accomplished in the all too brief career of the firm of Burnham and Root (1875-1891). Most of this, of course, was in Chicago, and the great portion has been torn down or altered out of all recognition. It is therefore a matter of substantial interest to discover a house for Julian M. Case in Marquette, Michigan done in the years 1886-87 and in mint condition.

Concerning Julian M. Case himself, not much is known, but the few details which do emerge from his obituary in the *Marquette Mining Journal* of June 27, 1890 are tantalizingly suggestive. He was born at or near Lansing about 1845 and came from a family which was active in state politics. His father was at one time Auditor General of Michigan. He came to Marquette in 1880, and, said the *Journal*, was "identified with a number of heavy land and mining deals".² Further, the paper added that, "His sociable nature and accessibility made him one of the best known residents of this city in other portions of the country."

1 Harriet Monroe, *John Wellborn Root: A Study of His Life and Work* (Chicago 1896; reprint edition by the Prairie School Press, ed. Reyner Banham, 1966), p. 70.

2 *The Marquette Mining Journal*, June 27, 1890, p. 1. The funeral notice appeared July 12, 1890. Case left a wife and four children whom I have been unable to trace.

It is significant that the cablegram which announced his death in London was sent to John M. Longyear, the city's leading capitalist and a man of truly national stature. Case had gone to England in connection with the formation of a company to work the marble quarries of the county, which he believed to be a very valuable property. Longyear was a pallbearer at his funeral, and one is tempted to posit a reasonably close business and personal relationship between the two men. In short, we have a picture of an energetic and hard driving man whose business interests were undoubtedly centered in the Upper Peninsula but who was well acquainted elsewhere in the United States and even abroad. Case probably moved in business circles in Chicago, and this experience could easily explain the decision to employ an architect from that city for a dwelling which was to be a demonstration of recently achieved affluence and sophistication. In this connection it is well to note that in the late 19th century travel between Chicago and the Upper Great Lakes was facilitated by frequent passenger service provided by the Lake Michigan and Lake Superior Transportation Company. The trip required three days, cost less than the comparable journey by rail, and offered some of the customary relaxation of an ocean voyage. It is quite possible that the hard-working Root had something of a holiday on his site inspection visit, which probably occurred in 1886. The completion of the house was announced in a lengthy article in the *Mining Journal* of Dec. 24, 1887. Allowing for the customary construction period, I would propose a design date of 1886.³

Marquette itself in the eighteen-eighties had a good many of the aspects of a boom town. Over its immense docks poured a steadily increasing volume of iron ore from the Gogebic range, a traffic which made wealthy men out of many of the town's leading citizens. While its prosperity thus rested on a seemingly solid industrial base, it had also an aristocratic character not often associated with mining. A visitor in 1873 wrote,

Marquette is not so large as I at first supposed, containing as near as I can learn, about 6000 inhabitants, but it has immense wealth, a good location for business, and with reference to its geographical position and more particularly to its immediate surroundings, it is most beautifully situated. It is as handsome a town as I ever saw

³ No drawings for the house exist in the Root collection of the Burnham library. It is, however, listed in Miss Monroe's compendium of 1896, and the architects are also mentioned in the newspaper article just cited. There should, then, be no hesitancy in attribution.

— not tame in its outlines but everything about it is bold, strongly in relief, huge and yet slightly.⁴

Some of the same comments could be made today. Many of the town's commercial structures were built of a striking red material called Jacobsville sandstone quarried along the eastern side of the Keweenaw Peninsula and in the Huron Mountains. The frequent employment of this richly colored stone, which has today been all too often masked by hideous plastic fronts, must have given Marquette in its heyday a continuity of appearance not unlike that of certain European towns such as the Cotswold villages or the Italian hill towns. More important for the Root project, however, was the presence of an incredible wealth of fine timber within easy reach. A brochure of 1891 proudly remarked that immediately surrounding Marquette were vast forests of every kind "... Magnificent varieties of beech, curly, maple, poplar, oak, and nearly all other kinds of hardwood."⁵ The best of this timber sold at around \$15.00 to \$18.00 per thousand board feet. It is no wonder, then, that Root chose to design the Case

⁴ Manuscript letter from G.W. Hayden to E.E. Foote, esq., 5 Feb. 1873. Michigan Historical Collections.

⁵ *Marquette, Michigan* (a brochure published by the Citizen's Association) Marquette, 1891, p. 69.

John Wellborn Root, Lake View Presbyterian Church, Chicago.



house in his own highly individual version of the shingle style. The building is closely akin to his few works in the Chicago area in that manner, notably the Lake View Presbyterian Church and the Jackson Park Pavilion.

Even more startling is its resemblance to some of the earliest Oak Park works of Frank Lloyd Wright, particularly the Gale houses of 1892.⁶ The round tower with its octagonal base, the sharply defined gables, and the feeling of expanding spaces pushing outward, are all characteristic of the best shingled work of the eighteen-eighties.

In that decade Marquette was engaged in developing an aristocratic residential quarter on a high ridge immediately to the north of its business center. Building lots were ample in size, the area was well wooded, and the best sites offered superb views of Presqué Isle and Lake Superior. Root oriented the Case house so as to take full advantage of this outlook. By 1900 the district possessed many other examples of what the period called "fine homes", but none of them possessed the architectural distinction of the Case house. This quality is traceable essentially to Root's exceptional design and the extraordinary interior detailing, which, the *Mining Journal* truthfully remarked, was "... like cabinet work, perfect." In an extended analysis the paper went on to say:

On both the first and second floors the key room is the reception hall, as it would be styled on the first floor, or the sitting hall on the second. The reception hall is one of the largest rooms in the house and is finished in birch that has a polish equalling that on a piano case. The fireplace with its birch mantel reaching the ceiling and containing a handsome beveled glass mirror, is the principal attraction of the room,

⁶ I owe the suggestion of these affiliations to a generous letter of Mr. Donald Hoffmann, dated 10 August 1972.

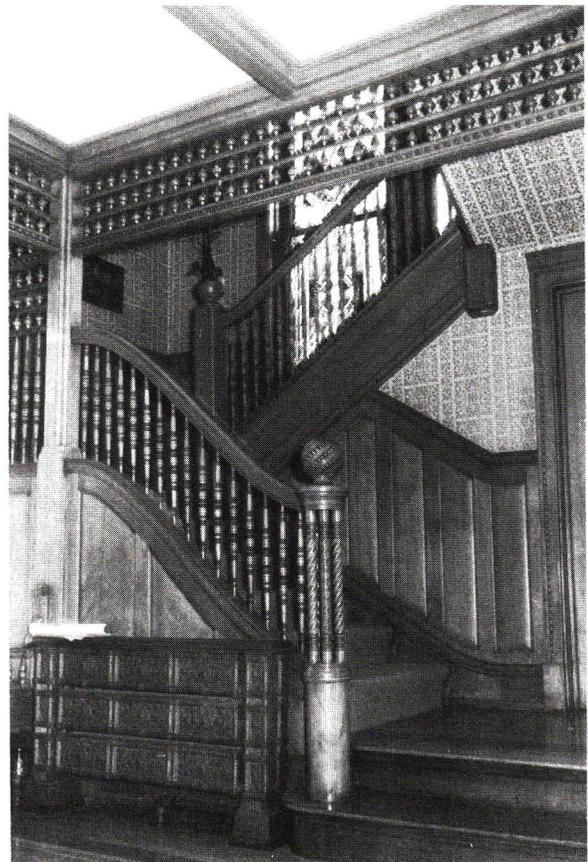
Radiator, Case House.



having wrought iron work on the chandeliers and on the newel light on the stairs. The room has a birch beam ceiling and the floor is on one piece of wood. It is lighted by large windows in the front of the house, the recess being shut off by spindle work in birch and fitted by one of the large window seats so popular in modern houses. The finest stain glass in the city is that over the hall windows and in the two large stair windows in the house. Besides stain glass the windows contain many pieces of double plate glass which casts prismatic colors across the floors within and almost dazzle the eye from without when reflecting the sunshine.

On either side of the fireplace an open doorway with a spindle arch and portieres leads to the dining room while a heavy sliding door with one face of birch and the other of oak connects with the front library. This room is finished entirely in oak including an elegant oak mantel and bookcases. The iron work of the fireplaces is Roman in design having inscriptions and relief pictures copied from walls in the excavated cities of the Roman Empire. This is a southeast corner room connecting with it by sliding doors to a second library, also used as a drawing room. This is the most beautiful room

Spindled stairway, Case House



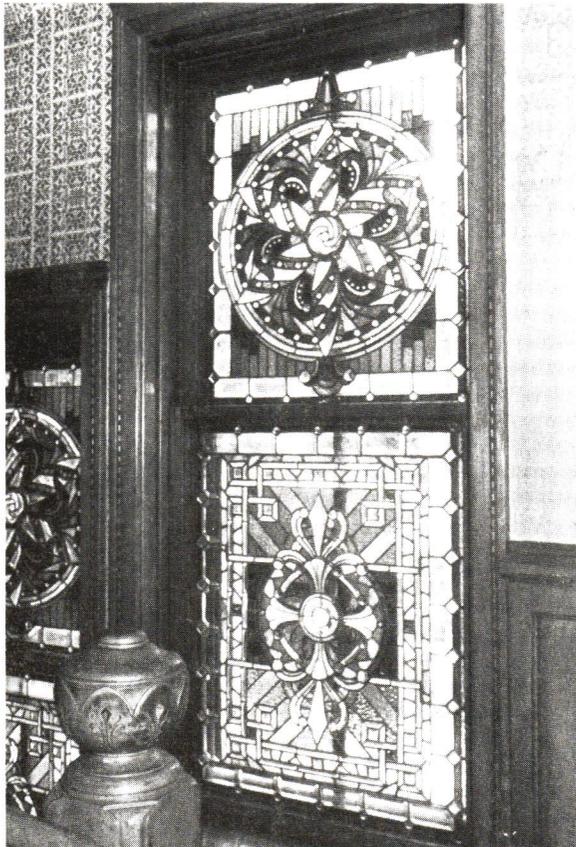
in the house. It is irregular in shape, a square projection from the corner of the house to the north east giving the view of a sweep of the lake from above Presque Isle to the harbor side of the lighthouse. In the center of the end wall of this extension is the fireplace and a mantel with its large double plated mirror. The tiles are all hand decorated, the famous Lowe art tiles, as are all the tiles in the house. The room is finished entirely in solid mahogany with a floor of birch. The rich color and finish of the mahogany with which everything else in the room is in perfect accord, making this room a perfect picture of beauty and a surprise to every visitor.⁷

Here of course, is Root's development of the great entry hall which was such a prominent feature of the domestic architecture of the eighteen-eighties and nineties in both England and the United States.⁸ Particularly effective is his treatment of the spindled staircase with its brilliant leaded glass windows; local legend has it that these were brought

7 *The Marquette Mining Journal*, December 24, 1887.

8 James D. Kornwolf has given probably the most comprehensive exposition of this theme in his *M.H. Baillie Scott and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Baltimore, 1972). I have myself devoted some attention to it in *The Architecture of Samuel Maclure* (Exhibition Catalogue, Victoria, B.C., 1971).

Leaded glass windows, Case House

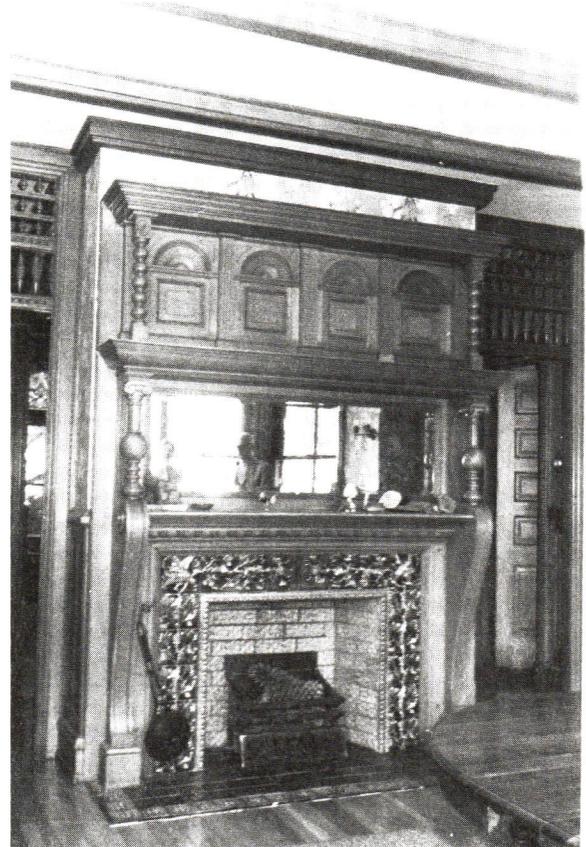


directly from one of the Paris expositions of the eighteen-eighties. On close inspection this belief does not seem implausible. The entire interior is in an amazing state of preservation. The close observer will note that even the original radiator cases have been maintained.

What the newspaper account does not make sufficiently clear is the clever way in which the entire house is adapted to both social program and environmental considerations. The chambers of the entire first floor are linked by a series of sliding doors. When these are drawn back, we are confronted with a single magnificent space, beautifully arranged for the parties with which the little aristocracy of Marquette perforce entertained itself during the long, cold winters.⁹ The place has, indeed, one of the hardest climates in the Mid-West. Temperatures of -30° are not uncommon, and in the summer, a day of 75° weather is hot. While the house possessed a coal fired hot water system, it was natural for Root to treat the fireplaces very seriously as auxiliaries, and it is not too much to say that they are masterpieces of decorative art. The

9 Since taking possession a few years ago, the present owners of the house, a university professor and his wife, have found themselves impelled to entertain a good deal more than they had done previously.

Dining room fireplace, Case House.



restrained opulence of the cast silver surround in the dining room is especially remarkable. The wood carving of course, echoes the floral motifs which Root was fond of executing in terra cotta on the exterior of his major business buildings. As the photographs indicate, the entire interior is full of bright, shiny, reflecting surfaces, which on a sunny winter day, or in an evening with the fireplace going, must be truly dazzling. These surfaces may be understood as having not only a visual but also an environmental purpose. With the sliding doors closed, the interior would become a series of sealed cubicles, and the mirrors and highly polished tiles would act as conductors for the heat currents generated by the fireplace. It is also worth noting that the house has a remarkable apparatus of high Victorian gadgetry. Almost every room was connected with the kitchen by electric bells and speaking tubes, and the refrigerator was built in — a great innovation for the time. Clearly Root paid as much attention to technological and environmental considerations in this small work as he bestowed on them in his large office buildings, and the solutions are worked out with the same architectural finesse that we encounter in the Rookery and the Kansas City Board of Trade. It is no wonder that the *Mining Journal* remarked, "In arrangement it seems perfect. Detail of wood carving, Case House.



Every room is intended for use, the tastes of each member of the family have been consulted, and there are a hundred little conveniences on every floor, which at once attracted the visitor's notice and admiration, yet cannot clearly be described on paper."¹⁰ In an idiom in which he is not particularly well known, the Julian M. Case house is clear evidence of the architectural stature of John Well-born Root.

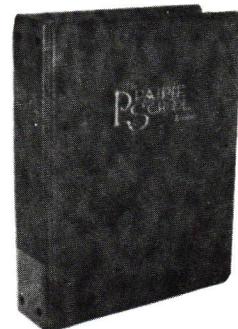
10 *The Marquette Mining Journal*, December 24, 1887.

Preview

The fourth quarter of Volume IX of *The Prairie School Review* will feature an article by Dr. Theodore Turak on Louis H. Sullivan's Holy Trinity Cathedral in Chicago. Professor Turak demonstrates Sullivan's synthesis of traditional Russian forms with his own distinctive style and the overall influence of earlier work by French architect, Viollet-le-Duc.

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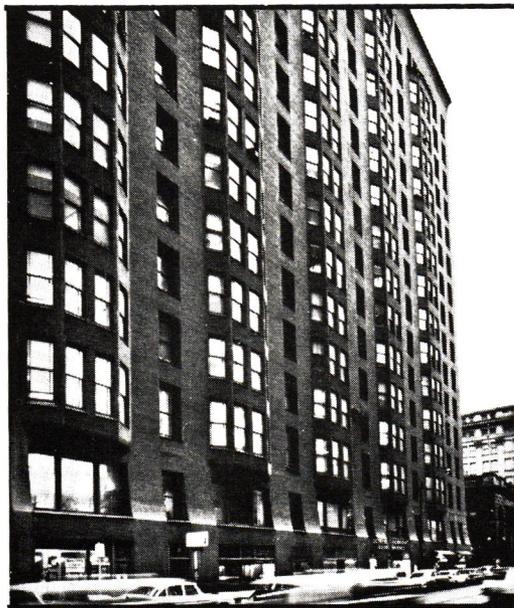
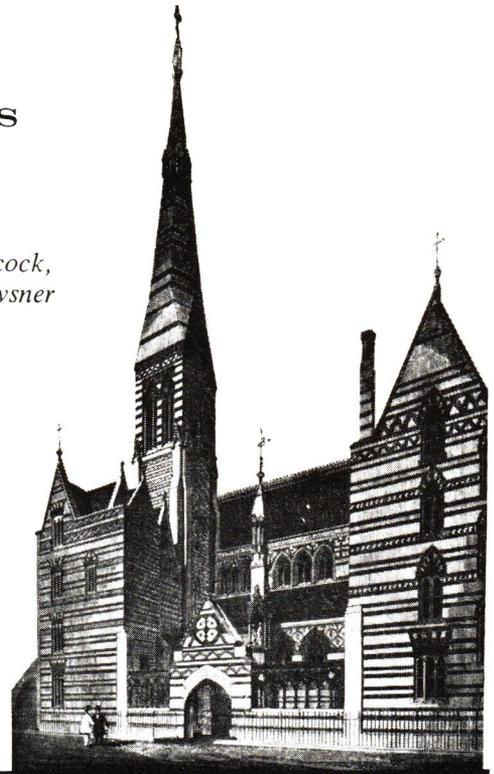
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