Ridge Historical Society
RECORD
BEVERLY HILLS, MORGAN PARK, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS & MT. GREENWOOD

Encouraging the American dream

The Better Homes in America Movement to improve home building practices and residential neighborhoods

BY CAROL FLYNN, JENNIFER KENNY, AND LINDA LAMBERTY

What a time it was in this country between 1920 and 1930! The end of WW1 allowed the focus of Americans to return to matters at home. Concerns shifted to improvement of the quality of life for all Americans during the prosperous 1920s, with an emphasis on health and social conditions. Standards were being raised and methods to maintain them were being devised and implemented.

One national organization that was concerned about such standards was Better Homes in America, Inc., established in 1922 to promote a national campaign for domestic reform. Following World War I, the American Dream was still alive and well, with Americans desiring to own a single family home set upon its own lot. By supporting the family unit and promoting ideal family life in an ideal family home, Better Homes in America brought together architects, builders, public officials, manufacturers, and social reformers to encourage the American dream while improving home building practices and residential neighborhoods.

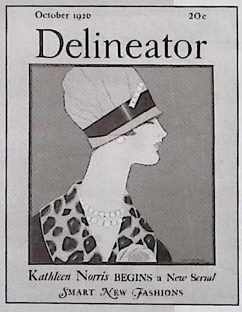
It was through the "worker bee" women's clubs that the Better Homes movement gained momentum. Women's Clubs formed in the late 19th century gained strength and power, and became the great right arm of the Better Homes in American campaign.

In Chicago, a local chapter of the Better Homes in America organization was established in 1923 and a demonstration house in suburban Park Ridge was displayed two years later. Women's clubs were often responsible for setting up and showing the demonstration houses to community residents.

Beverly/Morgan Park became involved in the Better Homes movement through a round-about way. A block of bungalows was being constructed on West 107th Street, and neighbors of this project grouped together to bring about changes in some of the houses. This venture attracted the attention of the Chicago Chairman of Better Homes in America, who sought the assistance of Morgan Park Woman's Club to secure one of the houses for a demonstration and it still stands at the NW corner of 107th and Wood Streets.

THE DELINEATOR – MAGAZINE FOR WOMEN

Better Homes in America, Inc, was a not-for-profit educational campaign started by "The Delineator" - one of two mass-circulation magazines for women put out by the Butterick Pattern Company. Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, served as its president for 12 years. Every year they sponsored, and Hoover's Commerce Department promoted, an annual competition to build better homes, with attendant educational programming. The whole point was to make accessible to all citizens the knowledge of high standards of home building, furnishing and home life.



SUMMER 2007
Vol. 36, No. 2

RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
10621 S. Seeley Ave.
Chicago, IL 60643

T 773/881-1675

ridgehistory@hotmail.com

Open to the public
Tuesday 2 - 5 p.m.
Thursday 2 - 5 p.m.
Sunday 2 - 5 p.m.
or by appointment

Better Homes and the American Bungalow

"The programs promoted by Better Homes in America have been designed primarily to reach the consumers of houses rather than their producers. It takes time to convey the essential information to an entire nation but unquestionably this and other movements are making important contributions to the development of discrimination in buying and to a demand on the part of home-owners and home buyers for better architectural design and better construction."

(BETTER HOMES MANUAL, 1931)

The promotion of good architecture was an important goal of the 1920s Better Homes movement. It was believed that through the study of well-designed and attractive homes in photographs, illustrations and by demonstration, potential home buyers and builders would gain an intelligent appreciation of architecture. This appreciation would improve American home life and shape better communities.

Bungalows were introduced in Beverly Hills and Morgan Park in the first decade of the 20th century, yet the modest Chicago Bungalow was a new variant type. They were built in multitude on vacant tracts of land between 1910 and 1930 to meet the housing needs of Chicago's growing population.

Emerging from working class cottage design of the late 19th century, Chicago Bungalows are one- or 1.5-story houses that are rectangular in plan with low pitched roofs. They are brick, with face brick on the street façade and common brick on the sides and rear walls. To Beverly Hills and Morgan Park residents, rows of these ordinary brick tract houses did not blend well with the upscale and better designed residences in their community.

With a building boom in the mid-1920s, many real estate developers seized profitable opportunities in the moderate Chicago residential market, by building bungalows. In November of 1926, Englewood-based real estate developer William Klein purchased all remaining vacant lots on the north side of 107th Street for speculative residential development. Upon narrow lots between Drew and Wood Streets, Klein proposed to construct a series of 16 standardized brick Chicago Bungalows. Klein had no idea that his venture, by example, would offer tremendous opportunity to further the Better Homes movement.

Dismay on 107th St.

With a tradition of well-built and architect-designed homes on picturesque streets, the residents living on or near 107th St. were dismayed at what William Klein had in mind. The Morgan Park Woman's Club, along with other neighborhood residents, joined forces and finances to work with the developer to build homes on slightly larger lots and aesthetically enhance his standard designs at a small price.

William Klein agreed, and where possible on the block, bungalow designs were recomposed to add interest to the streetscape. By raising or varying rooflines, adding dormers, or changing the volumes of the homes, the "pea-in-pod" effect was reduced.

"Pea in pod" houses redesigned

With help from local architect Ralph Oliver, the Better Homes in America Demonstration House at 1756 West 107th Street, the Douglas E. Thompson House at 1750 West 107th Street, the Ollie B. and Nena Jones House at 1746 West 107th Street and the Walter E. Anderson House at 1736 West 107th Street were redesigned for better balance, rhythm and proportion in 1927.

Contrast these homes with those built earlier at the east end of the block, and one can see how successful the Better Homes in America demonstration was.

To Beverly Hills and Morgan Park residents, rows of these ordinary brick tract bungalows did not blend well with the upscale and better designed residences in their community.

Changing an empty house into a furnished, restful place of beauty

"Changing an empty house into a furnished, restful place of beauty is no less a task than transforming a piece of paper into a lovely picture." Thus begins the "Suggestions for Furnishing and Decorating the Demonstration Home" from the national level Better Homes in America campaign. The campaign stresses that "the motive behind the demonstration is primarily educational."

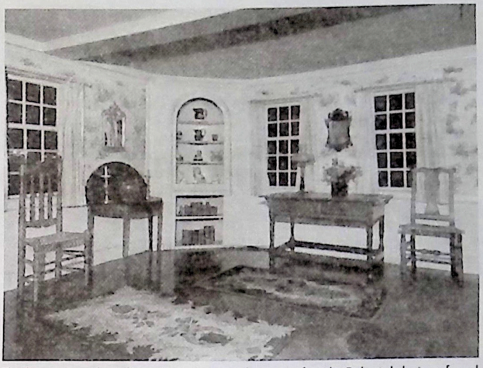
The suggestions address paint colors, furnishings, lighting, ventilation, wall hangings, window treatments, carpeting, accessories and arrangement for every type of room a model home could have down to the footrest in the "Housekeeper's Rest Corner."

The demonstration home for the Morgan Park-Beverly Hills District, on the north east corner of 107th and Wood Streets, was described as a "Colonial Bungalow" and was "furnished with a touch of the early American." This decorating theme was selected because it was a style that had been popular for 200 years; in the opinion of the decorators, it was a style that was always in good taste.

A revival of Colonial style had begun in the 1890s, at the end of the Victorian era. This revival ran concurrently with, and outlasted, the arts and crafts movement and the short art nouveau period. The Colonial style received even more interest when, in 1926, John D. Rockefeller began a lavishly funded and highly publicized restoration of Williamsburg, VA.

Descriptions of the rooms and their furnishings are included in the project's publications, such as the booklet Better Homes In America by the Morgan Park-Beverly Hills District, Chicago, Illinois, April 7 to 17, 1927, and newspapers of the time.

The booklet description reads, "The living room furnishings include reproductions of early Colonial designs found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.



The living room furnishings include reproductions of early Colonial designs found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Maple stools and tables, Windsor, ladder back and quaint split back chairs, spinet desk, Jenny Lind clock, chintz coverings and cretonne drapes bring in the early American feeling.

PLEASE SEE FURNISHED, PAGE 4

BEVERLY/MORGAN PARK PEOPLE INVOLVED IN BETTER HOMES

Across 107th Street from the proposed set of "pea-in-the-pod" bungalows lived Mr. & Mrs. Richard Marshall McClure.

Eunice McClure, newly-voted president of the Morgan Park Woman's Club less than a year before, with her husband and fellow neighbors around the intersection of 107th and Wood, rebelled at the idea that their community should be marred by the block of planned identical buildings.

So this coalition of neighbors purchased the properties, had the changes made to the plans and sold the houses at no profit to themselves.

The women responsible for the interior and grounds of the demonstration house were: Mrs. Claudia Barber, Equipment and Furnishings; Mrs. Henry R. Sauer, Interior Decoration and Mrs. Stuart M. Murdoch, Landscaping and Gardening. Mrs. Raymond Olmsted was in charge of Programs.

Research on Better Homes in America uncovered some local history along the Ridge. One of the community residents who became involved locally in the Better Homes in America effort in the 1920s was Viet Gentry, whose descendant, Bill, still lives in the same house today that his ancestor occupied then.

Additionally, census research into the families involved in the 1927 Demonstration house turned up neighbors whose surnames come up regularly as friends of RHS today… namely Sabal and Secord.

Another of the Better Homes backers (whose wife, Cora, was a member of the Morgan Park Woman's Club and in charge of "Reception" during their demonstration week) was Thomas Ranken, whose family wedding gown was featured in a Chicago Tribune piece on RHS by Rick Kogan a few years ago. A week or two after the article appeared, a Ranken descendant knocked at the RHS door, just to see the family heirloom.

This community has maintained families for generations, and some of the current members stay active in local affairs just as their ancestors did 80 years ago.

FURNISHED, FROM PAGE 3

Maple stools and tables, Windsor, ladder back and quaint split back chairs, spinet desk, Jenny Lind clock, chintz coverings and cretonne drapes bring in the early American feeling. Two well-filled open book cases on either side of a natural fireplace and a grand piano give the house a background of culture befitting the residential district in which it is located."

The Better Homes in America demonstration home, on the northeast corner of 107th and Wood Streets, was described as a "Colonial Bungalow" and was "furnished with a touch of the early American."

A newspaper article augments this with, "In the living room...is a Queen Anne wing chair in gay chintz, placed by a butterfly table in the corner....Cherry red is used for the background and the bright color is carried out in the chintz in the chair, in the colors of the picture over the fireplace and in the chintz hangings at the doors and windows. There is a grand piano, over which is thrown a Paisley shawl in harmony with a Paisley adorned davenport." The cost for furniture, draperies and rugs throughout the house was estimated at $3,250.

It should be noted that cherry red, chintz and paisley are not colors and patterns truly associated with Colonial times, but rather became popular during Victorian times. But, as so often happens in a "revival," reproductions of historical looks are left to the interpretations and whims of the "revivalists."

Of special interest is the kitchen. Electrical refrigeration, an electrical food preparer, an electrical window ventilator and a dishwasher were all included. A "new type of gas range" was installed that included extra drawers and cabinet space. These were very innovative for the time. One of the stated goals of this whole campaign was to make the home better equipped with modern, time-saving devices to free up the homemaker's time.

The house was equipped with an oil heating unit, and because this eliminated coal chutes and fuel bins, it added room and increased cleanliness in the basement. The demonstration suggested turning this area into home entertainment and recreation, and a billiard table and other athletic equipment was placed down there.

In addition, a tool cabinet and work bench were added for the men in the family. The women got a laundry area with "an automatic storage" hot water heater, a three-compartment laundry tub, an electric washer and an ironer. A corner space was reserved for a fruit and vegetable storage room.

Education programs were a critical component of the Better Homes In America campaign. At the Morgan Park-Beverly Hills site, programs were offered every afternoon and evening in another of the five houses built for this event.

The actual lectures and demonstrations included such topics as finance and the home, household refrigeration, books for the home, selection of proper shade materials, flowers for the garden, heating systems, electric lighting and wiring, principles of interior decorating, building materials, fireplace construction, what to look for in Colonial wallpaper, plastering, paint, cooking, meal planning, and recreation in the home. A concert was given on the grand piano.

Only a few hundred people were expected to view the demonstration house at 107th and Wood, but thousands of people actually attended. At one point, the wait to get inside the house was an hour and a half, and the delay was blamed on the inability of the hostesses in getting the women visitors through the kitchen.

On April 15, all of the furnishings, rugs, drapes, equipment and supplies were offered for sale. The amount made over the price of the furniture went to the Morgan Park Woman's Club to be put toward the building of a new Morgan Park clubhouse.

EDITOR
Eileen Klees

CONTRIBUTORS
Sue Delves
Carol Flynn
Jennifer Kenny
Linda Lamberty

DESIGNER
Greg Lochow

MEMBERSHIP
A newsletter subscription is a benefit of membership.

ANNUAL DUES
Individual $20
Family $30
Contributor $50
Supporter $100

Better Homes in America comes to RHS

Exhibit opens September 30th

RHS will open an exhibit on the Better Homes in America (BHinA) movement on September 30, 2007, which will run for several months.

The exhibit will focus on the national program and the contributions of Beverly-Morgan Park through displays and miniature dioramas. Join us for the opening event on Sunday, September 30th, at 2:00 p.m. Refreshments will be served. There is no charge for this event.

Also, watch for your next newsletter for more information about additional upcoming programs on this topic.

On the trail of a serial killer!

"Devil in the White City" bus tour scheduled for Saturday, October 6

RHS and Chicago folklorist and ghost hunter Richard Crowe are offering a "Devil in the White City" bus tour on Saturday, October 6, 2007, from 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. The bus will make a round trip from RHS at 10621 S. Seeley Ave. Lunch is included in the price of the tour.

"The Devil in the White City" refers, of course, to Dr. Harry Howard Holmes (the "Devil") and the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 ("The White City"). Holmes was one of the first known serial killers in this country.

He built a hotel at 63rd St. and Wallace for visitors to stay in while they visited the Fair. The building became known as the "Murder Castle" after it was learned that Holmes may have killed dozens - some say hundreds - of people in this lair. Holmes was eventually caught and hanged for murders committed outside of Chicago.

In his 1896 confession Holmes stated, "I was born with the devil in me."

The October 6 tour will visit Chicago sites associated with the Fair, also known as the Columbian Exposition, and with Holmes. The tour will begin with a trip to Oz Park on the north side of the city, which commemorates the Wizard of Oz written in Chicago by L. Frank Baum, who attended the World's Fair.

We will learn about Daniel Burnham, the chief architect of the White City, and view some of the other Chicago landmarks he is famous for, such as the Rookery.

We will head south to see the Midway Plaisance and the statue of The Republic, which is a replica of the original statue at the Fair. We will ride to the Englewood section of Chicago, where we will visit the site of Holmes's "Murder Castle."

Our route will take us past the Field Museum, the Museum of Science and Industry (where the bridge haunted by famous lawyer Clarence Darrow, who also visited the Fair, will be pointed out to us); through Lincoln, Garfield, Jackson and Sherman Parks, and by the old Chicago Stockyards.

Lunch will be served in the historic Schaller's Pump at 3714 S. Halsted St.

Schaller's, which has been operated by the same family since it opened in 1881, holds the oldest liquor license in the city. There is a reputed Prohibition-era peephole in one of the doors. Across the street from the 11th Ward Democratic offices, it has been a favorite spot for politicians to visit for over a century.

The "Murder Castle" of H.H. Holmes, which once stood at 63rd and Wallace, where he reputedly killed dozens - perhaps hundreds - of people around the time of the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

Richard Crowe, the tour guide for this event, has been conducting ghost tours in Chicago and its environs since 1973 and is recognized as an expert in Chicago folklore and supernatural tales. He has appeared on the History Channel, Discovery Channel, CNN, "Oprah," "Unsolved Mysteries," and "Wild Chicago." He has been interviewed numerous times on local TV and radio stations, and has authored a best-selling book, Chicago's Streetguide to the Supernatural.

Tickets for this event cost $50 for RHS members, and $60 for non-members. Seating is limited, so reservations are required and seats must be paid for at the time the reservation is made. Contact RHS at 773-881-1675, Monday through Friday, from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. to reserve your seats today!

Help wanted for house research

BY EILEEN KLEES

Jennifer Kenney, RHS historian and volunteer, has done a yeoman's job of researching people's houses. She has responded to virtually all requests and questions, often working hours on behalf of RHS to provide the desired information.

But, she needs help to continue this effort, specifically a team of volunteers to look up building permits at University of Illinois Chicago's library.

Forming a team

Eileen Klees is willing to head the team. She needs three other people who will agree to go to UIC library once a month to look up the building permits of the addresses Jennifer Kenney provides.

This is an easy, rather interesting job that only takes one morning or afternoon a month.

UIC is easy to reach via CTA or Metra. There is also visitor parking if you wish to drive.

Interested?

Please call RHS at 773/881-1675 or Eileen Klees at 773-233-4221 to volunteer on this team.

Nostalgic montage drawing highlights Beverly/Morgan Park businesses

Marsha Bolden, author of "Growing Up Brown in Morgan Park," made a speaking engagement for RHS two years ago when our exhibit space featured the over 100 year history of the interesting old African American Morgan Park neighborhood surrounding Shoop School. In a recent phone call, Ms. Bolden, who lives in Michigan, told us she has written a new book, due to be published in the fall of 2007. She included a chapter about the day she spoke at RHS, and the warm reception she received from many old friends of her family who were in the audience.

Artist Sue Engle Budash, of the Morgan Park High School 1967 reunion class, has created a nostalgia montage drawing, "Symbols of the Sixties" with sketches of a number of Beverly - Morgan Park businesses and/or their logos, to be the program cover for the reunion reception. Because Sue lives in Buffalo, N.Y., she sent classmate, Joyce Dobrick Bricker, to search our photo collection and old issues of the Beverly Review to find the images she needed. When she sent a digital copy of the finished result, we immediately asked permission to make copies of the print to benefit Ridge Historical Society. These are being sold for $25, and the first 100 are a limited edition, signed and numbered.

More than 274 persons from the class of 1967 and other mid-sixties Empehi classes made reservations for the July 28 reception at the Oak Lawn Hilton. As we do with other reunion events, RHS representatives will have a table with Society information, memberships, the Arcadia history book and of course the copies of the Sue Budash reunion cover 11 x 14 enlargement.

Ms. Budash's art is featured on her Web site at www.susansworld.net.

Reunions are a wonderful opportunity for RHS to obtain family stories, information for the Architectural Resource Center, and even artifacts.

The print "Nostalgia--Symbols of the Sixties" includes Snackville Junction, Beverly Theatre, Red's, Mickleberry's, Kaden's, YMCA on Walden, an old Rock Island passenger car, Mingeas, the Lind Shop, Ridge Park Field House, the candy store by Clissold, and others. To reserve a copy, send a check to RHS for $25 plus $2 for mailing and handling.

A look at Beverly Hills in the 1930s

BY SUE DELVES

This excerpt is from "A Community Study of Area 72, Beverly Hills," a college sociology class assignment written in the school year, 1937-38.

The full paper was given to RHS a number of years ago by its author Ann Mari Jonsson. She married Art Porter and they raised their family in the large Jonsson family home on the Longwood Drive hilltop, overlooking CosmePark and the 91st Street Station, where she still resides.

"Beverly Hills is a well cared for residential district. It is known for being the largest concentrated area for one family homes in the city, ranging in value from $6,000 to $150,000. A few contain as many as twenty or more rooms. Apartment houses may only be built in certain restricted areas, as on 87th, 91st, 95th, etc., along the railroad tracks, Ashland, Vincennes, Western Avenues (a two block limit on each side, and from California Ave. to Rockwell St. between 99th and 103rd Streets.

North Beverly Hills, where the two new schools are situated, has seen the rise of easily as many as 200 new houses in the last three or four years. These homes tend toward the English Cottage, the Colonial, the French Renaissance and Modern types. Built on lots of fifty or sixty feet, these homes cost between ten and twenty -five thousand dollars. The average cost is between fifteen and eighteen thousand dollars.

The land west of Western Avenue has a very interesting ecology. From 99th to 103rd Streets between Western and California Avenues, the land is flat and barren prairie except for the few commercial enterprises along Western Avenue, and one or two old farm houses and one or two rambling shacks, scattered here and there through the area. 99th Street proves to be nothing but a dangerous dead-end dirt road. It is of note that north of 99th Street just outside the city limits are many small cheap wooden shacks.

Between 103rd and 107th Streets and Western Avenue and the Ridge Country Club is a lovely addition to older Beverly Hills. The houses are beautiful, new and well built, similar to the homes of North Beverly Hills. Not so much built up, but just as fine, it presents an up and thriving neighborhood. West of the Country Club is a very definitely rural community -- small, white frame houses sparsely distributed, entirely different from Beverly.

It is amusing to see liquor stores and taverns just across the street from the boundaries of Beverly and Morgan Park, where sales of liquors are forbidden, even to Walgreens."

RHS WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE AND GROUPS FOR THEIR RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Peg Kapustiak for financing the "RHS Technology Initiative" - Peg donated much-needed new computers and other equipment;

Eileen Klees for helping Peg locate and set up the computer equipment;

Signe Morgan for maintaining the computerized membership records;

Carl and Elaine Spencer for donating a beautiful dining room set;

Carl also secured the donation of a new American flag from the Southwest Kiwanis Club;

Jack Simmerling for cleaning a painting (by Elizabeth Myrick, the first school teacher in the area) in the RHS collection;

Sue Cummings for arranging the donation of office furniture from the company she works for, the Gelber Co.;

Chris Lichtenfeld for his outstanding program on his restoration of the Armco-Ferro House;

Wendy Schulenberg for her continuing advice and guidance on landscaping;

Michael Messerle for his architectural review of the exterior porch/patio;

Michelle Burke, attorney, for her on-going pro bono legal advice;

David Young for his presentation on the history of railroads in Chicago;

Pat Gilligan for his house inspection services;

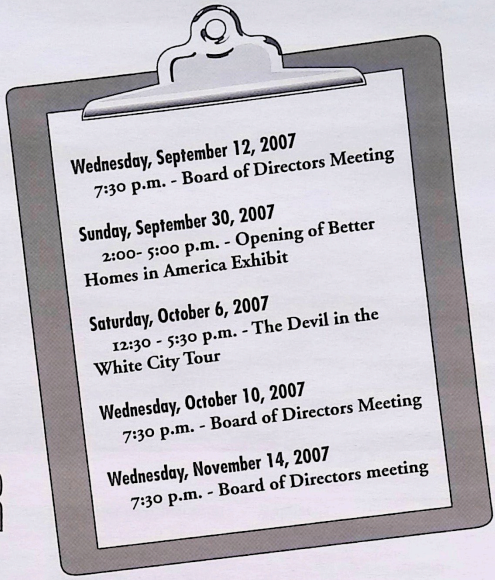
The Schell family for its continuing help with the house and grounds;

Dick Klarich for structural engineering advice;

College students Sussan Navabi, Katherine Hlousek, Carrie Mckeown and Tim Moran for their enthusiastic help with projects;

All the Board members and volunteers for their time and efforts.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR



Wednesday, September 12, 2007
7:30 p.m. - Board of Directors Meeting

Sunday, September 30, 2007
2:00- 5:00 p.m. - Opening of Better Homes in America Exhibit

Saturday, October 6, 2007
12:30 - 5:30 p.m. - The Devil in the White City Tour

Wednesday, October 10, 2007
7:30 p.m. - Board of Directors Meeting

Wednesday, November 14, 2007
7:30 p.m. - Board of Directors meeting

Ridge Historical Society
RECORD
BEVERLY HILLS, MORGAN PARK, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS & MT. GREENWOOD
10621 S. Seeley Ave., Chicago, IL 60643