

Old Homes of Fair Oaks

Sally Dunbar

“Kate Smith” home, 7710 Tobia Way

When looking at the history of an old home it is easy to unearth who owned it. We simply research the Chain of Title with the County, which is the list of owners who, just like a chain, are linked to each other as the home changes ownership. A to B. B to C.

C to D, etc. A bit more difficult, yet still something we can partially identify, is the record of who occupied the home. Our US Census, taken every 10 years, records who is living at the home at that moment, and it frequently tells a different story than the registered ownership.

What is even more difficult to research is the history of what happened within the home, and why various changes were made. Such is the puzzle of this quarter’s “Old Homes Article on the “Kate Smith” home at 7710 Tobia Way— one of our earliest grand homes on the Fair Oaks Bluff, built in the late 1890s.

We know the ownership chain lists Kate Smith as the original owner, purchasing the property on 13.09 acres from investors Clark, Cox, Wilson and Foster, in 1899. We then have records of Kate selling the home to Elizabeth Spencer in 1912.

Elizabeth and her husband Dr. George Spencer are shown on the census records as living in the home in 1920. It’s a bit vague between 1920 and 1925, when there is an Elizabeth Jones transferring her title to Paul Jones in Dec of 1925.

The McNabb family and the Barrister Macum Phelan families may have rented during that time, as well as someone Chinese, because the neighbors referred to the home as “The Chinese Mansion” before 1926, according to Lucy Houser Memories of 1958.

We know that Paul Jones and family lived in the home from 1932 until at least 1959 when he was interviewed for his article in the Memories. Was Elizabeth Jones the remarried name of Elizabeth Spencer? We don’t know.

But 7 years after taking ownership in 1925, the Paul & Aurel Jones family moved from Utah to live in their “Big Old Redwood home on Minnesota Avenue”, later to be identified as Tobia Way.

In April 1926 there appears a deed from Paul Jones and wife to A. R. Gallaway of Healdsburg. We have no idea who he was, but the Jones family continued to live there until after 1959 at least. We also know that from 1988 until 2005 John

Frances and his wife owned the home, with the 3rd floor being her art studio.

What is even harder to discover is how the changes in a home came to be, and when. And that is where this home is a real puzzler. The Kate Smith home was originally a 3-story home, with a deep wrap-around covered porch encircling the house. With a full hip roof and pop out dormer windows on the 3rd floor, it cut quite a silhouette perched up on the bluffs. If you drive by the home today, you would not recognize it, however. While the body of the solid redwood home remains with the original floor plan mostly intact, gone are the wrap around porches and the full hip roof. In their place is a French Country feel with a mansard-type flat-top roof and no overhang over the front door. There has also been a 2-car garage added towards the street, with stairs up to the foyer.

Why would this dramatic change have occurred? It is hard to tell, but a possible clue resides in Paul Jones' Memories article from 1959 when he mentions he is "sort of retired", or at least will be once he finishes "rebuilding new steps on all these redwood porches!" Can you imagine the work to rebuild all the decks and steps around the entire home? Despite the expense, the effort involved would be enough to convince many people to eliminate the decks. I know, from my own memory, that the current design was in place in 1979 when I moved to Fair Oaks, so the redesign must have taken place between 1959 and 1979.

The view from the house, once described as "one of the finest views in the world" is still spectacular, looking out over Sacramento Bar, the river, and on a clear day you can see all the way to Mt. Diablo. No wonder this was one of our first developed home lots!



