

PREFACE: THE PURCELL-CUTTS HOUSE IN THE CONTEXT OF LAKE OF THE ISLES

Insofar as the house represents a departure from customary forms it does so because in designing it a conscious attempt has been made to first establish a real modern American family life, and then give it expression in real forms.

W.G. Purcell, *Own House Notes*

The Purcell-Cutts House was designed by William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie in 1913 and called the Edna S. Purcell House, after Purcell's wife. However, this was not Purcell's first architectural undertaking in the Lake of the Isles neighborhood. There were two other homes completed nearby that lend insight into the final plan of the house at Lake Place: The Catherine Gray House (1907) and the E.L. Powers House (1910). (See Appendix A, Buildings in the Twin Cities by Purcell, Feick and Elmslie.)

In 1907, Purcell designed a house originally known as the W.G. Purcell residence on a lot in the prestigious Lake of the Isles area, purchased with money he had received from his father. The house was later renamed the Catherine Gray residence in honor of his grandmother who came there to live. As one of the first projects that Purcell and Feick undertook when they opened their firm in February 1907, the house foreshadowed many of the firm's trademark elements that were later more fully developed in the Edna S. Purcell (Purcell-Cutts) House. The Catherine Gray residence included an open floor plan, a unifying system of interior trim, outward opening casement windows and a raised hearth; the latter reflected the central gathering place of the camp fires of Purcell's youth

spent at Island Lake, Wisconsin. (The exterior and interior of this house have been much altered.)

Built in 1910, the E.L. Powers House was the first major residence designed by the new firm of Purcell, Feick and Elmslie. Hence it was the firm's first house to employ an extensive system of exterior and interior ornament designed by Elmslie, which included terra cotta, sawed wood, leaded glass, stencils, and furniture designed specifically for the house. In this way it is an important precedent to Purcell's own house with a similarly elaborate system of ornament. The house's living spaces were uncharacteristically placed in the back of the house which originally had a view to Lake of the Isles. Though that view has now been obscured, the house remains in mostly original condition.

Built in 1913 over a period of six months at a cost of \$14,000, the Edna S. Purcell (Purcell-Cutts) House was a superb example of the Prairie School philosophy of "organic architecture." The architect strove to combine the site, the house, its contents and its function all into one unified design. This was a drastic departure from traditional residential architecture. Residential houses of the same period were usually designed as "style period" houses, employing isolated spaces and traditional decorative forms reflecting what Purcell termed an "aristocratic view toward the community." Houses were built to impress others rather than to promote the functions necessary for daily living. Edna's house would have flowing, open spaces with rooms designed for modern American family life and was a statement of the democratic ideals embodied in the progressive social movement. For more information regarding Purcell's thoughts on the

architecture of the House, refer to Appendix B, *Historic Structures Report* - "Purcell's Own House Notes."

The Purcell-Cutts House is located in one of the oldest residential neighborhoods in Minneapolis (downtown was the *first* residential neighborhood.) As one can see today, the overall quality of residential architecture in the Lake of the Isles area of Minneapolis is eclectic. Though most of Purcell's neighbors on Lake Place possessed homes that were traditional examples of the Victorian period, others built fairly literal interpretations of Tudor, Mediterranean, and Italianate architectural styles on nearby Lake of the Isles Parkway.

Purcell, Feick and Elmslie built two houses on the west side of Lake of the Isles: the Owre House (1911-12) and the Tillotson House (1912). The first resembles the Edna S. Purcell House with its low-pitched roof, ribbon windows and earth-toned stucco with dark brown wood trim; the latter has a steeply-pitched front gable and is an example of the type of roof line Purcell had chosen for his father's house in River Forest, IL (1907).

Other Prairie School Style houses in the neighborhood include George Maher's Winton House (1910) on Mount Curve Avenue, and various broad stucco homes with tripartite-arch entries in the manner of George Maher. The large Prairie School Style house at 2424 Lake Place is the Leslie House, designed by Louis Long and built in 1914. Its interior has been substantially altered.

It is suggested that docents walk around the neighborhood in order to become familiar with these houses and their proximity to the Purcell-Cutts House. This is especially important with the Catherine Gray House and the Powers House.

PART I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PURCELL FAMILY AND LAKE PLACE

General Background

William Gray Purcell, his wife Edna and their adopted son James moved into the house on Lake Place shortly before the Christmas of 1913. In 1915, the Purcells adopted another son, Douglas. At Christmas 1915 Douglas would have been about 10 months and James would have been about 4½ years old. Catherine Gray, William Gray Purcell's maternal grandmother, lived only a short distance away at 2409 E. Lake of the Isles Parkway (Catherine Gray House, designed by Purcell, 1909). Another, often overlooked, member of the household was Edna Purcell's live-in maid. The maid would have played an integral behind-the-scenes role in daily life in the Purcell household.

The Purcells would have been considered an upper-middle-class family in 1915. William Gray Purcell himself was a partner in a relatively successful architectural practice. Purcell's father, a self-made millionaire in the Chicago grain trading business, left his son a substantial sum of money to get started in life. In addition, Edna Purcell came from a wealthy, well-connected Chicago family (her father owned a music publishing business) and had a substantial income of her own. Domestic labor was still very affordable and the Purcells could afford a live-in maid. The house on Lake Place had cost approximately \$14,000 to build in 1913, while the average new home cost under

\$3,000. Keeping this in mind, we can see that while the Purcells were not rich, they were certainly comfortable in the years preceding America's entry into World War I.

William Gray Purcell

William Gray Purcell was born to Charles A. and Anna Catherine Purcell in 1880. As previously mentioned, his father was a successful grain arbiter in Chicago and was well respected in the Oak Park area where he first came to attend school. From early childhood Purcell lived with his maternal grandparents, Dr. William Cunningham Gray and Catherine Garns Gray. Dr. Gray was the influential editor of the Presbyterian weekly "The Interior" from 1871 to 1901 and held a progressive, humanistic outlook emphasizing man's relationship with nature that was reflected in his internationally acclaimed publication. His grandmother was active in the arts of painting, music and literature. Purcell spent summers with his extended family at Island Lake Camp, Wisconsin, where he was constantly exposed to nature and the democratic realities of camp life. The rest of the year was spent in Oak Park and Chicago, where he walked frequently to see the construction of such notable architects as Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. The Gray's intellectual and moral influence remained with Purcell throughout his life.

Purcell entered the College of Architecture at Cornell University in 1899. In 1902 he won the Andrew D. White Competition with a design that featured no classical ornament and was designed purely for its function; an unprecedented notion in formal architectural training of the time.

After graduation in 1903, Purcell returned to Chicago to look for his first job. He met George Grant Elmslie, who was working as chief draftsman for Louis Sullivan. Elmslie obtained six months of employment for Purcell with the Sullivan firm, which undoubtedly was a formative experience for him. This was the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship between Purcell and Elmslie.

From 1904 to 1906 Purcell worked for several prominent area architects. Purcell then left on a one year tour of Europe with his Cornell classmate, George Feick, Jr. He was exposed to the best architecture Europe had to offer, but made a special effort to meet progressive European architects such as Berlage, Boberg and Nytrop. Upon his return to the United States, Purcell and Feick began their own architectural firm. Their first project was the W.G. Purcell House on Lake of the Isles (1909), later renamed the Catherine Gray House.

Elmslie's employment with Sullivan came to an end when Sullivan's fortunes began to decline and he could no longer afford Elmslie's salary. Elmslie and Purcell had often discussed a potential partnership, and in 1910 Elmslie became a partner in the firm of Purcell, Feick & Elmslie.

The firm also consisted of several drafters, artists, and designers whom Purcell referred to as "the Team." All employees participated in the design process and all drafters signed their work. Mary Alice Parker was the firm's first full-time, permanent drafter (hired in 1908). She later became a successful independent architect. Feick left

the firm in 1913, and the offices became known as Purcell & Elmslie, the name under which they continued to do business until the partnership was dissolved in 1921.

As Progressive (later called “Prairie School”) architects espousing a modern outlook, Purcell & Elmslie valued simplicity, function and the organic relationship of man and nature. They in turn rejected the historically derived forms of Neo-classical, Gothic, Egyptian or Romanesque revivalism so popular during the Victorian period. As evidenced by his writings (See Appendix B, *Historic Structure Report* - “Own House Notes”), Purcell was determined to abandon outdated Victorian notions both in his architecture and his lifestyle.

Edna Summy Purcell

Edna Summy was born to an upper-middle-class family in Chicago. Her father, Clayton F. Summy, was a successful music publisher who had good social connections and cultivated a comfortable lifestyle. Edna attended Wellesley, majoring in the study of music.

Purcell met Edna in Chicago and they married December 29th, 1908. They first lived in the Catherine Gray House with his grandmother, but evidently the two women were at odds because the Purcells soon moved to an apartment on Aldrich Avenue in South Minneapolis.

The Purcells did not have any children of their own and in 1913 they became foster parents of a young boy named James. With this step the couple began thinking about building a home of their own. W.G. Purcell was becoming more active in

professional organizations and both he and Edna became more involved in the arts community and other social groups. A house would provide a showcase for the firm's expertise as well as a focal point for their social lives.

Purcell decided that their home on Lake Place would be called the Edna Summy Purcell House after his wife. While Purcell and Elmslie were the principal designers of the house, Edna participated in many aspects of the plan, as evidenced by Purcell's letters to Elmslie in Chicago with comments such as, "E.S.P. won't have it..."

As the woman of the house, it was Edna's responsibility to supervise the maid's activities, plan menus for daily meals, oversee childcare, etc. Her role as a "lady of leisure" was to show the outside world that she did not have to work because her husband was a successful architect. However, her days were probably full, not only with her housekeeping responsibilities, but also with her involvement in the arts community and her own craft activities such as embroidering textiles for her home.

The Purcells adopted another boy, Douglas, in 1915. Unfortunately, the family did not stand the test of time. The Purcells divorced in 1935, citing irreconcilable differences.

The Maid

We know almost nothing about Mrs. Purcell's maid other than that she lived in the house with the family. The entrance to her small room, complete with sink, is off the landing of the stairs leading to the family's sleeping area. Her bathroom, with tub but no shower, and a small window, was located in the basement of the house next to the

laundry area. The front entrance to the kitchen is at the base of the stairs leading up to the second floor (with her room off the first floor landing) and the kitchen's rear entrance leads to the basement stairs. The kitchen door could be opened and closed with a specially designed foot pedal, while the phone closet and entrance to the basement stairs could also be closed off. This entire arrangement allowed for the maid's areas to be closed off from the family's main living areas, even in such a comparatively small house (approximately 2800 sq. ft.)

Statistics from the period indicate that the Purcell's maid was very likely a white, working-class woman or a white immigrant of Irish, German, or Scandinavian origin. Many immigrant women entered domestic service upon their arrival to the United States because they spoke little English. This position gave them a safe place to stay and did not require complicated language skills for instructions as factory jobs often did. After 1900 the use of very young girls (under the age of 16) as domestics was uncommon due to newly instated labor laws. It was hard to find servants and very hard to keep good ones. The constant shortage of good, experienced household servants was constantly referred to in women's literature as "the servant problem." The shortage was caused by several factors. First, immigration to the U.S. began to slow, reducing the supply of young, unmarried women needing positions. Middle class households began to aspire to the leisured lifestyles of the upper-classes, so that most middle-class housewives had at least one maid, stretching the already short supply over a greater number of American households. Factory work, though difficult and dangerous, began to pay higher wages

than many domestic positions. Finally, experienced maids were difficult to keep as they usually stopped working when they married.

As the Purcell's maid was the only domestic in the house, her duties would have been very broad. Mrs. Purcell probably would have prepared detailed instructions on her daily, weekly and seasonal duties. A typical day might have included rising before the family to be sure the coal-fired furnace was working properly (though the responsibility for keeping the furnace stoked after Purcell left for work was left to a "colored man" he describes in his notes regarding the house). She would then commence with her personal hygiene and breakfast. She would prepare and serve breakfast for the family, then proceed upstairs to air out the bedding, sweep the floors and clean the bathroom. Depending on her agreement with her employers, she might care for the children when they were not in school. She might also do laundry, although the Purcells might have hired a professional laundress to come in once a week. They might have had an electric wash machine and wringer system, as these were fairly common at the time, though the laundry room sink does have a built-in washboard. The room at the back of the basement was used for clothes drying. The electric buzzer system rang in the kitchen and kept the maid apprised of the family's needs with buttons located in the Purcell's bedroom, the dining room, the living room and the back porch. In the evening she would prepare and serve supper, then clean up afterwards. Finally, she would retire to her small room off the staircase to do darning, needlework, etc.; the lighting in her room was particularly good for doing close work.

The maid probably worked five and one-half days per week with Saturday and one-half day on Sunday off. If the Purcells needed the maid to prepare and serve for a Saturday dinner party, she would probably have received all day Sunday off. During her free time the maid might have shopped, taken walks, attended plays or gone to dances. The employer/employee relationship was often similar to that of parent/child. Some maids were allowed visitors to the home if they secured permission from their employer first. Of course, male visitors were prohibited. Servants usually were subject to a curfew. If she became ill, it was the employer's responsibility to provide medical attention. Employers provided uniforms if they wanted a specific mode of dress. Oftentimes the maid wore a standard three-quarter-sleeve, ankle-length dress of dark fabric and the employers provided the standard white collar and cuffs. It was up to the maid to see that these were kept clean and presentable. These almost parental restrictions on the maid's behavior and freedom probably contributed to the "servant problem."

With the advent of World War I architectural commissions were waning, and William Purcell began negotiations with Charles O. Alexander about doing advertising work for his industrial leather belting firm in Philadelphia. By now it was evident to most Americans that it would only be a matter of time before the United States entered World War I. Around 1916, the family moved to Philadelphia and put the house on the market. The property was purchased by Anson Bailey Cutts, Sr. in 1919 for \$15,000. The house remained in the Cutts family until Anson B. Cutts, Jr. bequeathed it to the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts in 1985.

Purcell wrote voluminously on his architectural career and kept his correspondence from his years in Minneapolis. Upon his death in 1965, his papers were given to the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota. They are accessible to the public, and have proved a valuable resource in the research, restoration, and interpretation of the house. Particularly important were the letters between Purcell and Elmslie regarding the house after 1912, when Elmslie opened a Chicago office for Purcell and Elmslie (Elmslie moved back to Chicago permanently after the sudden death of his wife Bonnie, to whom he had been married since 1910).

The Cutts Family: A Brief Profile

Anson Bailey Cutts was born in 1865 in North Carolina. He moved to Minneapolis via Chicago and served as Chief Rate Clerk of James J. Hill's Great Northern Railroad for two years (1890-92). In 1895, he married Edna Browning Stokes of Grand Forks, North Dakota. In 1902, he was General Ticket and Passenger Agent of the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad (built by W.D. Washburn in 1869), later serving as Passenger Traffic Manager.

Anson Sr. and Edna had one son, Anson B. Cutts, Jr. Anson Jr. was born about 1910, attended Harvard University in Cambridge, then worked in various capacities in the arts (architectural projects, criticism, and poetry among them). Anson became a visitor to Taliesin West at the invitation of Olgivanna Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's widow. He had written a piece about the musical performances at Taliesin (probably in the early 1960s).

Anson Sr. died in 1949 and is buried in Lakewood Cemetery. Anson Jr. moved back to his mother's house in the 1960s to care for her in her advanced age; however, she lived for many years afterward. Edna Cutts died in the late 1970s at about age 105. Anson Jr. died in 1985, bequeathing the house to the Institute along with funds for its restoration. The tall-case clock in the entrance hall, the photograph of Anson Sr. in the guest bedroom, and the case of gold trophies in the morning room are all Cutts family objects. They are in the house as a stipulation of Anson Cutts, Jr.'s will.

(A profile of Anson Sr. can be found in *Shutter*, "Progressive Men of Minneapolis", 1897.)