

BIRGE CLARK'S

Coleridge Avenue Legacy

Daniel Garber, FAIA
Fergus Garber Architects

Introduction	1
Part One: at 512 Coleridge Avenue	3
Stroll: Birge Clark on Coleridge Avenue	15
Part Two: at 232 Coleridge Avenue	18



Produced and presented for the Palo Alto Museum's event: Inside the Garden Gates, Birge Clark's Living Legacy on June 28, 2026, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. Benefiting the Opening of the Palo Alto Museum. The event (approximately 60 people) took place in the backyard off 512 Coleridge; the group then strolled along Coleridge Avenue to see all seven of Birge Clark's houses and gathered again behind 232 Coleridge to finish the presentation.

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Introduction

Good morning, and thank you all for being here, and to our hosts, Teresa and Brian Kelleher, and Steve Dostart, for opening their yards to us on this beautiful morning. I'd also like to thank Marguerite Gong Hancock, president and CEO of the Palo Alto Museum, Allison Chang, Nadia Naik, and the rest of the Museum's board for inviting me to talk about Birge Clark.

I never met Birge Clark, but I have learned much from him. This morning, I'd like to tell you a little about Birge, who he was, what he designed, and why it still matters.

A brief note on sources. Much of today's presentation is based on *An Architect Grows Up In Palo Alto* Memoirs of Birge M. Clark, F.A.I.A., 1982. I'd also like to thank Steven Switzer, Palo Alto City's Senior Historic Planner for making available the Historic Resources Inventory Reports for the houses we will be talking about this morning.



Photo: Carolyn Caddes, undated from Palo Alto Stanford Heritage

Part One: *at* 512 Coleridge Avenue



View looking east from Foothills to the Mayfield, College Terrace neighborhood, undated - Guy Miller Archives / Palo Alto Historical Association



Birge Clark was born in 1893, a year before Palo Alto was incorporated, and he spent his entire 96-year life here, except for his four years at Columbia University and a brief, eventful time in the Army.

To understand him, it helps to imagine what Palo Alto looked like when he was growing up. His father, Arthur, had come from Syracuse, New York, the year before Birge was born, hired by David Starr Jordan to teach drawing at the newly created Stanford University. The family's first home on Hanover Street in College Terrace had just one other house on the street. University Avenue was unpaved and extended only a few short blocks. There were no automobiles, no telephones, no electric lights in College Terrace until around 1900.



Photo - Arthur Bridgman Clark, Wikipedia

Photo - University Avenue and the train station circa 1895 - Palo Alto Stanford Heritage

Birge recalled the rhythms of that world in his memoir. The grocery man came in a one-horse buggy every morning to take orders, and returned in the afternoon in a two-horse wagon to make deliveries. The butcher drove a covered wagon with half a side of beef hanging inside, cutting your order at the tailgate. Twice a week a fish wagon came through. And there was a blind kerosene man whose horse knew the route to the houses.

Birge's father, Arthur, was not simply a drawing teacher. Arthur Bridgman Clark became the first head of Stanford's Art and Architecture Department, authored Palo Alto's first comprehensive plan, served on Palo Alto's first Planning Commission, and was the first mayor of Mayfield, leading the effort to close its saloons.

Mayfield's independence lasted barely two decades; in 1925, its residents voted to be annexed into Palo Alto. This is why, to this day, Palo Alto has two downtowns, University Avenue and California Avenue, which was Mayfield's main street.

He was also a part-time architect when he wasn't teaching, fitting projects in during his summers. He wrote a book called *Art Principles in House, Furniture, and Village Building*, which, paraphrasing, included this warning: *Ignorance in art is more dangerous than illiteracy... mistakes in street planning made one or two hundred years ago [remain] obstacles to the dignity and beauty of ... cities [today]*¹.

¹ Introduction, second paragraph. The full quote is: "Ignorance in art is more dangerous than illiteracy. Furniture, houses, and towns are being built constantly either well designed or poorly designed. Mistakes in street planning made one or two hundred years ago are still obstacles to the dignity and beauty of many cities, and mistakes made today will cause annoyance hundreds of years hence."

-2-



Birge graduated from Palo Alto High School in 1910, and after getting his undergraduate degree at Stanford, he took a train east to Columbia University in New York City, where he earned his architecture degree in 1917. After graduating, he immediately entered the Army Signal Corps, was assigned to the 2nd Balloon Squadron, and sent to France, where his job was to ascend in a tethered observation balloon above the front lines and watch enemy troop movements, until he was shot down in August 1918. He jumped, deployed his parachute, and walked away.

After 14 months in the Army, Birge returned to Palo Alto and went to work for his father on the design of President Hoover's house above Stanford University. In 1922, at 29 years old, he opened his own firm. By that time, the city had electricity, telephones, automobiles, and ambitions. And it was growing fast — from fewer than 6,000 people in 1920 to nearly 14,000 by 1930. Birge Clark was designing for a city in transformation.

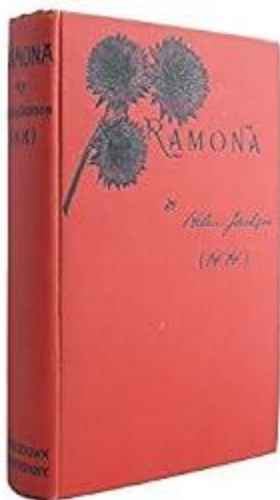
"Jobs simply gravitated into my office," Birge said in his memoir, "and it was only a little more than a year before I moved my office downtown."²

Photo: Observation balloon flying over territory near front lines, France - from the online WWI Museum Collection

² Page 19, *An Architect Grows Up In Palo Alto Memoirs Of Birge M. Clark, F.A.I.A.* He moved his office to 310 University Ave over Walgreens drug store. Birge also mentions that, other than him, for several years there was only another architect who was in Burlingame and that there were two architects who lived in Palo Alto, but whose offices were in San Francisco; Charles K. Sumner and John C. Branner.

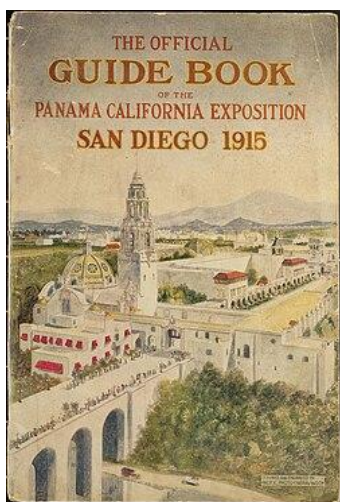
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By the 1920s, the popularity of the Spanish Colonial Revival style was crowding out nearly all the other Early California styles — Mission Revival, the earlier and simpler style modeled directly on the old mission churches; Monterey Colonial Revival, the homegrown hybrid style of the very house we're gathered at today; and Pueblo Revival, the style some scholars believe shaped the Hoover's House that Birge and his father had just finished designing.



The roots of this go back to 1884, when the writer Helen Hunt Jackson published a novel called *Ramona*. The book tells the story of the doomed love between Ramona, a half-Scottish, half-Native American orphan girl who is taken in by a wealthy family and falls deeply in love with Alessandro, a noble Native American Indian working on the family's rancho. When Ramona's foster mother violently opposes the match due to her racial prejudice, the young lovers elope to a disastrous end.

The story is set in the Spanish ranchos and missions of old California. It romanticized that world, and it was an enormous success. Nearly 150 years later, the book is still in print. In 1910, it was adapted into the first of five films and most recently a television series; a Mexican telenovela in the year 2000. The story sent generations of Californians, then and now, searching for the Spanish Colonial Revival style — a visual language that evoked that romantic past.



The moment that gave the style its definitive architectural expression was the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego; the entire fairground was designed in the Spanish Colonial

Revival style. Later, in 1925, an earthquake flattened the center of Santa Barbara in 19 seconds. The city rebuilt itself entirely in the Spanish Colonial style, creating one of the most unified urban environments in California and cementing the style's dominance across the state.

Birge captured the moment in his memoir: "By the middle [19]20's, this California Colonial style - Early California, Mission Revival, call it whatever you will - was breaking out all over the state, and I happily espoused it. ³"

But as the house we're at today makes clear, he was never locked into a single style. He looked to design what his clients wanted.

-4-

Between 1923 and 1935, Birge Clark designed seven houses on Coleridge Avenue in roughly twelve years

The architectural historian Paula Boghosian wrote in 1979 that "it seldom happens that a single architect is so influential that his work actually provides a major component of the image of a city." She named just three California towns where this had happened: San Diego, with the work of Irving Gill; Watsonville, with the work of W. H. Weeks; and Palo Alto, with the work of Birge Clark. "His hand," she wrote, "is to be traced in every range of building in the community, and is responsible for the remarkable visual coherence of post-1920s Palo Alto."

³ Page 25, *An Architect Grows Up In Palo Alto Memoirs Of Birge M. Clark, F.A.I.A.*.

The people who came to Birge Clark to build on Coleridge helped propel his young firm into prominence. And they, themselves, helped shape Palo Alto into the community it is today.

-5-



512 Coleridge - Photo by Paul Dyer for Fergus Garber Architects

The house we're at today was built in 1928 for George F. Morell and his wife Athene. And it's notable first for what it isn't.

It isn't a Spanish Colonial Revival.

At Morell's specific request, Birge designed it in the Monterey Revival style, which he used far less often and which has a distinct architectural lineage. Where the Spanish Colonial draws inspiration from the old missions and ranchos of Southern California, the

Monterey Revival looks north, to the two-story adobe houses of Monterey — buildings like the Larkin House, built in 1835 and claimed to be the first two-story house in all of California, and the Castro House in San Juan Bautista. The defining element of that style is the long, cantilevered second-story balcony, supported by heavy wood members, running the full length of the facade. Morell came to Birge knowing he wanted something reminiscent of the Castro House, and Birge delivered it.

George Morell graduated from Stanford in 1910 and spent the next decade in the San Joaquin Valley, making money developing and selling agricultural land by breaking up large ranches into family farms in Merced and Madera Counties ⁴. These sorts of projects were transforming the Central Valley at the time. In 1917, he trained and recruited a volunteer infantry company in Merced and served as a captain in the 20th Infantry during World War I.

In 1919, he entered another world when he bought control of the Palo Alto Times, the newspaper that covered this community. He went on to found the Redwood City Tribune, acquire the Burlingame Advance, and form Peninsula Newspapers Inc., the dominant newspaper group on the Peninsula. Later he served as a Trustee of Stanford University from 1944 to 1956.

When George came to Birge Clark to design this house, he had made a fortune in California by buying and selling farmland and was making another in the newspapers he had purchased. This

⁴ For an indepth read of the creation of the “Colony” concept in California’s Central Valley, and the development of small farms in the Central Valley, a worth while place to start is “Growing Along The Side Of The Road: Rural African American Settlements In Central California” by Michael Eissinger.

house, with its substantial presence and its quiet elegance, reflects a life built at the intersection of land and ink.

-6-

The builder was Wells P. Goodenough, born the same year as Birge, and like Birge, a man who built his career alongside the City's growth. They worked together on many of the most significant buildings in the city over the following decade, including the Norris and Dunker houses, both now on the National Historic Register, the Ramona Street commercial block, the Medico-Dental Building on Hamilton, and the Lucie Stern Community Center. Goodenough trusted Birge's design talent so completely that he hired him to design not only his first house but also his second.

-7-

The Morells sold the house to William Buck in 1956. Buck was the owner of Dahl Plumbing Co., and held the house until 1962. Robert and Jeanese Rowell were the next owners, beginning in 1963. Some of you here may remember them. The Kellehers are the current owners, and it was they who hired us to renovate the house.

Our charge wasn't to turn this house into a museum. It was to give it new life and make it enjoyable for a family to live in it today. That meant reckoning with the fact that this house was originally designed for a very different world.

It was built for a time when houses of a certain stock came with servants and service areas, small kitchens configured for a single cook rather than the center of family life. Back then the climate was more forgiving than it is today, and we had a very different relationship with it. Families accepted wider swings in indoor

temperature, where natural ventilation was the norm, and heating that was either smoky or from a drafty mechanical system, and cooling systems simply didn't exist.

When Birge designed the house, families didn't expect their houses to open out to the outdoors the way we do today. The yard was typically something you looked at from a parlor window, not conceived as a part of the house. Today it's almost exactly reversed; the boundary between inside and outside has become fluid in a way that wasn't part of how people imagined domestic life in 1925. A pool, spa, terrace, outdoor rooms - these are contemporary expectations that families back then couldn't begin to imagine.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards tell you what to preserve. They don't tell you how to make a nearly one-hundred-year-old house genuinely livable for today's families.

Rotted framing and windows were replaced. Modern waterproofing and insulation was added to the exterior wall and roof. The interiors, including the attached garage, were gutted, opened up, repurposed, and added on to.

A partial basement was added, and the new kitchen and family areas opened to the outside, bringing in light and air and a connection to the yard. A pool and a new garage were added. And the beautiful gardens were designed by the well-known Katsy Swan, who I'm sure many of you are acquainted with.

The street-facing facade was restored, keeping what made it beautiful before, beautiful today.

-8-

In a moment, we're going to stroll Coleridge Avenue. I encourage you to look at the variation in what you're seeing. Different styles, different scales, different clients — but the same attentiveness to materials, proportion, and craft. Birge said that he "looked at any new project as a problem to be solved," and that his first effort was "always to be sure that it would work." This, I believe, is what made him successful: he listened carefully and found ways to make beauty from his client's wants and needs.

You'll have a handout with some notes on the other houses along the way. Note that there are only four houses on the 500 block, and they are all designed by Birge Clark. So before you head down to 232, be sure to walk this block first.

I encourage you to look for some of the things that Mr Clark focused on design-wise. Here are three:



First: the surface texture and color of the stucco of each of the houses, in particular the stucco on 544 Coleridge, two doors away. You will note the “combed” texture that creates horizontal lines on the stucco surface. I suspect that may have been inspired by the Knoll at 660 Lomita Drive on Stanford’s campus, which architect Louis Mullgardt designed for Stanford’s third president Ray Lyman Wilber and completed in 1917, six years earlier than 544.

Photo: Detail of The Knoll (CCRMA) Stanford University Campus

The Knoll blended Spanish Colonial Revival and Spanish Gothic styles and features excessively detailed stucco carvings⁵ ornamenting the architectural elements of its facade. It also uses a heavily textured “combed” stucco technique that Birge would certainly have seen applied and completed.

Mullgardt was hired by the Hoovers to design their house. But, excited by his commission, he leaked his design to the press, which pissed off Herbert's wife Lou, who then tossed him off the job and hired Arthur and his son Birge to design their house instead. Lou, by all accounts, was not a shy person.



Second: Birge paid special attention to his front doors. Nearly all of them are deeply set. It is a detail meant to recall thick masonry walls - be they European cathedrals or Spanish Missions. Walls that needed that depth simply to bear the structure's own weight. Birge's houses, framed in light wood rather than load-bearing stone, never actually required it. But the depth still does real work: it creates a strong sense of shelter and arrival as you reach for the door.

Third: Birge used balconies in many ways. While he declared in his memoirs that he always designed ‘things that worked’, he was not immune to using balconies in romantic displays to be seen rather than actually used. We often have clients who ask for a second-story balcony to sit on for their morning coffee. While a lovely and romantic image, none are ever used. The same is likely true for Birge's balconies, as well.

Photo: Detail of 455 Coleridge Avenue. Note the deep-set door, shallow picturesque balcony, and the decorative rod above the 2nd-story window for an exterior curtain - an early form of air conditioning.

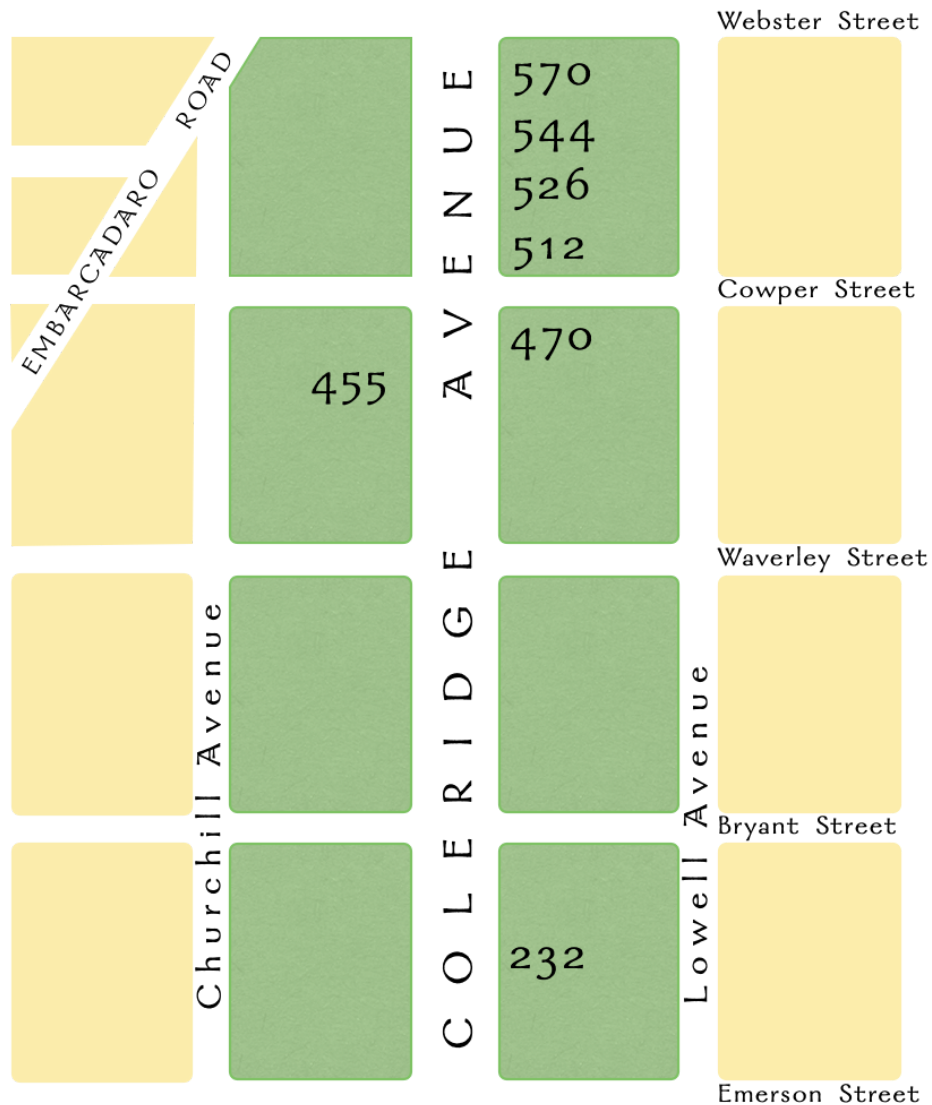
⁵ The style of these ornamentations is called Churrigueresque (“chore-rigo-esk”)

When we reassemble behind 232 Coleridge, we'll continue the story and follow Birge's legacy beyond these houses, to the place that brings us all here today.

Birge Clark on Coleridge Avenue

A Self-Guided Stroll

Between roughly 1923 and 1935, one architect, at the height of his talent, designed seven different houses for seven different clients along Coleridge Avenue between Emerson and Webster - Birge Clark.



232 Coleridge - 1925

Spanish Colonial Revival Built for Dr. Joseph Kirk, who established his Palo Alto medical practice in 1916 and remained active until his death in 1948. The house later passed to Jesse Tapp, who became Chairman of Bank of America's Board of Directors. A recessed entrance, deep-set windows, and ornate iron screens give the front facade its quiet formality.

Things to look for: the recessed entry with its molded keystone surround, and the oriel window centered above the door.



455 Coleridge - 1927

California Colonial Revival Built for sisters Enid & Mary Ettie Kinney, Stanford graduates who moved from San Jose, Ettie taught entomology and Enid was active in local music affairs. They lived here until 1952.

Things to look for: Plaster flourish to the left of the second-story mass. Deeply set window meant to recall the romantic depth of Spanish Mission walls, which relied on masonry to carry the structure's weight rather than wood-frame construction. Exterior iron rod over the balcony to hang shades from keeping summer sun out of the interior.



470 Coleridge - 1922/23

Spanish Colonial Revival Among Birge's earliest residential commissions — built when he had only just opened his own office. Altered somewhat in 1936; deemed potentially eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources in 1998 and renovated and added on to in 2010.

Things to look for: The Palladian influenced windows on the second floor over the deep set front door and the 2010 addition on the right behind the tree.



512 Coleridge - 1928

Monterey Revival Built for George Morell, who made his fortune first in California farmland and then in Peninsula newspapers — he bought control of the Palo Alto Times in 1919 and went on to found Peninsula Newspapers Inc. At his request, Birge departed from his usual Spanish Colonial mode for the Monterey style, reminiscent of the old Castro House in San Juan Bautista.

Things to look for: the cantilevered second-story balcony, carried on heavy wood beams, running the full length of the facade.



526 Coleridge - 1935

Monterey Revival The matched companion to 512, built for Mrs. Herbert Fox, who became Mrs. Philip N. Brooke before the house was even finished, she was particular enough about getting it right that she flew Birge Clark out to her home in La Porte, Indiana, so he could see her furnishings and the way she lived firsthand before finalizing the plans. The Brookes lived here for twenty years.

Things to look for: the two-story covered gallery (balcony) — compare its details to its twin at 512.



544 Coleridge - 1923

Mediterranean Revival Built for Gustav Laumeister builder, responsible for buildings in Professorville, and University Avenue, and Castilleja School. Married Mabel Seale in 1919, they developed South Court subdivision later annexed into Palo Alto. In 1926 Lester and Frances Morse purchased the house. In 1955, Edward Christiansen purchased the house, who with his sons established Eaton's Creamery and the University Creamery.

Things to look for: the Palladian doorway, and the hand scored horizontal texture of the stucco.



570 Coleridge - 1926

Tudor Revival Built for J.M. Blackburn, who owned Palo Alto's President Hotel (another Birge Clark building). Blackburn was forced to sell the hotel in 1932 when the Depression hit. Birge was characteristically candid stating: "...looking back you wonder why you designed it that way, other than probably an owner asking for it."

Things to look for: the half-timbering (applied over stucco, not structural), the massive brick chimney, and the steel casement windows.



Birge Clark designed over 100 buildings in Palo Alto and at Stanford between 1922 and 1933 - homes, schools, fire stations, banks, and other commercial establishments.

This stretch of Coleridge Avenue remains one of the best places in the city to see the range of his residential work in a single, short walk.

Part Two: *at* 232 Coleridge Avenue



232 Coleridge - Photo by Paul Dyer for Fergus Garber Architects

Welcome back — hopefully you have now walked past the seven Birge Clark houses on Coleridge; seven different designs, seven different clients, all by the hand of a single architect working at the height of his young talent.

The house we are at now, 232 Coleridge, was built in 1925- three years before 512. 512, styled as a Monterey Revival, was Birge's response to his client's specific request. This house shows you the style he and so many of his clients returned to again and again:

Spanish Colonial Revival.

-1-

The house was built for Dr. Joseph Herman Kirk and his wife Angeline. Kirk was a physician and surgeon who had come to Palo Alto in 1908. I couldn't find any connection between him and the Palo Alto Medical Clinic, so it's likely he was in independent practice. He remained active as a physician until his death in 1948. He was one of the doctors who contributed to Palo Alto's growing community of professionals seeking to live someplace that matched their ambitions.

Birge designed a Spanish Colonial Revival for the doctor - it was the popular "I have arrived" style of the day. Two stories, stucco exterior, clay tile roof with a molded wood cornice. Wood-sash windows, most in a one-over-one configuration, with ornate wrought-iron railings at several shallow balconies. A recessed main entrance framed by a molded plaster surround with a keystone and pilasters. A short, cantilevered, Monterey-like balcony hanging off the left side and a second-story terrace on the right complete the composition.

Birge called the style of many of his homes "Early Californian."⁶ He seemed to use that moniker as a sort of umbrella that the other Spanish styles assembled under. He often recombined and repurposed elements of various styles to complete his compositions, such that few of his designs could be understood as "pure". The Monterey Balcony, which he used on the side of this house, is an example of this.

⁶ Birge discusses "Early California" and other styles on page 25 in - *An Architect Grows Up In Palo Alto Memoirs Of Birge M. Clark, F.A.I.A.*

The Palo Alto Historic Buildings Inventory describes the house simply as "a good example of the work of a notable California architect." What that description misses is how, from the street, the design captures the Doctor's ambition and desire to project an image of confident, successful professionalism in this new community.

-2-



Given the house's prominent setting, sitting well back from the street, you would be forgiven for thinking that the house was as fully conceived as Birge's other most celebrated houses: the Dunker House on Maple Street, or the Norris House on Cowper.

It was not.



Architecturally, only the front facade was truly memorable. The sides and back of the house, as Birge designed them, were not particularly well composed; they had little character. The house was designated Category 4, the lowest historic designation.

While the lot itself is large by Palo Alto standards, the house wasn't overly large, with only three bedrooms upstairs and no courtyard or wings as the Dunker and Norris houses have.

Photo: Undated postcard of the Norris house.

*Photo: The Dunker house, 1929 by Berton Crandell*⁷

⁷ Berton Crandall (1882–1979) was a prominent American architect and photographer based in Palo Alto, California. A 1906 graduate of Stanford University, he extensively documented the campus. His notable 1929 works include historic photography of the newly constructed Cardinal Hotel designed by Birge Clark and a famous portrait of First Lady Lou Henry Hoover. He also took many ariel photos of Palo Alto.

A large garage was added later, and it was utilitarian at best. It showed no sympathy at all for the style and spirit of the front of the house. It sat like a large toad behind the house, obscuring the property's depth from view.

In 1942, the house passed to Jesse and Isabelle Tapp. Jesse worked for the Bank of America and eventually became its Chairman of the Board. Then it passed to their son Fielding and his wife Mary Jane, who lived in it for decades. Serendipitously, my wife Catharine Fergus Garber and I joined Fielding and Mary Jane's book group in 2012; they had been members since 1996. Fielding passed away in 2018 at 87. Mary Jane left the house and moved to Petaluma to be closer to her family, and passed away a few years ago at 95.

-3-

In 2019, Steve Dostart purchased the house and hired us to renovate and add on. Steve moved in three years later - in time to host his daughter's high school graduation party, here in the backyard.

The renovation of this house was similar to that of 512 Coleridge. The existing clay roof tiles were carefully removed and eventually reinstalled after new waterproofing was applied. The stucco was entirely stripped and replaced with new waterproofing and finish. The original front door was refinished and reused. New windows and shutters were made to match the rotting originals. The wrought iron balcony handrails were refinished.

The rear of the house was entirely reconfigured: one-story gabled wings were added on the east and west, and the second floor was extended over the existing terrace. Salvaged tiles from other

demolished houses and buildings were used to cover the new roof areas. The interiors of the house were reconfigured, including the small kitchen (like 512). The old garage was demolished and replaced with a better-located, more sympathetic design. A new pool and ADU were added at the rear of the property. The beautiful landscaping was designed by Colin Jones. And, as it happens, Kristen Rowell, whose husband was the son of Robert and Jeanese Rowell and grew up in the other house we were at this morning (512 Colerdige), was the interior designer for the project.

Interestingly, of the new houses we design today, only about one in five has a formal dining room, and maybe one in four or five has a formal living room. In 1925, a house was designed around those spaces.

The interiors of these old houses are consistently darker than we expect today. The window area in today's houses is nearly always larger, often dramatically so.

And then there is the house's infrastructure. If the original mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems were still in place, they were long past their useful life. Houses back then were rarely insulated. When Sears and Roebuck started selling a toilet with a tank in the 1920's, it took five to seven gallons of water to flush it. Today, if you're using more than a gallon per flush, something is seriously wrong.

-4-

These seven Coleridge houses are among the most visible parts of Birge Clark's residential legacy. By 1928, the year 512 was built, his practice had expanded well beyond residences, and his work had

begun to define the visual identity of Palo Alto that most of us carry in our heads today.

The buildings that define Ramona Street, which is the block you may know best in downtown Palo Alto, were designed by Pedro de Lemos. Stanford had hired him in 1917 as the first director and curator of the Thomas Welton Stanford Art Gallery (now the Stanford Art Gallery), and later as director of the Stanford University Museum (today's Cantor Arts Center) after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Pedro was a gifted and wholly self-taught artist, designer, and educator. It was Pedro who developed the block's romantic Spanish Colonial character, drawing on memories of his travels in Spain. Pedro had the vision; but it was Birge, the licensed architect, who worked with him to provide the expertise to execute it. Later, Birge designed the two buildings that completed the block: the Cardinal Hotel and the Medico-Dental Building.

Ramona Street is now on the National Register of Historic Places - described by one architectural guide as "a fine bit of commercial stage setting in the then-approved Spanish Colonial Revival style, impressive for Northern California."⁸

Beyond Ramona Street, Birge had designed the Dunker House, which we're currently helping renovate, and the Norris House, both on the National Historic Register. The Medico-Dental Building was the tallest building in Palo Alto when it was completed, and included the city's first drive-in parking garage ⁹. He designed the

⁸ *A Guide to Architecture in San Francisco and Northern California (Revised 1976) by David Gebhardt et al*

⁹ *Feb 8, 2024 Memorandum, Page & Turnbull regarding: 261 Hamilton Avenue – Palo Alto Historic Inventory Evaluation Memorandum*

Fire and Police Station, now the home of Avenidas, and other commercial buildings along University Avenue, including the President Hotel, now the Graduate Hotel. He designed the Post Office on Hamilton Avenue. And, of course, the Lucie Stern Community Center, as well as the dozens of other houses in Palo Alto and the surrounding communities.

And in 1932, he designed the building that brings us all here today.

-5-

By the early 1930s, a small group of physicians had built an unusual business in Palo Alto - a group medical practice, at a time when the concept of a group practice itself was disruptive and viewed with suspicion by independent physicians, who worried it threatened the traditional doctor-patient relationship and labeled it, disparagingly, "socialized medicine."

The practice was opened in 1924 by Dr. Russel Lee and Dr. Thomas Williams. They first worked out of Dr. Williams' office at Bryant and Hamilton. Their practice grew quickly - so quickly that Dr. Lee famously tried to slow it down by raising his fee for delivering a baby from \$35 to \$100. The result, as he later recalled, was that it immediately quadrupled his practice. It was said that: "If he charges that much, he must be pretty good."

In 1927, a pediatrician, Dr. Esther B. Clark, was added. Esther was Birge Clark's sister and reportedly one of the first female pediatricians in the country, and certainly the first in Palo Alto.

-6-



By the early 1930s, the group had six physicians and had outgrown its Bryant Street quarters entirely. They needed a new building. And they hired Birge Clark to design it.

There is a moment in Birge's memoir where he describes his design conversation with Dr. Lee. Lee wanted the building done in the Art Moderne style, the sleek, forward-looking aesthetic that was gaining ground in the early 1930s. Birge pushed back. "The 'moderne,'" he told Lee, "the "moderne" was still in its infancy at best and would probably change a good deal as time went on, while the California Colonial was a developed mature style..." The argument prevailed ¹⁰.

When the building was completed, it wasn't named after anyone. That happened later, when a three-story building was constructed next door for the growing practice. It was named the Lee Building, and Birge's original building was then named the Roth Building - honoring the two senior physicians.

-7-

The Lee building was demolished in the early 2000s to clear space for residential housing and what is now Heritage Park. The Roth building at 300 Homer is now home to the Palo Alto Museum. It's a one- and two-story Eclectic Spanish-style building, U-shaped and built in concrete, clad with beige cement stucco, topped by a hipped clay tile roof. The building wraps around a landscaped courtyard facing the street, welcoming the public in.

Undated Photo: Dr. Russell Lee and Birge Clark, Palo Alto Stanford Heritage

¹⁰ Page 69, *An Architect Grows Up In Palo Alto Memoirs Of Birge M. Clark, F.A.I.A.*

Facing the courtyard is a second-floor balcony; its hand-adzed beams and heavy square posts recall Birge's other Monterey-style balconies, like 512, and below it is an arched arcade leading to the main entrance.

On the wall around that entrance is something you would not have found anywhere else in Palo Alto at that time: a series of exterior fresco paintings. They were painted by Victor Arnautoff, a noted and controversial Depression-era muralist who fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and, via China and San Francisco, he made his way to Mexico, where he continued his study of mural painting, becoming Diego Rivera's assistant, painting murals in the National Palace. In 1931, the two of them came north together to San Francisco to work on a mural for the San Francisco Art Institute, and Arnautoff stayed on in the Bay Area, landing the Palo Alto Medical Clinic commission the following year.

-8-

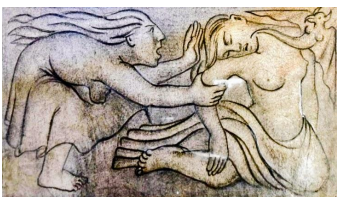
There is an interesting thread that connects Victor Arnautoff's New Deal murals and Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* that I spoke about at the other house. Helen passed away before Victor was born, and while it was possible that Victor knew of Helen's book, there is no record of it. They both sought to challenge the sanitized, triumphant myths of American progress. As empathetic outsiders- Arnautoff, a Marxist, and Jackson, a Victorian activist- they both aimed to expose the devastating human cost of our nation's western expansion, forcing their audiences to confront the systemic displacement and racial inequities inflicted upon Indigenous populations.

Jackson wrote *Ramona* to be the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for Native Americans, seeking to expose the federal government's cruel taking of lands from California's Mission Indians. She cloaked her critique in Romanticism, wrapping the tragedy in a melodramatic, pastoral love story.

Arnautoff championed an uncompromising Social Realism. His later works, like the Life of Washington murals in George Washington High School in San Francisco (which was in the news in recent years) placed uncomfortable truths directly in front of his viewers. Their approaches yielded vastly different impacts: Arnautoff's confrontational approach triggered immediate censorship battles, whereas Jackson's romanticized backdrop backfired completely, accidentally birthing a nostalgic "Old California" tourism boom that the railroads exploited and obscured the very suffering she tried to reveal.



Arnautoff's 1932 frescoes at the Clinic were his first major commission in America, before his work turned overtly political. But the murals did create an immediate uproar for puritanical reasons - not for their politics. The local public was scandalized by a panel depicting a male doctor examining a woman with exposed breasts. One of the clinic's doctors initially threatened to not move into the building unless the frescoes were whitewashed. That didn't happen.



Arnautoff's Medical frescoes actually conformed to the prevailing Western progress narrative of the time. He painted the modern, Western physicians in vibrant color while relegating historic images in cold grays.

Both Photos: Mette Huberman for Palo Alto Online, July 2, 2026

In retrospect, the murals stand in contrast to his career's shift toward more overtly political expressions, during which, like Helen Hunt Jackson, he fiercely criticized government actions.

Victor was hired as an Art Professor at Stanford University in 1938. His views attracted the attention of McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee in 1957, but he kept his tenure until his retirement in 1962 and eventually decided to move back to Russia. Apparently, among his students was the future Abstract Expressionist, Richard Diebenkorn.

-9-

The Roth Building housed the Palo Alto Medical Clinic for decades before eventually becoming the home of the Palo Alto Museum, an institution dedicated to preserving and sharing the history of this community.

Birge Clark was trained in a tradition that taught architects to be fluent in multiple styles; to match the language to the client, the commission, and the place. That tradition was considered the highest form of professional competence in the 1920s. It would soon be declared obsolete by the Modern Movement within a generation, replaced by the idea of a single correct architectural language, universal and ahistorical, derived from structure and material alone.

And nearly a hundred years after Birge Clark opened his office, his buildings are still among the most admired in Palo Alto. The houses on this street are still cherished by the families who live in them - and presumably those of us gathered here today!

The Roth Building, designed in a style Birge argued for, in the depths of the Depression, for a practice that included his own sister, is now a museum dedicated to the history of this city.

His father recognized that beauty is important to the identity and longevity of a city and its community. Birge spent his career designing buildings and homes that have enriched this community for nearly a century, and we hope that their beauty will enrich it for a century more.

-10-

This is the legacy we're here to protect. The Roth Building has a problem that no amount of architectural admiration can solve on its own: water intrusion in its basement. Preserving this building - keeping it sound, keeping it open, keeping it alive as a place where the history of Palo Alto is collected and shared - requires exactly the kind of community investment and attention that built it in the first place.

I'll turn it back over to Marguerite to tell you more about what that investment looks like, and how you can be part of it.

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