

My Mom the General (Contractor):
A Building Dream Comes True

Sowing the Sawdust Seed

Alice is composing a school paper at the kitchen table while listening to familiar supper-preparation music from her mother's orchestra, featuring one cooking instrument at a time. A chopping knife cubes onions, carrots, and potatoes on a wooden board. The gurgle-splash of water into a pot and the pop-hiss of a gas flame igniting under a burner both signal where those vegetables will go next. Browning beef sizzles in a cast iron frying pan. A wire whisk blending flour and milk for dumplings makes a percussive rhythm against the sides of a pottery bowl. Soon, the kitchen symphony finale, a rich aromatic stew, will be served to an appreciative audience of six family members.

Alice's carefully-inked English composition is nearing completion when a sharp explosive bang from the slamming back door makes her flinch. Six-year-old brother Phil dashes through the kitchen, narrowly missing collision with his mother, and bumps the table on his way to the bathroom. "Look out, look out-- I gotta go!" he warns.

"Philip!" Alice yells, "Why can't you be more careful?" She would have said something more critical, but her mother is there. "Mom, he ruined my paper; look at this big mark. Now I'll have to start over. This wouldn't have happened if I didn't have to do my homework in the kitchen."

This imagined 1938 scene supposes that 13-year-old Alice (my mother) wished her family could live in a different house, one with a better-designed floor plan and traffic patterns to rooms that would allow everyone the spaces they needed. It was a common desire; who among us has not wished a certain room had a different window placement or that a chilly room faced the morning sun? Today, these desires can lead a person to a career in drafting, engineering, construction, or architecture; but in the decades before 1970, those careers were not normally available for women.

From age sixteen on, my mother dreamed of designing and building houses with features middle class home makers would appreciate. She wasn't the only woman of her generation wanting to do such a thing. It wasn't a burningly obsessive dream and she didn't pursue it constantly or aggressively against all odds. Still, she walked towards the dream in sometimes small steps or large steps, irregularly spaced, at every opportunity. It was a "someday in the future" dream always at the back of her mind. The seed for the building part of this dream may have been planted and nourished before she reached school age.

Cultivating the Sawdust Seed

While her older sister Nancy played with dolls as young girls were expected to do in 1930, five-year-old Alice might have wandered off



Figure 1-- Curtis Street home in Albany, California. This photo taken in 1981.

the front stoop of their bungalow-style house in Albany, California, to visit her father in his carpentry work shop at the back. Her father George enjoyed two hobbies when he came home from his executive office job at Standard Oil: first, raising wire-haired terriers, and second, crafting bookshelves, tables, and chairs from wood. Alice was the only one of his three daughters encouraged

to share both hobbies. Perhaps she had the disposition to appreciate this attention.

At first, little Alice only pretended to make things by playing with wood scraps and blocks. When she was old enough, her father taught Alice how to draw a plan for any project before cutting the pieces, how to measure with a folding carpenter's rule, how to hand saw two-by-fours and plywood, how to hammer nails, and how to test corners with a square. Her grandpa Chester might have taught her some wood working lessons also; he was famous in several states for making and donating doll furniture to children in Masonic Shrine Hospitals.

During visits to her grandfather's home, she could have learned how to cut flat wood pieces into curved shapes on his scroll saw.

That same scroll saw later inhabited our garage while I was growing up. At first, it was too high up for me to reach. My kindergarten eyes could see only sawdust on the legs and view the motor, pulley, drive belt, and electric cord mounted underneath the table surface. Later, when I was tall enough to see and hear the wicked narrow blade vibrating and whining against the pressure of wood turning in its path, a deeper respect for my mother's skill began to grow. Other kid's moms had sewing machines, but my mother was special; she operated a dangerous scroll saw.

Sprouts from the Sawdust Seed

Alice acquired other carpentry and home improvement skills in addition to her mastery of the scroll saw and the tools introduced by her father. Most were learned as need dictated while living in one house after another during the dozen years of her first marriage. I remember that she would stand at the doorway to a room, with measuring tape in hand, and stare silently without moving for long minutes at a time, calculating and planning. If she wanted to change something, she did it herself.

She was a big fan of built-in shelves and cabinets. Every bathroom sink had to be encased in a cabinet with drawers and doors to make full use of the space under the sink. We take this for granted now, but houses in the nineteen-thirties, forties, and even some in the nineteen-fifties left pipes exposed under their sinks. We lived in a few of those older houses, which is probably why the dream of designing a better home persisted.

In the backyard of every place we lived, Alice designed and erected open-weave lattice roofing to protect her shade-loving plants. This meant using a manual post hole digger to sink the supporting posts in hard soil and mixing concrete in a wheel barrow to pour around the base of those posts. She constructed the framing and nailed crisscrossed strips of lath to it. Then she brushed on the wood stain, wearing a white bandana tied over her hair and an old, too-large,

man's dress shirt for protection against splatters. This was sweaty work always done in the summertime, her favorite season to do all projects. She loved hot weather.

In my memories, Mom always had a tool in her hand. Photographs show her with a saw, hammer, or paint brush, bending over a project across sawhorses. If not building something from wood, she was wielding a shovel to dig holes for planting shrubs, to spread gravel, or to mix fertilizer and mulch in a wheelbarrow. Home improvement tools were part and parcel of everything about her.

Most summer home improvement projects called for a finishing coat of stain, paint, or wall paper. Our garage always contained large canvas drop cloths, wooden stirring sticks, cans of turpentine or paint thinner, paint brushes, putty knives, sand paper, sanding blocks, a spattered step ladder, empty five-gallon buckets, fuzzy paint rollers, wall paper brushes, and masking tape. Those things competed for space with a carpentry mix of nails, brads and tacks, hammers, special saws for every purpose, short and long bubble levels, saw horses, and scrap lumber. Although sometimes full of dark shadows, spider webs and sawdust litter, the garage nevertheless sparked our imaginations. When we grew up, one brother and I became home improvement do-it-yourselfers and woodcraft hobbyists. We caught the sawdust bug.



Figure 2-- June 1984, in the driveway of the last house built (not shown).

First Fruit

In 1959, Alice designed her first dream house. It was in the Cape Cod style, which seems inappropriate when you think about it. True, we were only three miles from an ocean, but it wasn't the Atlantic and we were not on a cape; we lived in California. She just liked the way those early Colonial saltbox houses looked, I guess, and she wanted the energy efficiency gained from stacking two floor levels. The Cape

Cod definitely stood out from the single-story ranch style homes up and down our street.

Instead of placing the chimney and fireplace in the center of the house like a traditional saltbox, Alice moved it against an outside wall in the living room. Next to the fireplace and beneath a window looking towards the creek, she constructed a hinged window seat that also served as a box for fire wood. The practical aspect of that firewood box was the small cupboard-like door on the exterior wall. There was no need to trek through the house with messy armloads of wood; we just loaded up the box from outside. Ease of wood loading



Figure 3-- Chimney and wood box door.

was not the main reason we (the children) liked it though. In the summer, when the box was empty, we could squeeze ourselves into it and push up the hinged window seat to get into the house. This was important if we forgot our key to the front door and found ourselves locked out after school while Mom was still at work.

Alice's Cape Cod design stayed true to the steep roof style that was characteristic of saltbox houses. This meant the back wall of the second floor lost some height; a person taller than five feet ten inches (none of us) could scrape against the ceiling slanted toward the center ridge of the house. For the first two years after we moved in, that shortened wall held a special attraction for me because I was allowed to write and draw on it. Later, when there was money to finish construction, properly painted sheetrock replaced my artist's canvas of appliance-box cardboard.

Replanting and Cross Fertilization

After the Cape Cod, life had marched on eighteen years for Alice without an opportunity to design and build another house. She continued to draw house plans in her spare time while working as a bank teller or running little home-based businesses. Memories of her



growing up years, the experience of raising her own family, and the homes she lived in influenced her designs. After moving to San Jose in 1965, she began to offer those plans for sale to home makers who shared her views about how rooms should be arranged.

At age forty-two, when it finally seemed like a good time to reach for the building dream again, her second husband (an electrician named Bill) encouraged her to attend contractor school. She went to classes and studied textbooks for a month to confirm what she already knew from experience and to learn seldom-encountered building code details. She then drove to Sacramento to take the California contractor's exam. Her license arrived in the mail on December 14, 1977. With little fanfare, Alice (of A & B Builders) officially became a General Building Contractor. I proudly began bragging to co-workers about "My Mom the General."

A New Crop from the Sawdust Seed

Just before earning her license, Alice and Bill had moved from San Jose to a popular middle-class retirement area in the Sierra-Nevada range where they began building houses "designed for the homemaker by a homemaker."

At last she could address every irritating arrangement encountered in other houses. For example, she considered how to place a house in relation to the sun in order to maximize passive solar heating. She designed closets with two levels of hanger rods to accommodate trousers and shirts. She moved bedroom windows from the common center-over-the-bed position to either side of the bed space, thereby eliminating a draft above the heads of sleepers. She provided a place for a laundry hamper in the bathroom. Also in the bathroom, she installed electric wall heaters for damp bathers on cold mornings.



Like many homemakers, Alice gave a lot of thought to the kitchen. Advertisements for her "Country Kitchen Series" mention several practical details, including these:

- o *Working area is out of the path of traffic*
- o *Has convenient work flow from refrigerator to sink to range*
- o *Cabinets include corner unit, drawer unit, and tray unit*
- o *Wall space for buffet, hutch, or desk*

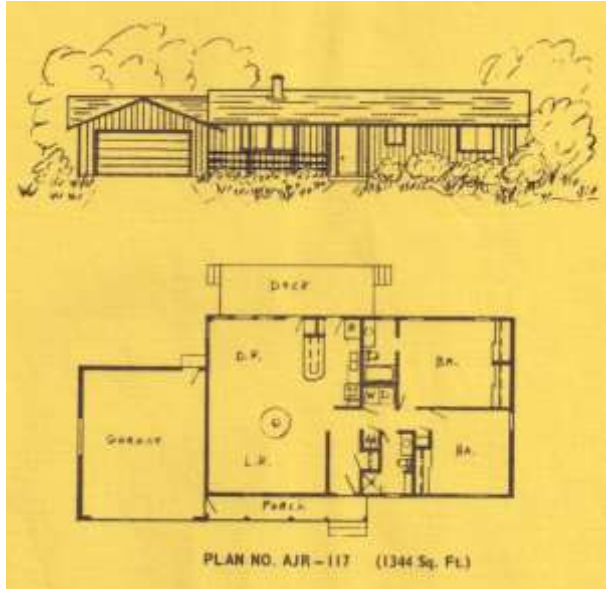


Figure 4 – This plan does have a doorway into the kitchen from outside, but it can be locked because there is another one nearby.

The Kitchen door is handy for taking food outside to barbeque on the deck.

Between 1977 and 1981, Alice designed and built six homes "planned for comfortable retirement living." Even assuming retired couples would have no children living with them, she still remembered her brother's mad dashes into their childhood home on Curtis Street. Alice made sure that if a back door opened directly into the kitchen, it was not the only back entrance available.

"Philip!" she could have yelled, "Use the other door!"
