

Eastwood: the residence park

Houston's original "planned community" is still inviting

I had no idea... is the usual response that the Eastwood neighborhood's current residents hear when friends come to visit. "People always express surprise at finding this in-tact neighborhood of gracious older homes on the city's near east side," says Bill England, an active Eastwood resident, booster and rehabber. "They think this area is all industrial."

The truth is, Eastwood today reflects the patina of its intriguing past. It sits about two miles east of downtown where homes, not skyscrapers, sit on streets named McKinney, Walker and Rusk. Above the tops of its mature trees the savory smells of baking bread and brewing coffee waft from the Earth Grains and Maxwell House plants. Important and recognizable surnames like Hughes, Mandola, Tellepsen, Cameron and Bering still identify many of Houston's most successful businesses and these same families were among Eastwood's

first proud residents.

Back in 1912, under the auspicious of the Good Government and City Beautiful movements, Eastwood's developer, William A. Wilson, kneaded together several yeasty ingredients including the dream of home ownership, acres of timbered land divided by a picturesque ravine, modern amenities, proximity to transportation and plenty of land set aside for neighborhood amenities like schools, parks, and shopping. The resulting concoction sounds a lot like today's "planned communities" but the concept was revolutionary in 1912.

Wilson set aside five acres of his Eastwood Addition for a "social and education center." It was on that land that Eastwood Elementary School was built in 1916. The charming mission-style buildings now house Lantrip Elementary and according to the recollections of Lester Scardino who attended Eastwood beginning in 1923, it hasn't changed all that much. For 83 years, the school has been one of the vital links that tie the

Eastwood community together.

Another was the intertwining ravine that provided a natural counterpoint to Eastwood's gracious homes. In addition to lending the neighborhood a "delightful vista," the ravine aided local drainage. In the thirties, Tom Tellepsen had the ravine filled in but, not before several luxurious homes had been built along its banks. At several of these, elegant Japanese-style gardens were carefully cultivated so that they rolled gently down the banks of the ravine. One can just imagine party-goers dressed in their Great-Gatsby finery strolling among flickering the Japanese lanterns and exotic oriental plants.

Wilson was emphatic that the new Eastwood Addition offer its buyers value, safety, comfort, convenience and even low insurance rates. Everything was thoroughly modern. Fireplugs, gas and electric service, electric street lights, sewers, curbs, sidewalks and graded streets, telephones, tree

plantings and a street car line straight to Houston were among Eastwood's fabulous features.

In Montrose and The Heights, earlier additions of that era, homes were described (and still are) as "cute little bungalow." Eastwood boasts many bungalows, but the term "little" doesn't accurately describe them. Instead, they are "lovely big bungalows." The same can be said for its Prairie, Craftsman and Foursquare Style homes.

Eastwood's bold promotional advertising proclaimed it a "Restricted Addition" where the style and class of homes to be built would be carefully controlled. The bankers, lawyers, and up-and-coming entrepreneurs of early Eastwood built comfortable, spacious houses where notable architecture and distinctive details were the norm. High ceilings, wide porches, stained glass, oak paneling, window seats and inglenooks were standard features in many of these commodious homes.

While some of these

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Bill - Thanks - I so enjoyed our visit last week! Hope this meets w/ your approval Carol

lovely old houses have been maintained and up-dated over the years. Others have been re-muddled, subdivided or just plain neglected. Most retain their "good bones," allowing them to be well-restored. It's unusual for Houston, but there is one Eastwood home that is still lived in by the fifth generation of the family that originally built it.

Other Eastwood homes may also be inhabited by their former owners. One resident says he distinctly felt a ghostly presence next to him. As he put the finishing touches on the home's exterior window trim, the ghost squeezed his shoulder in approval and congratulations.

Home tours also attract former residents, explains England who says, "An elderly lady and her husband came to my house when it was featured on the tour. She said she'd grown up there and wanted to see it again. When the crowds got thick, she pitched right in and gave delightful accounts of her childhood memories.

Later, in a sadder tale, she filled me in about some of the architectural changes that had puzzled me."

"Apparently, as a child of six she was excused from Christmas dinner with permission to light the fire in the fireplace. She accidentally set the Christmas decorations on fire, the fire spread and the resulting damage to the house was extensive. Her mother hired an architect to re-work and modernize some of its original features and that explained why the house now has open arches instead of pocket doors and no window seats or oak paneling."

While Eastwood nurtured the youngsters of many of Houston's finest families, two infamous icons of American pop culture, Howard Hughes and Clyde Barrow, also have connections to Eastwood. Back in the thirties, Houston Police received a tip that Barrow was working as a milkman and living in an Eastwood-area rooming house. They surrounded the building. Barrow escaped, but not before causing an uproar as the news rippled through the neighborhood.

For most of us, Howard Hughes is remembered as both a wierdo and a hero, but among Eastwood's old timers, he's remembered as the quirky teen ager who was always building his own airplane in an aunt's Eastwood garage. No one remembers exactly where her house was or if he ever finished the plane. It's clear though that young Hughes had a fondness for the familiar neighborhood of his youth, and visited often, even after his father had built a more palatial house elsewhere.

Along the Eastwood section of McKinney Ave. an enterprising soul established the first coin-operated laundry in the southwest. As ubiquitous as such establishments are today, it's difficult to imagine one being so noteworthy.

In the smaller, more insulated Houston of the early nineteen hundreds, many of Eastwood's first residents were close friends and associates who attended the same church, participated in the same clubs and married one another. As Eastwood inevitably became less fashionable, they also moved on to newer neighborhoods

together. New families followed them into Eastwood and although they had different last names, different church or club affiliations and different occupations, they all valued the same qualities upon which Wilson built his neighborhood.

Modern-day Eastwood is the eclectic home of tenured blue-collar and service workers who keep the area's economy moving forward. They've been joined more recently by younger professionals who enjoy the short commute to downtown as well as self-employed, home-based business owners, university professors and medical center personnel. ■

The Eastwood Historical Society is interested in hearing from people who want to share old photos, recollections or memorabilia about the neighborhood. To learn more or to share, please call the Eastwood Historical Society at 713-926-6722. Many thanks to Bill England for his help in this article.

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