A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOPEKA’S WEST HILLS

This article is excerpted from “Prairie to Property: A history of the ownership of West Hills,” an unpublished manuscript by Stephen E. Good

West Hills was once part of two different Indian reservations. The eastern boundary of both the Kanza and Potawatomi Reservations was a north/south line that ran from just east of Burnett’s Mound on the south to the current Highway 75 bridge across the Kansas River on the north. The line was first surveyed in 1827 by Angus L. Langham. It was established by a treaty in 1825 when the Kanza tribe gave up 20 million acres in northeast Kansas for a reservation of 2 million acres. The treaty called for a reservation 30 miles wide that straddled the Kansas River starting about 60 miles from the mouth of that river and extending west for approximately 300 miles.

When Kansas became a territory in 1854, white settlement was delayed for two reasons. First, most of eastern Kansas contained Indian reservations, which were not open for settlement. Second, before a squatter or anyone else could acquire land and receive a deed, the land had to be surveyed. The land east of the Potawatomi Reservation line and south of the Kansas River, where Topeka is located, was not part of an Indian reservation but was not legally available for settlement until it was surveyed in 1858. Nevertheless, settlement began as soon as Kansas Territory was opened to settlers. The land west of the Indian boundary line remained in Potawatomi hands until 1867. A treaty between the U.S. government and the Potawatomi in 1867 opened the land for legal settlement after the area was surveyed.

Fast forward not quite a century and the area known was West Hills was ready for modern development. It became home to one of Kansas’s most famous citizens—Alfred Mossman Landon. As Alf Landon’s second term as Kansas governor was coming to an end, he started looking around for a Topeka home site. In 1936, Theo Landon, Alf’s wife, approached Madge MacLennan about purchasing her home. MacLennan refused the Landons’ offer and, after her death, it was donated to the State of Kansas for a Governor’s Mansion. Landon built a home on land that had previously been part of the Prospect Hills Golf Course. The home was referred as Landon’s White House.

Landon went on to develop Prospect Hills with 1 or 2 acre-sized lots in 1938. He paid $37,000 for the land. The original lots ranged in price for $1,000 to $4,250.

Landon’s own colonial style home was built on 40 —cont., p. 2
The remaining 120 acres were developed “as a carefully protected neighborhood of better class home ($7,500 to $12,500),” according to the Topeka Daily Capital, March 7, 1939. Initially there were plans for the neighborhood association to erect a community stable on the Landon acreage where saddle horses belonging to residents could be accommodated.

Landon made his money in oil. He served as Kansas governor from 1933-1937. He ran for President in 1936 but was defeated in a landslide by Franklin Roosevelt. He was considered a liberal Republican; however, he was opposed to the 1936 Social Security Act. Four years before his death, His daughter, Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker described her father as “an oilman who never made a million, a lawyer who never had a case, and a politician who carried only Maine and Vermont.” As Landon himself said in 1936 rights after his defeat “As Maine goes, so goes Vermont.”

Alf, as he was called, was known around West Hills for riding his horses, Dandy Jack, and Big Red, through the neighborhood, even after it was being developed. Every Saturday morning Alf gave horseback rides to Betty Seltsam Cleland’s daughters.

When Prospect Hills was built, there was no I-70. Before I-70, Highway 40 was built as a four-lane sometime in the early 1950s. Highway 40 started at Gage and went westward. Such was the status when West Hills was platted in 1955. Fairlawn north of 6th Street did not yet exist, so the only way into West Hills was via Danbury from 6th Street. When Highway 40 was built, Alf Landon struck a deal with the highway department. He gave them lot 6 of Range 27, Township 11, Section 15 where Highway 75 crosses the river, in exchange for the four Danbury exits. When I-70 was built in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the highway standards did not allow for the close proximity of the Danbury on/off ramps and the I-70/Highway 75 interchange. However, another compromise was reached. Landon (and other neighbors) successfully argued, that for fire safety, one Danbury exit ramp should remain.

Landon’s daughter Nancy remembered as a child “hiking from my home in Prospect Hills to the river.” She, her brother, and their friend Betty Carmean spent “many happy hours on the sand bars. ...In those days (1940-41) polio was a tremendous scare and for some reason my parents believed the waters of the Kaw River were safer than chlorinated swimming pool water. We would then hike the railroad tracks and climb back up the bluff, then cross on back to my house. We would sometimes be gone for hours and no supervision ever seemed necessary in those wonderful growing up years.”
Visitors from All Over the World Visit the Ritchie House

Students and adults continue to visit the Historic Ritchie House located at 1116 SE Madison. The Ritchie House, the oldest residence in Topeka, has attracted visitors from Denmark and China in this first quarter and there will be many more as the year progresses. Bill Wagnon, Tom Ellis and Bob Totten are the guides for many of the tours, drawing local students from Seaman and Williams Middle School and others farther flung from Andover, Olathe, and Lecompton. So far, more than 630 have come through our doors to learn about the Underground Railroad and the great quest for freedom.

If you are interested in touring the House, it is open on a regular basis from 1 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday.
The Shawnee County Historical Society's Historic Homes Tour on April 13 was an instant sell-out and a smash hit! The weather cooperated with cool and breezy day. Ticket holders toured four great homes, partook of a wine and cheese reception and enjoyed reminiscences by Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker. We received great media coverage preceding the tour and from a press conference with Senator Kassebaum. We are very grateful to those who bought tickets; they made this fund-raiser success.

The homes owners who graciously opened their dwellings reported that visitors enjoyed the diversity of styles—a Victorian home, Prairie Style home, a home built from an L. F. Garlinghouse home design book, and the colonial style usually referred to as the Landon Mansion. This tour would not have been possible without the support of the home owners, Ann and Jerry Palmer, Helen and Dad Crow, Rhonda and Ron Cathey, and Dr. Michael and Katy Franklin. The Franklin/Landon Mansion is featured in the lead article of this newsletter. Descriptions of the other homes follow.

### 305 Greenwood – Ann and Jerry Palmer

This Victorian style house was built in 1886 by Louis Wolfe for his daughter and her new husband. It was on Second Street across from Colonel Hughes home. Colonel Hughes was the founder of Potwin and its first Mayor. The Palmer house cost $6,000 to build but was sold during the economic “Panic of ‘93” for $600 in a tax sale. The house was remodeled and expanded several times before the Palmers bought it. With the additional two large renovations they did, there is no surface of the house that is the same as it was when they moved.

Ann and Jerry have loved the house and the wonderful neighborhood from the day they moved in August of 1978. They purchased it from Phyllis and Ellis Moke. Phyllis taught ballet to a generation of young girls during the ’60s and ’70s in the house. The Palmers raised their son and daughter there and it worked very well as a home for an active and busy family. Because Victorian houses are so adaptable, it functions equally well for a couple. Ann’s office is in the remodeled Dance Studio and Jerry’s study was once the son’s bedroom. The front parlor is a music room. Upstairs features a bedroom, a second small bedroom and the sleeping porch which became a Master Suite and bathroom. The home has been a wonderful gathering place for the six grandchildren who have grown up in Topeka. The “Nursery” remains intact although the grandchildren now range from 13 to 25!

### 400 Greenwood – Dan and Helen Crow

Dan and Helen Crow bought their prairie style home in 1981. Situated on a ½ acre lot in Potwin, the brick house has a clay tile roof. The interior has extensive woodwork, stained-glass windows on three sides of the home and an oversized fireplace. W.W. Whitney hired architect Frank Squires and contractor Bert Fry to build the house in 1918. It is believed the construction cost of the home was approximately $12,000. Records show the mill work for the house was awarded to Wisemans Planing Mill, the brick work to Hargreaves & Co., and the sheet metal and tile work to J.C.
Purl. It is not known who made the stained-glass windows nor who got the contract for the heating and mechanical systems.

The 1916 Polk Directory says William W. Whitney was Treasurer and General Manager of the Warren M. Crosby Dry Goods Company. Whitney bought the property in 1911, the same year the Frank Lloyd Wright built the guest house that served as the model for the Crow’s home. A 1912 mortgage shows that W. W. Whitney was a single man.

After Whitney, other owners of the house included Edgar Campbell Arnold, a wealthy North Topeka pharmacist who owned a wholesale and retail drug company. He was 34-years-old and living with his mother in 1907 when he made the local news by jilting his fiancée on their wedding day in Los Angeles. The bride-to-be sued for breach of promise seeking $25,000. Their love letters were published in the course of the federal court law suit. Arnold’s obituary shows his involvement with several local banks and investment companies. Another owner of note was Charles Wierenga, the local Nash dealer. Other owners were George and Flossie Walker, Kenneth and Venita Mitchell, Gene and Sara Jane Schnell, and Gary and Doralee Cowger.

2532 Granthurst - Rhonda and Ron Cathey

Built in 1933 by developer Ruth McClintock Mohler, 2532 Grant Road became 2532 Granthurst Avenue in 1938. Mohler’s husband, Jacob, served as Kansas’ Secretary of Agriculture. The design for the home was Plan No. 1246 in the L.F. Garlinghouse plan books. Though not the grandest residence on the 2019 tour of historic homes, the Granthurst home aligns with the Garlinghouse Company’s ideal of providing modest homes all could afford.

The Catheys purchased the home in January of 2003 after happening upon an open house and falling immediately in love with it. The previous owner had decorated it in an English cottage motif, which may have been Ruth’s intention when she built it. Ruth’s homes were influenced by her travels through England before the Great War. Garlinghouse must have agreed, for there is a note with plan No. 1246 referring to it as the Osborne House, one of Queen Victoria’s favorites and where she died in 1901.

The wood paneling and bookcases in the living room are original, as is the front door, which can be seen in the Garlinghouse photo. In the sixteen years of their ownership, other than some paint, paper and new kitchen cabinets the interior remains mostly the same as when the Cathey’s bought it. They continue to maintain the character of the home in everything they do.

The City of Topeka is currently pursuing a nomination of the residence for a place on the National Register of Historic Places. There is another effort to create the Garlinghouse Multiple Property Documentation Form in an effort to recognize the significant historical impact Topeka’s Garlinghouse company had on Topeka, the state, country and even international home building since the early 1900’s.

Those who parked at Gage Park to ride buses to our 4th stop, Landon Mansion (see “West Hills” feature, pp. 1 & 2), got a nice view of tulips blooming in the Doran Rock Garden. [Photos of homes toured & flowers are by Carol Yoho]
July Birthdays To Be Celebrated!

There’s nothing better than **ice cream** and **band music** on a Kansas Summer Day! Come join us **Sunday, July 14** as the Shawnee County Historical Society celebrates the birthdays of prominent Topekans **John Ritchie** and **Arthur Capper**. Along with several delicious flavors of ice cream, participants will be entertained by the **Santa Fe Band**.

Capper was born in Garnett in 1865 and served as Congressman, Governor and Senator from Kansas. His annual public picnics in Topeka (1908-1951) included ice cream for everyone.

The Ritchies came to Topeka in 1856, built their house on Madison Street and were strong abolitionists during the “Bleeding Kansas” era of the state. **Festivities begin at 2 p.m. and will conclude by 5 p.m.** Bring your lawn chair, enjoy some music and dig into some ice cream at the famous Ritchie House.
Would you like to support the Shawnee County Historical Society?
Here is your opportunity. Just fill out the following information below and send it to:

Shawnee County Historical Society
PO Box 2201
Topeka, Kansas 66601

I want to support:

- [ ] Heritage Education for kids $_____________
- [ ] Shawnee County Preservation $_____________
- [ ] Historical Programs/Lectures $_____________
- [ ] Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) $_____________
- [ ] Ritchie House restoration and maintenance $_____________

I also want to renew my annual membership:

- [ ] General Membership $35 $_____________
- [ ] Patron Level Membership $50 $_____________
- [ ] Renovator Level Membership $100 $_____________
- [ ] Sustaining Level Membership $150+ $_____________

Total $_____________

[ ] Visa  [ ] Mastercard  [ ] Discover  [ ] Credit
Name on Card ______________________________________
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Mark You Calendars
Society Events: May-December 2019:

June 12  Day of Giving Fund-Raising Event  2-8 PM
TPAC, 8th and Quincy

July 14  Birthday Party  2-5 PM
for John Ritchie/Arthur Capper
1116 SE Madison

August 1  Educators Night Out  5-7 PM
Topeka Uncorked for Field Trips
Kansas State Historical Society

October 6, 13, 20, 27  Special Sunday Presentations  3 PM
Cox Communications Center, 1118 SE Madison

December 8  Annual Membership Meeting  2 PM
Cox Communications Center
1116 SE Madison