

The Best of Great Old Houses 2090 Vallejo Dabbling in Bay Area tradition

The New Fillmore is alternating "Great Old Houses" columns by the late house historian Anne Bloomfield with David Parry's New Fillmore column "Pacific Heights Architects." This piece first ran in April 1989.

A little old lady in Berkeley once told me that this was her favorite of Clarence A. Tantau's houses. You might expect her to choose among his many Berkeley products, for Tantau belonged to the third generation of Bay Area Tradition architects, the stylistic orientation begun by Maybeck, Polk, et al that inspired most of the non-campus buildings of which Berkeleyans justly boast.

Actually, Tantau only "dabbled in the Tradition," as David Gebhard says, "but eventually settled down to a more traditional use." This is one of his settling-down houses.

Others, often in Mission Revival style, are found in the Berkeley Hills and especially in Pebble Beach, where Tantau was consulting architect for the Del Monte Properties. In the early 1930s, a difficult time for architects, he supervised the Pasatiempo work near Santa Cruz of William Wurster, preeminent later generation Bay Area Traditional architect. Tantau also designed the SF Building at the Exposition on Treasure Island in 1939.

Here on Vallejo Tantau played with southern colonial ideas, especially in the thick mortared brick walls, restrained white trim and steep roofs with chimneys at the apex, return angles at the base. He added two sensuous notes.

The pediment over the iron front door curves into voluptuous wave crests, and the view-enjoying bay window projects over Buchanan Street on an unnecessary but delightful series of rounded moldings.

For this San Francisco house, Tantau had a rich client, Benjamin F. Schlesinger. Schlesinger came from the midwest out of a clan whose members owned department stores all over the country. He came here probably in his twenties, just after the 1906 Fire, as assistant general manager of the Emporium. Was he related to an owner of it, or did he simply have department stores in his blood and know that business well?

In either case, by 1914 he was the store's general manager. Soon the employee magazine was calling him "The Big Chief."

That was what Schlesinger was when he had Tantau design this house in 1919. He moved in right away with his wife and four sons. In 1923 he resigned from the Emporium and went on to buy a number of other stores on the Pacific Coast such as May Department Stores, B. F. Schlesinger & Sons in the Emporium-like building in Oakland, and the flagship store, the lamented City of Paris, whose rotundas Neiman-Marcus reconstructed.

The City of Paris Dry Goods Company claimed branches in Paris and New York. Paul Verdier was perennial president, but in the late 1920s Schlesinger was chairman of the board and his son was treasurer. One senses a significant investment.

The family had some personal problems. One of the sons died early. Another staged a fake suicide, sending his car into the Columbia River, and had to spend the rest of his life abroad. By the time B. F. sold the Vallejo Street house in 1939, he had retired. He died in 1960.

The only other owner of the house, until recently, was Arthur Dunne, attorney son of an attorney. He had graduated from Berkeley in 1920 and from Harvard Law school in 1923. A member of the most socially approved clubs, Dunne became dean of the SF Law school, a governor of the State Bar and head of the Republican County Central Committee.

In 1944 Vincent Hallinan, father of the current District Attorney, charged Dunne with subordinating the interests of the State Bar to those of Southern Pacific. But the Hallinans are another story and if Dunne was on the railroad payroll, he still took excellent care of his beautiful house.