

BY DEE CARAWAN ARCHITECT

---

# SMALL HOUSE(S), BIG LIFE

---

In all my years of being an architect, I never once met anyone who recognized my grandfather's name. "There" I would say, pointing to the Index of Photographers in a Frank Lloyd Wright book or a Wallace Neff book "That's him". And there, listed after Maynard L. Parker would be a long list of credits.

Then, several years ago, my mother and I found ourselves at the Huntington Library in a large sterile room, file boxes stacked and lining the walls, facing a team of researchers headed by Jennifer Watts, the Curator of Photography. They were eager to ask questions about my grandfather. Not only did they know his name, they knew more than I did. The tables were turned.

In the late 90s after my grandmother died, my family donated my grandfather's files to the Huntington Library. She had liked the nice man from the Huntington over the various suitors from UCLA, UC Santa Barbara and USC. And when my grandmother got a whim, tides could turn. The files had sat for decades in his studio, the second floor of his very traditional Cape Cod house in Echo Park, negative strips still hanging from clothes pins, the two person desk where my grandmother would spend hours touching up photos under the window facing the downtown LA skyline.

The studio was the antithesis of this very sterile room at the Huntington. As we sat, my mother answering questions about certain negatives or prints, I marveled at the difference. His 60,000 images had been categorized, labeled and filed within an inch of their life and now sat neatly in a staggering amount of boxes.

"I think that's Carolyn Murray" I heard my mother saying, pointing at an elegant young woman in a negative.

Carolyn was part of the staff at House Beautiful. Led by the iron glove of Elizabeth Gordon, a small group of stylists, editors and ML (my grandfather) would swoop down on a house, work their magic and cart away appetizing images for their publication. These gatherings could be very chi-chi with the owners hosting dinners and the young stylists dressed to the nines.

"Do you recognize what city this building is in Ann?" asked Jenny, prodding my mother's memory. I marveled at what they had accomplished, identifying houses, locations, owners, architects and designers. After cataloging 60,000 images, they only had a handful of questions. My grandfather had been prolific over his thirty plus years photographing all manner of American housing from the late thirties to the late sixties.

As much as his work interested me, what always got my attention was how he himself lived. Yes, he photographed the lives of the rich and fabulous and documented the newest kitchens but his own home, his own life was what I found inspiring. I jokingly say I learned my most important lessons even before starting architecture school.

He had a propensity for small houses. Indeed, he could have been the poster child for Sarah Susanka's *The Not so Big House*, the tome that urged us to value quality over quantity. When he started to become successful in the thirties he purchased a lot in Echo Park and built what he knew; a Cape Cod house that echoed his Vermont roots. I was told he built it because it was a frugal way of building, four walls and a roof, a simple box. Just as the settlers of New England choose this style for its simplicity, ML was his own pioneer staking his claim in Echo Park. Even after his professional success continued and he could afford a rambling Cliff May or an impressive

Wallace Neff, he stayed loyal to his modest home. He valued a life rich in experiences over material possessions.

Yet over his life he collected or built 7 small houses and he didn't need much of an excuse to add to his coterie. In 1946 his sister Daisy was moving west to California and he bought a small craftsman in the neighborhood so they would have a place to live. Then Uncle Charlie needed work and ML bought two garage kits and even though his business was booming, proceeded to build with Charlie a two bedroom house. My mother, age 16, was enlisted to help. This ended up being the house I grew up in on a lot next to his, perched on the hill overlooking downtown LA. As with all his houses, he added his bit of magic. In this case it was a checkerboard of wood paneling inside. Supposedly a desk company was going out of business and he bought up the veneer wood.

In the early fifties, Cliff May gave him a call. He had a small house at Lake Arrowhead that he wanted to sell. He wanted to buy the larger house down the road. Was Maynard interested? Silly question. This house fit my grandfather's lust for small and eccentric to a tee. It was the chauffeur's quarters for an estate; a simple two story salt box house on the lake.

His work took him across the US and down into Mexico to photograph houses such as Barbara Hutton's home in Cuernavaca. To facilitate these trips, he acquired what was probably his most prized possession; a small home on wheels, a Clark Cortez. This sleek motor home ferried my Grandparents and his equipment to projects, criss crossing the US every year. Every summer they would end up in New Brunswick, Canada where my grandmother Annie had grown up. In the early forties they bought a "camp" which was what the locals called a small cabin, on the Magaguadavic River where they could connect with family, fish for their breakfast and enjoy the simple life. His "shoots" would be lined up so that he had assignments to and from New Brunswick each year. Each fall was a reunion, we driving home from Arrowhead and they arriving from the East and we would all pile in the Cortez and head down to the drive-in at Bob's Big Boy in Glendale where the waitresses would take orders from the cars.

My Aunt Elizabeth was born in 1942 and suddenly the cozy Echo Park Cape Cod was too small for a family of four. In his backyard, he built what came to be called the Sky House, a small single room structure hanging over the hill side surrounded by orange trees and climbing roses. My grandparents used this as their bedroom for many years. As less was better in his book, he neglected to build a bathroom. It is a testament to my grandmother's unflagging loyalty and adaptability that she went along with this arrangement.

His motto, though never spoken, seemed to be 'Build what you need'. But these simple structures were filled with delight and humor and always in beautiful surroundings. One of the new ideas permeating housing during this time was indoor-

outdoor living. And so his Cape Cod grew a lanai during a home improvement burst of activity. It didn't strike me as odd that a Cape Cod would have a lanai (along with a macadamia nut tree) until I was an adult. Just as he embraced his roots and New England architecture, he equally delighted in breaking the rules. The thought of resale, so often a factor in home renovation, never entered his mind. Indeed, when he passed away in 1976 he still owned all seven homes.

Instead of moving up or building out ML was always more interested in the next interesting experience. Trips to Magdalena Bay in his Willys jeep to camp out and film the whales were a favorite outing. He would construct and tinker with bows and arrows in his wood shop and then take them on the road to archery tournaments. Growing up a favorite family outing was Sundays at Arroyo Park in Pasadena. We would pack a picnic and my Grandparents would spend the afternoon shooting.

My mother has said that as things got high tech, ML would lose interest. So as archery bows became mechanized, his interest faded. His studio also remained primitive. The Franklin stove that had been installed to heat his studio in 1939 remained until his death in 1976. In his mind it was wholly adequate as the only means of heat for the second story. Jenny, the Huntington's curator, is amazed that the black and white negatives stayed in excellent shape as they weathered decades of summer heat in what was essentially an uninsulated attic space.

He loved the fact that Southern California lay in the 'banana belt' and he surrounded his Cape Cod with every imaginable fruit tree from pomegranates to kumquat, blood oranges, bananas, avocado and our favorite, a mulberry tree where we had our tree house. What could be lovelier than to sit up in a tree noshing on juicy mulberries? After photographing Eve Arden's house at Christmas one year he brought home a potted pine tree from the shoot and planted it in the side yard between his home and ours. Eve, as we called the tree, grew to 60' and was wrapped toe to top in lights every Christmas.

His interiors were a collection of high and low art and furniture. Inside, simple whitewashed pine cabinets nestled next to ornate lacquered chinoiserie screens while outside a tumbleweed hung like a chandelier on the lanai.

In the late 30s when he built his Echo Park home, he located it to be near the end of the Red Line that stopped at the bottom of the hill, a short walk away. The Red Line could whisk him downtown and he was close to the Interior Designers whose offices lined Wilshire just west of downtown. So many of his lifestyle choices made then would have fit in perfectly with today's renewed interest of living near transportation, having an edible garden and building small and smart.

And for me? I've had my own string of small houses over the years and currently live in a 975 sf cottage perched on a hillside in Ventura overlooking the ocean. ML would approve.