

A Look Back: Depression-era home was built with modern-day features

10:00 PM PDT on Saturday, April 10, 2010

By NITA HILTNER
Special to The Press-Enterprise

Ingenuity sometimes had to trump income during the Great Depression when it came to building a house. Like using broken tiles and bricks to fashion a home, and used crank case oil on the wooden exteriors.

So it is for the home built by Peter J. Weber.

Weber was a classically trained architect, born in San Francisco in 1893. His family survived the 1906 earthquake there, but lost their home.

At the age of 14, Weber became a draftsman, helping to rebuild after the quake. He attended a technical high school and then worked in the office of Julia Morgan, the architect of Hearst Castle. . Weber won a scholarship offered by Hearst's mother to the Sorbonne in Paris, but he couldn't go because World War I began.

Weber attended the University of Pennsylvania and in 1917, he received a certificate of proficiency in architecture. Returning to southern California, he found work as chief designer for famous architect G. Stanley Wilson in Riverside in 1918 and went on to design Mission Inn Authors Row, the St. Francis Chapel Rotunda, the Arlington Branch Library and Firehall, Riverside Municipal Auditorium, the RCC quadrangle, Fullerton City Hall (now the police station), and Corona High School (now the historic civic center) and more.

Peter Weber, Peter J. Weber's son, said that his father was involved in the design of over 100 buildings for the firm.

[Story continues below](#)



Special to The Press-Enterprise
The Peter J. Weber home in Riverside, now sharing space with a hotel. The home is now headquarters of the Old Riverside Foundation.

Weber was doing quite well in life and owned a Riverside orange grove when he decided sell it, quit his job, get married and take a one-year honeymoon to North Africa and Europe.

His son owns the approximately 6,000 photos his father took of buildings in Europe, particularly the Alhambra in Spain from which the Peter J. Weber house was designed, with Moorish, Art Deco, Art Nouveau and Craftsman design elements.

Peter J. Weber bought nine acres of land when he moved back to Riverside. He wanted to build a house back in the grove, away from the street; but the cost of hooking up to utilities was too much, so the house and garage were built close to the street.

Peter Weber said living in the house was like paradise, surrounded by groves at the time. His father first built a three-car garage, highly unusual at that time when cars were still a fairly new invention.

The family moved into the garage and lived there while Weber built the home. Since he had no money, a lot of the half-timbered brick house was built from salvage.

[Story continues below](#)



Special to The Press-Enterprise
The bathroom of the Depression-era home in Riverside was built using tiles discarded from other jobs.

"He would pay \$5 a barrel for broken tiles, and if you look at the outside of the house, it's all broken brick," said Peter Weber.

The 1,100-square foot house features a large walk-in fireplace with metal surround, hand carved or decoratively painted wooden ceilings, two large French doors, wrought iron hinges on doors, cabinets with decorative nail heads, wood and plaster walls and a fully tiled bathroom.

A south-facing patio cover allows sun in during the winter to help keep the house warm, but keeps the hot summer sun off the house in the summer.

The house features a 1934 solar water heater on the roof, for which Peter J. Weber used car windshields to build. The house walls were double, with cardboard between the walls used as insulation.

"We'd be out in the hot 105 degree day, and go back into the house and be cold, it was so well insulated," said Weber.

The house has one bedroom separate and outside the main house, as it was used by Weber's grandmother. Peter Weber, his father and mother slept on the wooden decked roof the whole time he grew up there, with a corrugated roof overhead and canvas walls forming the rooftop bedroom.

"The rain couldn't get it, and seven blankets were the answer to the colder winters," he said.

So use was he to sleeping outdoors, Weber said he had a hard time sleeping indoors when he went to college.

Exterior wood on the house was oiled with used crankcase oil. A massive exterior chimney stands out on the house.

Weber said his father's brother Frank Weber helped build the house, but it took the two men six years to complete in 1938. Another bedroom would have been added in time, but Weber said there was never money for that.

Although the house sits atop a concrete foundation to which it is not attached, Weber found out as an adult that his father had built in earthquake protection to the house using steel straps connected to wood beams in the basement, probably because of his experience in the San Francisco earthquake.

Today, the house is home to the Old Riverside Foundation. It sits in the parking lot of the Courtyard Marriott hotel, which is off to one side. The Days Inn, which also sits on the house's previous acreage, helped restore the house. The house was acquired in 1986 and restored by the Old Riverside Foundation, so therefore, it could not be razed when the Marriott was built.

Weber will be giving tours of his childhood home during the 19th annual Old Riverside Foundation Vintage Home Tour, Restoration Faire and Vintage Mercantile from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 15. The tour will feature six Wood Street homes near downtown Riverside.

Projects involving Peter J. Weber

01/01/1923 -Corona High School aka Corona's Historic Civic Center, 815 W. 6th Corona

01/03/1923 -Riverside City College Quadrangle, 4800 Magnolia Ave. Riverside

01/04/1923 -Riverside-Arlington Heights Fruit Exchange, 3391 7th st. (Mission Inn Ave.) Riverside

01/05/1925 -Simons Mortuary Building, 3610 Eleventh St. Riverside

01/01/1926 -Pickwick Hotel , Anaheim

01/01/1928 -Arlington Branch Library and Fire Hall, 9556 Magnolia Ave. Riverside

01/01/1928- Mission Inn, Authors Row Riverside

01/02/1929- Norconian Pavilion and Chauffeurs Quarters, Norco,

03/09/1929- Mission Inn, St. Francis Chapel, Riverside

03/14/1929 -Riverside Municipal Auditorium, 3485 7th St. Riverside

09/04/1929 -Mission Inn, Rotunda, Riverside

09/26/1929 -Mission Inn, Japanese Court, Riverside

01/03/1933 -U.S. Post Office, Redlands

01/01/1938 -Weber House, The, 1510 University Ave. Riverside

01/01/1941 -Fullerton City Hall, Fullerton

01/01/1944-Mission Inn, New Chimes Tower, Riverside
