

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Home, Home on the Ranch

By Margie Waltz-Actor

Ranch houses, those sprawling, ubiquitous emblems of post-World War II lifestyle, are now historic in their own right—mainly because they stopped building them at the end of the 1960s.

The ordinary rectangular structure that dominated suburban neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s is no longer the new kid on the block. At more than 50 years old, it has finally come into its architectural majority—in fact, it has more than reached the cutoff point for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

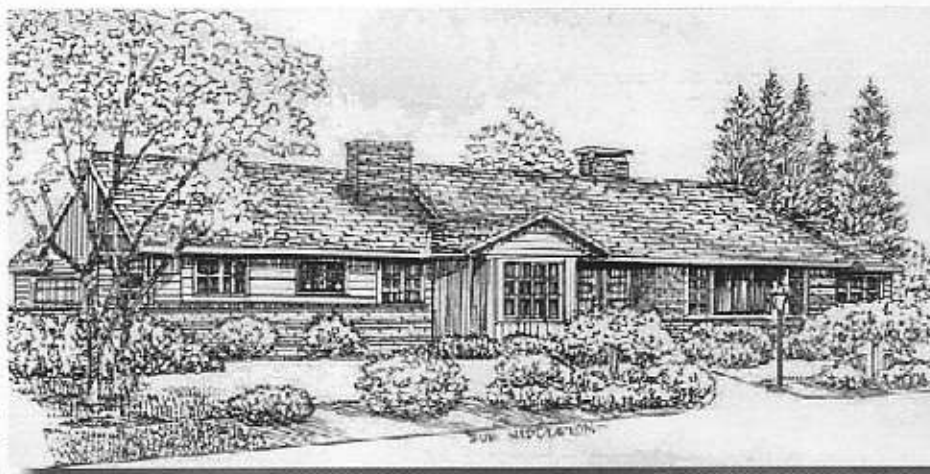
Perhaps that is why architectural historians, ever hungry for fresh debate on period styles, are scrutinizing thousands of unpretentious ranch houses. Granted, very few of these will make the Register on their own individual merits. Most will be judged for their role as part of a historic district, as “contributing resources”, in official preservation parlance.

Before laughing at the idea of an “historic” ranch house, let’s look at where these fresh-faced houses came from and what they have come to represent.

What exactly is a ranch house? With a little thought, most of us could come up with a few ranch style characteristics: one story, horizontal lines; a low-

pitched gable or hip roof with overhanging eaves; a long shallow front porch or a recessed entrance porch; an attached garage jutting out ahead of the main block of the house; and let us not forget the picture window in the living room and sliding glass patio door at the rear! Even when the typical linear or L-shaped footprint is varied to become a U or a V, we have no trouble picking up on the overall ranch-ness of the design.

The term “ranch style” is derived from the phrase “California ranch house”. California was the birthplace of this now-familiar form, not just once, but twice. The first ranch-style house evolved in the early to mid-19th century. Of course, these



19th century houses really were located on ranches. Rural dwellings, they were simple, linear, unadorned adobe or frame structures that were most often a single story high and a room or two deep. There were one or more porches extending across the long front façade and sometimes on the back or sides of the house. Such porches provided sheltered access to every room, avoiding space-eating interior hallways.

The layout of the early ranch houses was informal and usually asymmetrical. More attention was paid to function than to style. Need a room? Simply add one on. The rambling L- or U-shaped houses that resulted from this practical design approach were easily

expandable, as well as winningly picturesque. Patios, partly enclosed by the walls of the Ls and Us, offered refuge from the region's harsh sun and wind. They also afforded privacy and an element of protection from intruders.

A hundred years after the original California ranch house made its debut, this soon-to-be universal suburban phenomenon made a comeback. The mid-20th century suburban ranch house, like its predecessor, was also informal and functional, attuned to the needs of growing families. In addition, these houses were inexpensive and easy to build, both vital considerations when the Baby Boom descended upon a housing market that had been stalled since the 1930s.

Developers and builders in every part of the country found the designs easy to sell to eager consumers. Plans were offered for sale through special issue magazines, catalogs and plan books. However, it was the merchant builders, the producers of town-sized suburbs, who spread the ranch house across postwar America.

Not surprisingly, as ranch house design moved out of the limelight of architectural ideal and into the reality of speculative construction, architects and builders took many liberties with the original idea. The ranch house changed somewhat as it moved eastward and northward and regional variations became common. Building materials also changed over time and distance. A major feature of a typical ranch house design was a mixture of building materials. Stone, stucco, vertical board and battens, clapboard siding and brick were all popular. In the East, brick was a frequent choice for exterior walls.

Although the 1950s ranch house was typically small, the open floor plan, with its combined living and dining spaces and its large glass wall areas, went far to make up for its petite size. Glass patio doors put the spotlight on the rear of the house, where most family activities—backyard barbecues, children's games, and grownups' cocktail parties—took place. The front door, in fact, was often consciously de-emphasized in the asymmetrical ranch facade, so cleverly hidden in a side-facing projection that it was barely noticed from the street.

Gable roofs were most common—side gable on the long main block, front-facing ones on wings—but there were also a good many hip roofs. All had sheltering, overhanging eaves. Massive chimneys of stone or brick on the front walls were also enticing to families in search of warm, inviting spaces.

Windows were large in the public areas of the house

but generally smaller and set high on the walls in the bedrooms. Steel casements, popular before the war, gradually gave way in the 1950s to aluminum windows of various sorts—sliders, double hung, awning or jalousie. The living room's picture window often consisted of a large center pane flanked by two sets of operable casement or awning windows.

This seemingly simple house has become the focus of architectural historians asking such questions as: How many different types of ranch houses are there? Is there a difference between a ranch house and a rambler? What is the cutoff between a high-style ranch and a mid-style modern? Stay tuned. We'll let you know how the investigations proceed....



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Painter's Woods National Historic District A New Addition to Forest Grove

By Neil Poulsen

The Historic Landmarks Board is poised to add a second National Register Historic District to Forest Grove. Painter's Woods Historic District is approximately 26 acres in area that is roughly bounded on the north by 15th Avenue, on the west by Ash Street, on the south by 12th Avenue and on the east by Cedar and Elm streets. For those familiar with Forest Grove's history, it consists primarily of large portions of both the South Park Addition and the Knob Hill Addition. Not all the properties in these additions have been included in the district. Properties must be "historically contributing". Consultant Kimberli Fitzgerald is guiding the district through the nomination process.

The Painter's Woods Historic District began, in

name, as the South Park Historic District. But Mary Jo Morelli, a respected Forest Grove historian, suggested that the district would be more appropriately named Painter's Woods. The district was originally part of land purchased by R. M. Painter from Harvey Clark



Iarrington/Story House, built around 1915

in 1861. The purchased land comprised the southern portion of the original 1845 Harvey Clark land claim, much of which also forms the Clark Historic District. Given this excellent historical provenance, the new name was adopted.

When first presented to the State Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation (SACHP), members had a concern. Was the proposed district different enough from the bordering, existing Clark Historic District to warrant designation as a separate historic district? They asked, why not include the proposed district as an expanded Clark Historic District? This concern was reinforced by the fact that some properties in South Park Addition had been included in the Clark Historic District.

Pooling observations by Mary Jo Morelli and the research provided by Kimberli Fitzgerald, we discovered that there were a number of reasons why the Painter's Woods Historic District merited consideration as its own district:

- The Clark District represents the plats established between 1848 and 1854 that first formed Forest Grove. The Painter's Woods District would include portions of a later plat established in 1891 that expanded Forest Grove.
- The railroad came to Forest Grove in about 1875. So the Clark District has its roots in pre-railroad Forest Grove, while Painter's Woods has its roots in post-railroad Forest Grove. Land originally purchased in the Clark District area was more speculative, while land originally purchased in the Painter's Woods area was less speculative.
- Being pre-railroad, the Clark District area was largely an agricultural community. The lot sizes were much larger in the original plat in order to grow food.
- When the South Park Addition was platted in 1891, the population was professionally more heterogeneous, and food products were brought in by the railroad. So lot sizes were smaller and more affordable.
- There are architectural differences between the two districts. For example, in addition to more traditional styles found in the Clark District, the Painter's Woods District contains examples of Minimal Traditional, WWII Cottage, and Ranch houses that predate 1948.

Hopefully, articulating these differences between the Painter's Woods Historic District and the existing Clark Historic District will help bolster our proposal when we next present to the SACHP on Friday, February 27th. Representatives of both the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the SACHP have read our revised proposal and given it their thumbs up.

Assuming that the SACHP approves our proposal, the next step will then be to forward the nomination to the National Park Service for their review and approval. We hope for the best.

Special Note

The HLB has completed a draft copy of The Forest Grove Historic District Guidelines document. It will soon be posted on our website. We invite your comments. Your input matters!

The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

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