

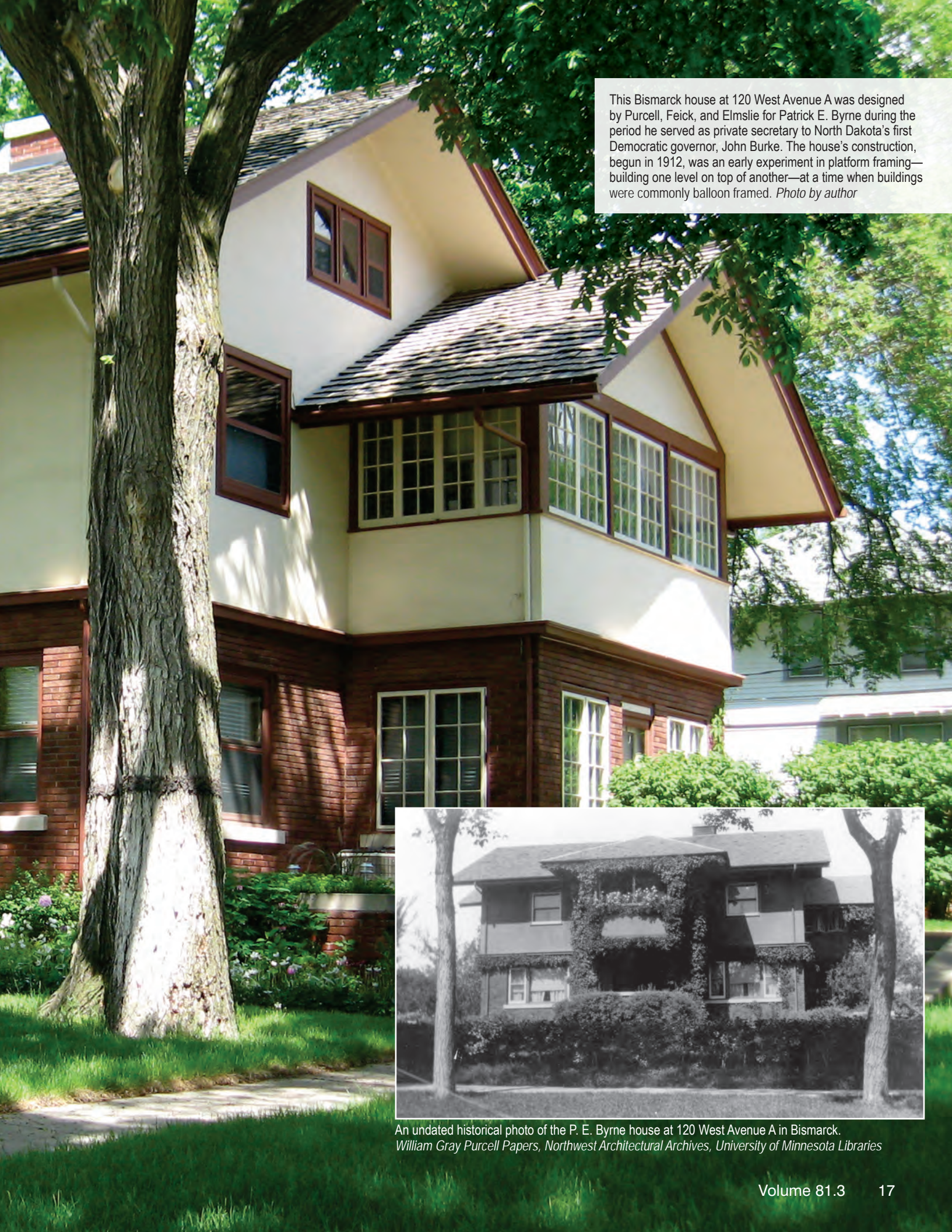
PRAIRIE VISION

*The Architecture of Purcell, Feick,
and Elmslie in Bismarck*

BY EMILY SAKARIASSEN



This Bismarck house at 120 West Avenue A was designed by Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie for Patrick E. Byrne during the period he served as private secretary to North Dakota's first Democratic governor, John Burke. The house's construction, begun in 1912, was an early experiment in platform framing—building one level on top of another—at a time when buildings were commonly balloon framed. *Photo by author*



An undated historical photo of the P. E. Byrne house at 120 West Avenue A in Bismarck.
William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

Reading the built environment is integral to reading history. Pedestrians strolling the older residential streets of a city like Bismarck, North Dakota, might describe a neighborhood's atmosphere in terms of shady, tree-lined streets, well-tended gardens, or stately homes. They may be less conscious of the history they are glimpsing as they pass by each residence. The large, brick and stucco house at 120 West Avenue A, in the heart of Bismarck's Cathedral Area Historic District, for example, was designed in 1909 for Patrick E. Byrne, private secretary to Governor John Burke. A careful eye might note details about the house itself: the roof eaves are broad, the windows are wide, and the colors are natural. There are delicate, wood-carved, wedge-shaped designs in the gable ends, an embellishment unlike any on the surrounding residences. Inside, much of the furniture and shelving is built in, incorporating native wood—both oak and birch. These architectural features are found in a handful of houses in Bismarck and are clues to an interesting piece of local history. They are hallmarks of the Prairie Style of architecture and, more specifically, the architecture of William Gray Purcell, George Feick Jr., and George Grant Elmslie.

From 1908 to 1916, the Chicago-trained, Minneapolis-based partnership of Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie drafted designs for ten buildings in North Dakota: three commercial and seven residential.¹ Four of these works survive in Bismarck and illustrate how a group of Progressive community leaders helped to establish the renowned architectural firm's presence in North Dakota.

The Prairie School

The names Purcell and Elmslie may be familiar to those versed in the Prairie Style of architecture, which was most prominent between 1900 and 1920.² The firm initially consisted of William Gray Purcell and George Feick Jr. but achieved greatest recognition with the addition of George Grant Elmslie,



The office of Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie in Minneapolis, circa 1911. As identified in *At Home on the Prairie: The Houses of Purcell and Elmslie*, from left are architect George Feick Jr., draftsman Marion Alice Parker, an employee named Ireland, architect George Grant Elmslie, and draftsman Paul Haugen. *William Gray Purcell Papers*, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

who served in an advisory role to the fledgling architects for several years before signing on with the firm in 1910. The architecture they would introduce to North Dakota was part of a nationwide trend inspired by the same ideals that drove the broader social and political Progressive movement and efforts to improve the quality of the average American life.³ These three men were devoted to what architect Frank Lloyd Wright would later term the "Prairie Style," an architectural style influenced by the English Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth century, yet committed to modern innovation. Practitioners of this "Prairie School" challenged earlier

styles of architecture, creating an indigenous North American aesthetic now known as the Prairie Style. Theirs was a new ideology—a break from the past perfectly suited for the progressive spirit that attended the turn of the century.

The Prairie School had as its mentor Chicago School architect Louis H. Sullivan of the firm of Adler and Sullivan. Sullivan championed the cause for a uniquely American architecture, and his axiom "form follows function" became a battle cry. Sullivan's fresh approach to buildings stemmed from his distaste for the classical revival styles of architecture based in Greek and Roman antiquity,



Designs were intended to reflect a building's organic setting. The open plains of the Midwest served as their primary inspiration.

Wright and other young architects of Chicago including William Drummond, George Washington Maher, and Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin began to reimagine their Chicago School teachings that a work of architecture should grow from its use as an organism. Instead of form following function, Wright proposed that the two are inseparable. In perfecting an organic harmony, architects of the emerging Prairie School would begin to exercise the same manner of observing and appreciating nature as did the transcendentalist writers, such as Emerson and Whitman, whom many of these progressive architects had grown up studying.⁶ The characteristics of their Prairie Style of architecture are readily recognizable, particularly in contrast with the late Victorian-era styles of building. Designs were intended to reflect a building's organic setting. The open plains of the Midwest served as their primary inspiration. Repeated characteristics of the Prairie School designs include broad horizontal lines, low ceilings, cantilevers, and deep eaves. They experimented with new building technology, testing the limits of modern engineering. They embraced the open floor plan and sought framing solutions to allow natural light to penetrate interior spaces by way of curtain walls and expansive, single-pane picture windows.

which he considered a recycling of past ideas. He wanted a new architectural language, an organic language. Forms were to be inspired by nature. He introduced modernized plant motifs, such as those seen in terra-cotta reliefs adorning the exteriors of his commercial designs, in an attempt to provide organic context to their surroundings.⁴

Frank Lloyd Wright, undoubtedly the most celebrated of the Prairie School architects, would take Sullivan's architectural vision a step further to create the Prairie School style. Wright cut his teeth in the Chicago office of Joseph Lyman Silsbee, where George Grant Elmslie also worked.⁵

The Prairie School architects emphasized the use of local materials such as native stone and wood. In the Midwest they generally focused on oak, pine, and limestone to create an honest and intimate relationship with the region. Color and texture were also crucial to the organic aesthetic. These residential buildings were stained in earth tones or sometimes left unstained. Stencils were commonly designed for interior walls and the woodwork stained and waxed to enhance the natural grain and character of the material.⁷

George Grant Elmslie

Alongside Wright in developing the Prairie School style was architect George Grant Elmslie. Elmslie was born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1869 and immigrated to Chicago with his family in 1884. From a young age, Elmslie built his intellectual attitude from the poetry of Robert Burns, Mary Shelley, and other Romantic writers. His interest in architecture stemmed solely from his parents' desire for him to become an engineer.⁸ He began his career at the architecture firm of William LeBaron Jenney, a pioneer of the Chicago School, who introduced him to the Beaux Arts style.⁹ He then worked a year with the firm of Joseph Lyman Silsbee in 1887. It was here that Elmslie was inspired to develop his own freehand technique of drawing, paying particular attention to the often romantic designs influenced by Silsbee's Victorian plans in the Queen Anne style, characterized by asymmetrical designs,



George Grant Elmslie (1869–1952), a native of Aberdeenshire, Scotland, immigrated to Chicago in 1884 and joined the Minneapolis-based architectural firm Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie in 1910. The Prairie School architect's designs pay particular attention to small, delicate ornament, as exhibited by his stencils, art glass, and wood carvings. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

machine-produced ornament, curved turrets and towers, and wrap-around porches.¹⁰

In 1889 Elmslie joined Frank Lloyd Wright at Adler and Sullivan on a recommendation by Wright himself. Here Elmslie's friendship with Wright deepened, though his quiet personality is said to have clashed with Wright's extroverted egotism.¹¹ Wright described Elmslie as "a tall, slim, slow-thinking, but refined Scottish lad who had never been young." And yet Elmslie's experience and skill eventually earned him a position as Sullivan's chief draftsman, where he developed his own theories on design.¹²

Elmslie's work is quite distinguishable from his fellow Prairie School architects. His designs pay particular attention to small, delicate ornament. Stencils, art glass, and wood carvings by Elmslie share a certain delicacy in either simplicity or the execution of curvilinear qualities. Elmslie defends his belief in the importance of ornament in a letter to American historian and critic Lewis Mumford:

Most of the designs I made, in relation to particular buildings and in attempting to visualize the entire expression of the building, were made, as the buildings themselves, in the open air of the spirit and miles away from a drawing board.¹³

William Gray Purcell

Elmslie's talent for ornamentation would eventually come to work in perfect architectural harmony with the more masculine form and broad focus of the business-minded William Gray Purcell. Purcell, born in 1880 in Wilmette, Illinois, grew up with a fascination and appreciation for the architecture of the city of Chicago. He was raised and educated predominantly by his grandparents, who lived in Oak Park, not far from Wright's own home and studio. His grandfather, a writer and publisher, introduced Purcell to



William Gray Purcell (1880–1965) grew up near Chicago, where he worked for Louis Sullivan following his graduation from Cornell University College of Architecture. He and classmate George Feick Jr. founded their own Minneapolis-based firm in 1908, but Purcell became most well-known for his Prairie School designs with architect George Grant Elmslie, a partnership that lasted from 1910 until 1921. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

the academic world of literature, art, and society. He, like Elmslie, took great interest in the American Romantic poets, studies that would inspire him throughout his career as an architect. In addition to his Oak Park and urban Chicago environments, Purcell spent much time at the family summer

Feick and Purcell chose Minneapolis as the location to establish their architectural firm.

home of his mother on Island Lake in Wisconsin. Here the impressionable young Purcell explored the natural world in the deep woods where "the fresh clean unspoiled life was a delight and an inspiration."¹⁴

As a teenager, Purcell watched the construction of Wright's new architectural studio, and its design intrigued him. He witnessed the construction of a succession of Wright's residential projects in Oak Park and neighboring River Forest.¹⁵ He was also keenly aware of the work of Louis Sullivan in Chicago; Purcell had attended events at the Sullivan-designed Auditorium Theater, where Adler and

Sullivan kept their offices. Purcell also visited the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where he saw Sullivan's Transportation Building, an organic design that stood in stark contrast to the neoclassical architecture that served as a central theme of the fair.¹⁶

Purcell brought these experiences with him to Cornell University College of Architecture in 1899. Here he focused on studies of Renaissance and Roman architecture, but he soon developed a distaste for classical forms. Upon graduating, Purcell returned home to Oak Park and sought work as a draftsman with a Chicago firm. He met George Elmslie at a party in July 1903, where young Purcell's enthusiasm for progressive design impressed Elmslie, and the two struck an instant friendship. Elmslie hired Purcell to work in Louis H. Sullivan's office in the Auditorium Building the very next day. He worked at the firm for only five months, however, before Sullivan and his colleagues began losing commissions, forcing Purcell to leave in search of new work experiences.¹⁷ In January 1906, Purcell's father encouraged him to take a grand tour of Europe. Purcell invited an old Cornell classmate, architect George Feick Jr., to join him, and together they sailed with a Bureau of University Travel tour lead by professional historians.

George Feick Jr.

George Feick Jr. was born and raised in Sandusky, Ohio. According to the 1903 Cornell University class book, "George at the early age of seven developed a taste for beauty of proportion and it was but a mere step to choose architecture as his life's work."¹⁸ His father owned a construction business in Sandusky, and after his graduation from Cornell University College of Architecture, Feick returned to Ohio to work in his father's business, designing houses and doing engineering work. His family contacts later provided several early commissions for Purcell and Feick when they decided to form a partnership of their own.¹⁹



William Gray Purcell, left, sits in an office with George Feick Jr. in 1908, the year the two Cornell classmates established their own Minneapolis firm. Feick (1881–1945) was a native of Sandusky, Ohio, where he returned in 1913 to join the building firm George Feick and Sons Company with his father and brother Emil. The junior Feick went on to direct construction of many important Ohio buildings, including structures on the campuses of Ohio Wesleyan University and Oberlin College. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

But before the partnership was established, Feick and Purcell set off on their European tour. While still in the States Purcell paid a brief visit to Elmslie, who provided him a list of progressive European architects with whom Elmslie suggested they meet. Traveling across Europe, Purcell and Feick visited architects

in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In the Netherlands, they met architect H. P. Berlage. They viewed examples of modern buildings, as well as the classical sites of Greece and Asia Minor. Their goal was to learn from their ventures, but not to apply the past to their present. Purcell reflected on their trip: “We were no better draftsmen, gained no further skills making patterns...we had stabilized our resolution to stay with the organic architecture and the view of life which Sullivan had outlined.”²⁰ While experiencing the world of architecture abroad, Feick suggested the two young architects form a partnership of their own upon their return to the States.²¹

A Young Partnership with Bismarck Connections

Feick and Purcell chose Minneapolis as the location to establish their architectural firm. There would be more opportunity for them there than in the increasingly competitive climate of Chicago. Purcell describes their arrival in Minnesota in the winter of 1907:

It was twenty below zero. The thin lemon sunlight, as tight as frozen sailcloth, slatted past the soft flowing sleeping cars. Through

the triple glazed Pullman windows could be seen the clustered dusty tubes of grain elevators. Black sheds along the river clattered away behind as if in tow by passing freight trains. Once outside the railway station, one felt tight and small; hurrying freezing gloved hands to yellow street cars; elbowing up gated platform steps; pressing into crowded car aisles. Between the people sitting or swaying on their legs all the various space was filled with frozen gray dust, with the gusty talk of Swedes going to work.... Then these architects spread their drawing paper...radiated enthusiasm, and wondered a little just how they were going to secure some business in a strange city where the partners each knew but one man.²²

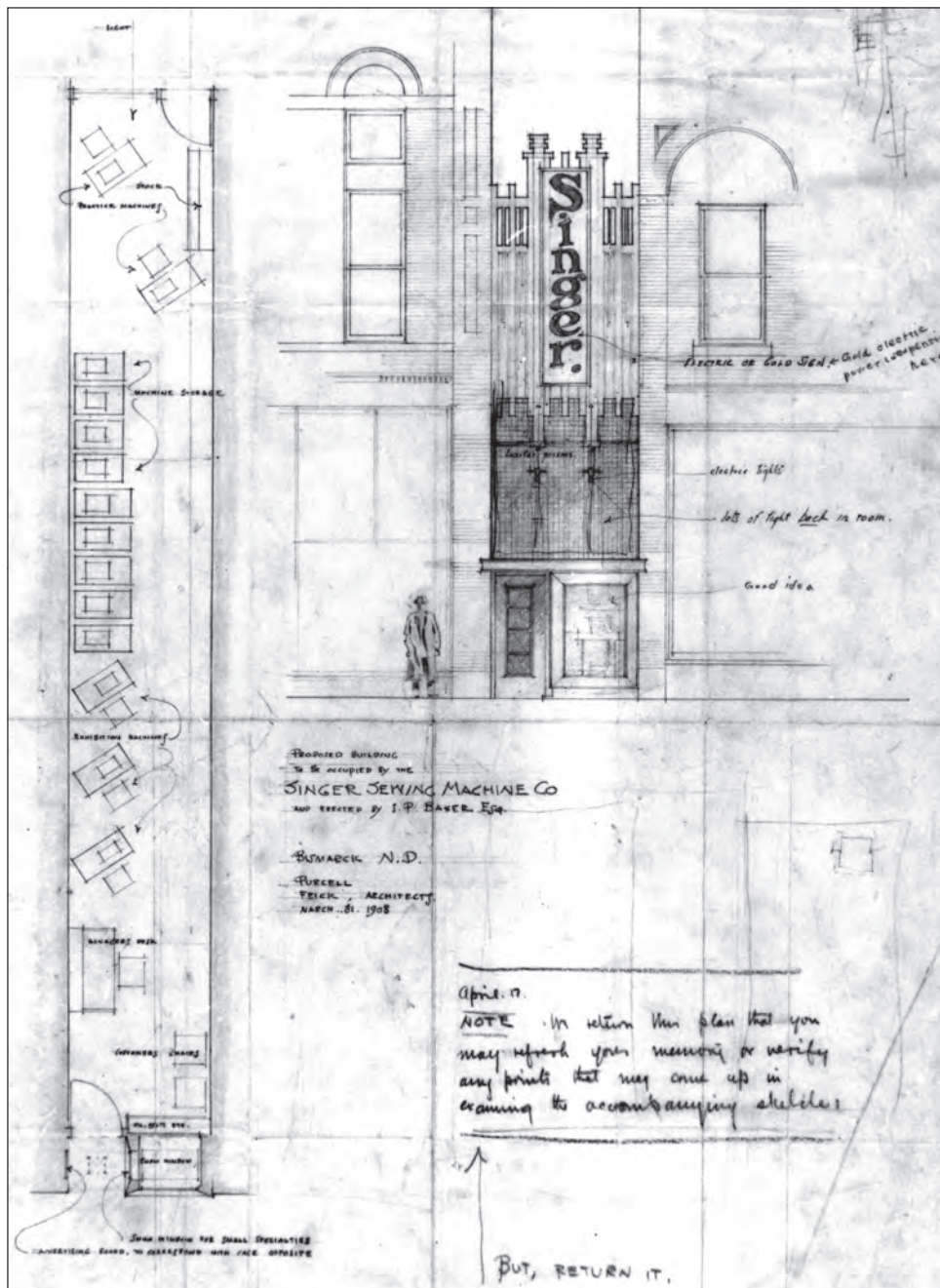
The two established an office on the tenth floor of the New York Life Building and began promoting their organic vision. In the true spirit of social progress, their first hired draftsman was a woman—Marion Alice Parker.²³ She would contribute greatly to their successes, and in particular, would do most of the detailed drafting for their residential commissions in North Dakota.



Past, Place, and Preservation

Historic preservation is a young discipline that integrates elements of history, archaeology, and architectural history. It is a study of material culture and what some romantically refer to as “sense of place.” A historian might view a historic property as a visual illustration that supports a broader historical narrative. An architectural historian might consider it a creative artistic expression that presents an aesthetic solution to a functional problem. An archaeologist would see the same property as a cultural remnant yielding clues to past human behavior. It is the unique role of historic preservation to interpret a historic property—a holdover from our past—to reuse it and make it relevant to the public through observation and experience.

In 1966, Congress declared that “the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage” and that these foundations “should be preserved as a living part of our community life...in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”⁶⁵ The language of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 is certainly idealistic, but it captures the determination of many, at a time when large-scale public works projects such as interstate highway construction and urban redevelopment destroyed numerous historic properties. Only fifty years have passed since the act was signed, and yet, as a nation, we can count more than 90,000 properties currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places—including two of the houses in this article. As a result of the regulatory process the NHPA established, still more historically and culturally significant places have been identified, recorded, evaluated, or in other ways preserved on our path to progress.



Plan and elevation for the exceptionally narrow Singer building project, intended to house a sewing machine shop on Bismarck's Main Street, from 1908. The project was cancelled before construction began. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

On February 24, 1907, the Northwestern Cornell Club held a banquet in Minneapolis, in the balcony room of the Kaiserhof restaurant, for which Purcell and Feick designed and coordinated every detail, from the menu cards to the attendees' custom lapel pins. This was an early opportunity for the architects to promote their newly established business. The *Cornell Alumni News* reported that the majority of guests "expressed the opinion that of all banquets they ever attended, this was the most successful and complete in every detail.... To Messrs. Feick and Purcell is due the credit for the grace and effectiveness of all these details."²⁴

Among the thirty-five guests attending the affair was George H. Russ Jr, a fellow classmate of Purcell and Feick's who had entered Cornell University Law School as a special student following his service in the Spanish-American War. In 1903 Russ graduated and married Susan Barnes, the sister-in-law of Isaac P. Baker, a prominent businessman in Bismarck, North Dakota. In 1905, Baker hired Russ to move to Bismarck and work as a cashier in his banking interest there.²⁵

Baker had come from St. Louis, Missouri, where his father and grandfather had established steamboat operations along the Missouri River. Baker moved to Dakota Territory in 1882 and landed in Bismarck, where he worked as the agent for the Benton Transportation Co., owned by Thomas C. Power of Helena, Montana. In Bismarck, Baker was responsible for operations in the steamboat line between Bismarck and Fort Benton.²⁶ In 1889, with Power as partner, he bought out the interests of both the Bismarck National Bank and the Mellon Brothers Bank, owned by Andrew and Richard Mellon of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Together they merged the entities to create the new Bismarck Bank.²⁷ I. P. Baker proceeded to establish himself as a member of the Democratic National Committee, served as Bismarck mayor from 1890 to 1891, and was heavily involved in commercial and agricultural spheres.²⁸ Through his

brother-in-law's Cornell connection, and what can be imagined as a stimulating encounter among old friends, Russ and Baker would harness the aesthetic of Purcell and Feick and ultimately plant its seed in North Dakota.

Progressivism on the Prairie

The state was experiencing its "Second Boom," a new chapter in North Dakota history following the nationwide depression of the 1890s. This period of economic growth ushered a new era of progress and development for the state. The population increase of eighty-one percent between 1900 and 1910 remains the largest increase in the history of North Dakota.²⁹ About half of the new wave of settlers were farmers, and the rest filled occupations such as bankers, dock workers, ministers, jewelers, and school teachers.³⁰ With agricultural and economic growth and prosperity came great social developments under the influence of the Progressive movement.

Progressivism was a national response to the poverty, violence, and corruption that followed industrialization. Progressives felt government had a responsibility to the American people to correct these social and economic problems, to improve quality of life, and strengthen democracy. Theodore Roosevelt, affectionately considered "North Dakota's adopted son," led the Progressive wing of the national Republican Party and, as sitting president, his influence penetrated communities across the nation, popularizing Progressive ideology. In North Dakota, the Progressive movement found political support with the prairie populists who rose in opposition to monopolistic control of grain trade, banks, and transportation. North Dakota Progressives called for an end to political bossism and exploitation by railroad companies. They sought fairer grain grading laws, better schools and new standards for educators, child labor laws, and legislation for safe food and drugs.³¹ According to historian

Elwyn B. Robinson, it seemed as though "for a time, everyone in North Dakota was a progressive, or at least wore a progressive mask... even conservatives often adopted liberal, progressive views."³²

Leaders of Progressivism in North Dakota communities were commonly lawyers, academics, merchants, and other conservative businessmen. George Russ and I. P. Baker were among those who assumed the mantle of Progressive leadership, advocating its wider agenda. Supporting his old comrades, Russ brought Purcell and Feick's modern style of organic architecture to the capital city. He was

The collective projects Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie designed in Bismarck are a testament to change.

able to land them a commission, dated March 26, 1908, to redesign the interior of the Bismarck Bank for Baker.³³ Not only would this help promote the firm, but it would benefit the business's own status by linking the bank to Purcell and Feick's architectural ideals.

The Singer Building

Baker was pleased with the nature of the collaboration and hired the firm for a second commission, dated March 31 of the same year. This project, though never realized, was a particularly interesting engineering challenge for the up-and-coming firm. Bismarck lost a large portion of its downtown to the Great Fire of 1898. One effort made to revitalize Main Street had been the relocation of an ice house from a warehouse district in Bismarck. Fifteen years before the fire the Marquis de Morès, French aristocrat and founder of Medora, Dakota Territory, had formed the Pacific Refrigerated Car Company to ship dressed beef from the Missouri Plateau to Chicago by refrigerated rail cars, and he constructed icehouses as storage facilities from Helena, Montana, to the Twin Cities.³⁴ His company failed after the winter of 1886–87, an unusually cold winter that killed over seventy-five percent of cattle across

the Northwest.³⁵ I. P. Baker purchased one of the Marquis's vacant ice houses in Bismarck. Following the fire, he relocated the unused structure to the burned-out northeast corner of Third and Main, across Third Street from the Bismarck Bank, which had escaped the 1898 blaze. He had the building refaced with an ornate, Italianate-style brick facade. However, the standard lot frontage at the time was fifty feet. The frontage of the Marquis's ice house was only forty-two feet. This left a seven-foot, ten-inch gap in the block. Two decades later, Purcell and Feick's commission was to fill this well-known "Hole-in-the-Wall," as was its local byname, which Baker felt was "so unsightly on Main Street."³⁶ They designed an astonishingly narrow Singer sewing shop.

Purcell describes the plan as a "unique opportunity to dramatize the idea that everything in or upon this building of a merchant, which appeared to the eye of a passerby, was in reality his signboard. By means of all the forms of our architecture he would be offering his wares and services to the public."³⁷ Unfortunately, delays in the writing of the lease forced cancellation of the project. But the firm's work on the Bismarck Bank had been well received, and they gained a momentum that made pursuing commissions in North Dakota worthwhile.

The E. M. Thompson House

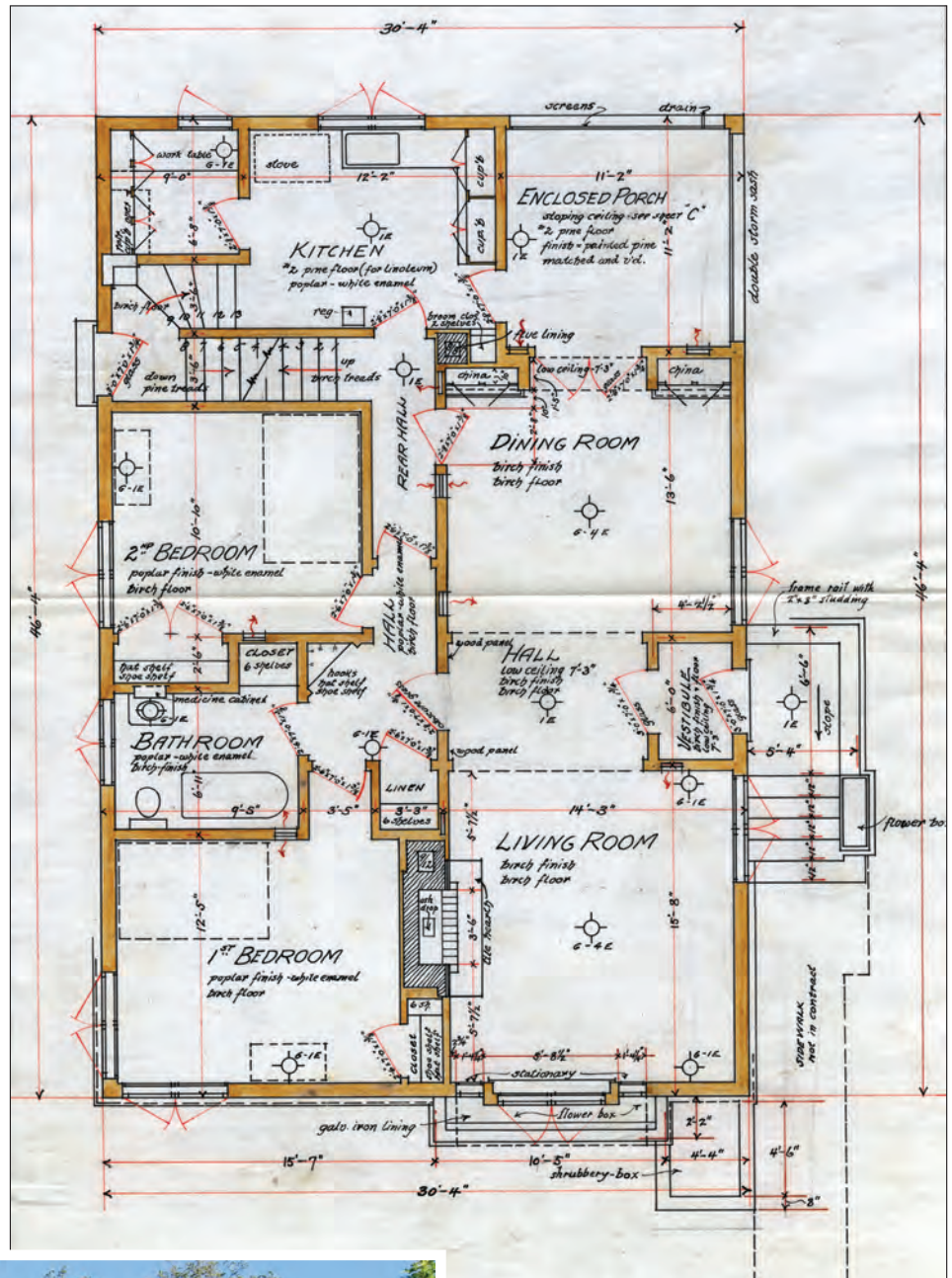
Edward M. Thompson, a clerk for I. P. Baker in the Bismarck Bank, commissioned Purcell and Feick's third project in Bismarck, dated May 25, 1909.³⁸ According to the Bismarck Directory of 1919, E. M. Thompson's residence was located at 623 Third Street.³⁹ Purcell describes the project as "a direct little house without much emotional appeal. A gadgety plan, arranged for possible future expansion."⁴⁰ The bungalow-scale house does, however, exhibit notable characteristics of the Prairie School style. The exterior finish is earth-toned stucco; the roof has exaggerated eaves,

and the windows are large and massed together, with deep recessed openings. Blueprints of the interior show the use of birch and poplar woodwork, low ceilings, and large, open rooms. In an unusual construction feature, the exterior walls incorporate the use of hollow, structural tile block. This construction method, clay tile with a skim coat of stucco, allowed for uncased window openings, subtly softening the structure's visual expression.

The P. E. Byrne House

In a project dated September 6, 1909, Purcell and Feick began planning the residence for Patrick E. Byrne, private secretary to Governor John Burke.⁴¹ The relationship they cultivated with Byrne, and the process of design for this specific house, exemplifies the importance of their time in North Dakota. The construction of this house was not begun until 1912, as they continued to develop and refine the design for over a year and a half. Purcell describes collaborating with P. E. Byrne and his client's eagerness to understand the progressive ideas of their architecture:

We are having an interesting time with the Byrnes. They are going into this study of things in a way that we like to see clients do. Right down to rock bottoms and a question wanting a reason for each point. So we are on our mettle and are sure to get something good.⁴²



An early floor plan for the Edward M. Thompson house, Purcell and Feick's third commission in Bismarck, begun in 1909. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

In 2006, while poring over archival materials at the University of Minnesota, architectural historian Richard Kronick noticed a typographical error: the floor plans, elevations, and sketches for the design of the Carl O. Jorgenson House at 1022 North Fifth Street in Bismarck had been mislabeled as the "E. M. Thompson residence." As a result, little research has ever been conducted on the E. M. Thompson commission, and for years its location remained a mystery. Property records show that the address changed sometime in the 1990s—attributable to its corner lot location. For decades, it has served as a rental property, now listed as 301 East Avenue C. *Photo by author*



This interior view of the P. E. Byrne house shows architect-designed fixtures including built-in shelving and furniture. Subsequent owners of the house have made several alterations to its interior. However, the main rooms of the house, like the living room pictured in this early photograph, remain virtually unchanged. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

Byrne worked for George Russ and I. P. Baker as a clerk at the Bismarck Bank. He later established an insurance company and real estate appraisal business and kept offices in the Bismarck Bank building. Byrne was born in Ireland in 1868 and, upon the deaths of both of his parents, immigrated to the United States at the age of thirteen to live with his sister. He settled with her in Bismarck in 1881. Following graduation from high school, he began work in the office of the territorial secretary of Dakota Territory.⁴³ From 1907 to 1913 Byrne served as private secretary to Governor Burke, the first Democrat elected North Dakota governor. Many consider Burke the most Progressive politician in the state at the time; he instituted health and

sanitation laws, child labor laws, and workers' compensation, and tried to reverse corrupt practices in elections.⁴⁴ Working alongside such a Progressive spearhead, Byrne, a staunch Democrat, became a strong proponent of the Progressive movement. He was an avid historian and champion of Plains Indian history. In 1926 he published *Soldiers of the Plains* with the intent to offer a Native American perspective of the American Indian Wars on the Great Plains and refute the Custer myth.⁴⁵

Shortly after Purcell and Feick began work on the Byrne project, George Grant Elmslie came on board as an official partner in the firm. In Chicago in 1910,



Unlike the patterned shingles or lace-like spindle work of Victorian-era Queen Anne houses or the fluted columns and ornate cornices of contemporary Classical revivals, exterior ornament found on Prairie Style residences is typically restrained, often intended to emphasize the horizontality of the structure. Examples include the use of contrasting trim between stories and recessing horizontal masonry joints in brickwork. The P. E. Byrne house exhibits both of these techniques and boasts the added charm of wood-carved eave details with a flora motif inspired by natural forms. *Photo by author*

Elmslie had married a young Scotswoman, Bonnie Hunter, and he moved with her to Minneapolis to join the firm.⁴⁶ The three partners worked together as a team in democratic fashion, sharing responsibilities and extending acknowledgement for the efforts of other draftsmen in the office.⁴⁷ The Byrne house was the first project to carry the new firm title "Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie, Architects."⁴⁸



Purcell and Elmslie incorporated raised hearth fireplaces in many of their residential commissions including the T. R. Atkinson House. Ann Atkinson is seen reading next to the hearth in the recently completed home, circa 1912. To her right, centered on a desk that is now an Atkinson family heirloom, is the Elmslie-designed art glass lamp. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

The Byrne house provides an interesting example of the firm's innovation. The construction was an early experiment in platform framing at a time when buildings were commonly balloon framed. This process involves building one level on top of another, as opposed to framing the entire house at once. However, the engineering decisions for this project proved problematic. Purcell admits the fundamental error in the design's execution:

There was a space which had to be furred out to carry the plaster and the skirting bands which were made rather like a picture frame of $\frac{3}{4}$ " boards. This space could easily have been, and should have been, thoroughly protected and insulated against the weather

and the joint between plaster and skirting and skirting and brick should have been securely sealed against wind...and so it came to be that when "forty-below" weather, whipped by an eighty-mile gale, hit the North Dakota prairies, it blew right through these joints, forced its way between the floors up into the bedrooms, down into the living room, and created some pretty difficult days.⁴⁹

The house was included in an article published in the January 1913 issue of the *Western Architect*. The article, "The Statics and Dynamics of Architecture," introduced the three architects to the broader profession and was the first major publication



George Grant Elmslie is known for the delicate and curvilinear quality of his stencils and art glass designs. The panes of colored glass used in this lamp, designed for T. R. Atkinson, are inspired by organic forms reminiscent of the abstracted floral motifs for which his former mentor and friend Louis Sullivan was celebrated. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

for the firm. The article also included a photograph of an art glass lamp designed for the state engineer, Timothy R. Atkinson of Bismarck.⁵⁰

The T. R. Atkinson House

Atkinson commissioned a house design from the firm in a project dated March 12, 1910.⁵¹ Atkinson was born in Anson, Maine, in 1868, and came to Fargo, North Dakota, in 1899. In 1905, he moved to Bismarck, where he served variously as city engineer and Burleigh County surveyor. He designed various waterworks and sewer systems across North Dakota and supervised construction of major public works projects in Bismarck.⁵² Among his many contributions to the community, Atkinson created plans for a series of parks and narrower residential roadways in Bismarck as part of a progressive city beautification program: “[W]e will have more comfortable homes, more pleasant drives and these things all tend towards the moral uplifting of our citizens.”⁵³

According to Purcell, the house designed for Atkinson “was a commission that grew out of our

contact with George H. Russ, of the Bismarck Bank.”⁵⁴ The budget was significantly smaller than that for the P. E. Byrne house, and therefore fewer decorative items were incorporated. However, the architects “made every part count for all its possibilities.”⁵⁵ The house maintains the Prairie School style with its wide eaves, wide windows, and horizontal accents. The first floor is covered in narrow clapboards, while the upper story has wider shingles. The entryway brings in abundant natural light through a series of windows wrapping around all three exterior walls. An element of charm is added by a diamond-shaped window tucked under the broad overhang of the front gable, just above the second story windows. Though this house is taller and slightly less elaborate than the Byrne house, it maintains, nonetheless, its connection with the organic aesthetic.

The Carl O. Jorgenson House

The third residential design Byrne instigated, dated simply 1911, was for Carl O. Jorgenson, deputy state auditor. Jorgenson was born in Willmar, Minnesota, in 1881, and moved to Dakota Territory with his family in 1884.



These stencils were drawn in 1912 for the T. R. Atkinson House. Both of the designs shown here were inspired by nature—one depicts paired tulips, while the other contains the distinctive shape of a garden iris. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*



Emma Atkinson and daughters Ann and Mary pose with the family dog in front of their recently built house at 402 West Avenue B in Bismarck, circa 1912. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*



The T. R. Atkinson house has seen a major remodeling in recent years with the addition of a garage, expanded kitchen, and family room, but the overall treatment of the exterior has returned the house to the look of its original clapboard and shingle siding. *Photo by author*



An undated photo of the Carl O. Jorgenson House at 1022 North Fifth Street in Bismarck. A note by Purcell on the reverse of a photograph in the Purcell papers mistakenly refers to the subject as the E. M. Thompson residence. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*



The Carl O. Jorgenson house as it stands today, with few structural changes since its construction circa 1911. The kitchen and second floor bathroom interiors have been renovated and, subsequently, rear windows have been replaced with modern casements. According to the owners, it was in the course of one of these renovation projects that they uncovered a builder's mark on the original lumber identifying J. L. Day as the local contractor. *Photo by author*



In Purcell's *Parabiographies*, he describes the Jorgenson house as a modest cottage. It includes interior details typical of most of the Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie designs. Pictured here, beneath a pair of leaded glass windows, is a built-in buffet similar to that in the P. E. Byrne house. The current owners added the display cabinets in the dining room and box-beamed the ceiling. *Photo by author*

In 1901, he earned a job as clerk for the state auditor's office in Bismarck and was elected state auditor in 1912, serving four years.⁵⁶

Purcell describes the house: "This was a nice little two-story cottage, the details conscientiously worked out by Marion Parker. The building was of no particular significance, but for an enthusiastic and appreciative man who was about to be married."⁵⁷

The First National Bank and the Schipfer Residence

In 1912, Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie were hired for a third commercial project in Bismarck—a remodel of the First National Bank. The bank's president had been Asa Fisher until 1895, when Clarence B. Little bought controlling interest and merged it with the Capitol National Bank to form the First National Bank and Trust Company. "Colonel" C. B. Little was a political and business rival of I. P. Baker's, and his First

National Bank was located just one block east of the Bismarck Bank.⁵⁸ The commission was likely influenced by P. E. Byrne, who did considerable title and abstract work for the bank.

Feick left the firm the following year and returned to his father's contracting business in Sandusky.⁵⁹ When the First National Bank project was included in a January 1915 article for the *Western Architect*, it



An exterior view of First National Bank following the 1912 renovation by Purcell and Elmslie, featuring large columns and art glass windows. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

illustrated the works of “Purcell and Elmslie, Architects.”⁶⁰ According to Purcell, the First National Bank remodel had been a difficult job:

The problem was to unite a very old-fashioned store building and a very old-fashioned corner banking room to produce, exterior and interior, a new banking office with real contemporary feeling. I went to Bismarck to explore and confer, used every bit of canny

judgement and common sense I could summon, to accomplish the reconstruction surgery that was necessary, with as little confusion and as much economy as possible.... We tried to make every constructional item count in the design.⁶¹

The bank was the only project in Bismarck for which the firm designed art glass windows. These windows employed a delicate, geometric, organic motif. The material used for the



A 1910 photo of First National Bank at the corner of Fourth Street and Main Avenue in Bismarck. An expansion and renovation by Purcell and Elmslie would begin two years later, when the bank absorbed the neighboring storefront of Capital City Bottling Works. *SHSND SA 00025-B-00012*

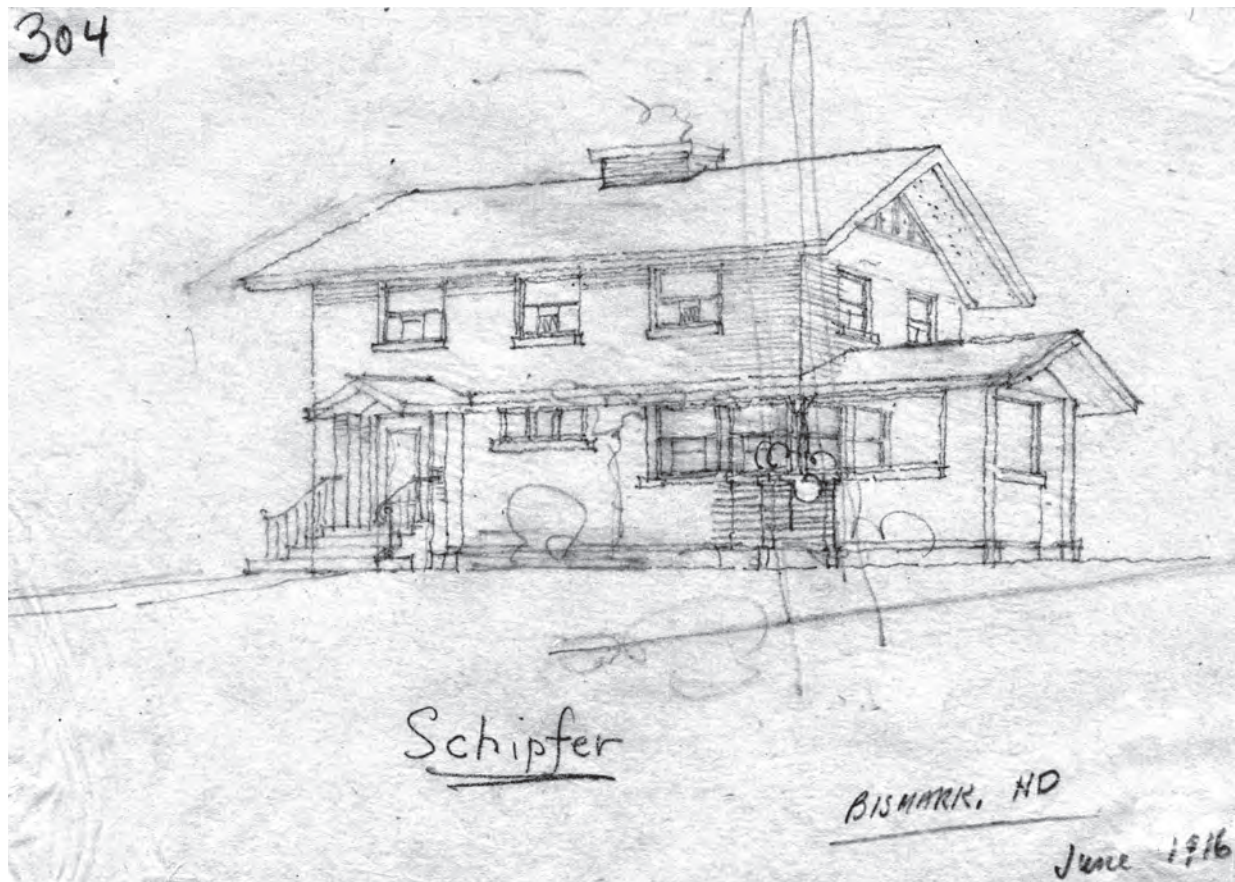


Interior of Bismarck's First National Bank prior to the 1912 renovation. Second and third from left are bank employees Leonard Bell and Dick Peuwarden. *SHSND SA 2004-P-023-00004*



An interior view of First National Bank in Bismarck following the 1912 renovation and expansion. This commission for C. B. Little was featured in *Western Architect* and is the only project in Bismarck for which Purcell and Elmslie designed art glass windows. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*

Elevation drawing for the Schipfer house project slated for 232 West Avenue B in Bismarck. Though the house was never built, the drawings show the house would have closely resembled the T. R. Atkinson house one block to the west of Schipfer's lot. *William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries*



interior of the bank was predominantly marble with large semicircular decorative urns atop bold marble piers.

The firm's final undertaking in Bismarck was a house design for Lloyd A. Schipfer in June 1916. Schipfer was a physician and surgeon in Bismarck, and, as a customer of the Bismarck Bank, was quite possibly intrigued by the work of the firm on that early commission. However, he ultimately declined the design that Purcell and Elmslie proposed. It is possible that Schipfer felt the estimated cost of construction was too high. Notes in the Purcell Papers indicate the firm produced several project variations with different cost estimates.⁶² Schipfer chose instead a design by the Fargo architectural firm of Archie Ashelman and William Gage.⁶³

Passages

The collective projects Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie designed in Bismarck are a testament to change. The burgeoning Prairie Style promised a wholly

American aesthetic for a modern age. George Russ, I. P. Baker, and the men who commissioned these projects were investing in a modern theory of design inspired by the Prairie School. Their collaborations with the fledgling firm shed light on a time a century ago when the brighter promise of a Progressive ideal guided the spirit of our nation. Now, more than one hundred years later, all four of the residential designs Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie constructed in Bismarck still stand.⁶⁴ Their preservation speaks to a nationwide impulse enabled a half-century ago by the National Historic Preservation Act to retain tangible links to stories like these. These houses provide more than a testament to the early successes of a renowned architectural partnership. They offer valuable insight into the Progressive community leaders involved in their realization, whose legacies are perhaps more readily recognized in areas of state and local government, banking and commerce, and city planning and engineering. The works

of Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie survive as illustrations of the nature and depth of the changes that were sought for North Dakota at the beginning of a promising new century.



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ENDNOTES

1. Mark Hammons, "The Compleat Commission List," *Architecture in the Spirit of Democracy*, last modified September 26, 2015, <http://organica.org/PEComplete.htm>.
2. Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 552.
3. Hammons, "A Brief Introduction," *Architecture in the Spirit of Democracy*.
4. H. Allen Brooks, *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), 7–8.
5. Elaine M. Holzschuh Harrington, *Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 1996), 6.
6. Dixie Legler and Christian Korab, *At Home on the Prairie: The Houses of Purcell and Elmslie* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 22.
7. H. Allen Brooks, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School* (New York: George Brazillier, 1984), 10.
8. David Gebhard, *Purcell and Elmslie: Prairie Progressive Architects* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2006), 30.
9. The Chicago School refers to a group of nineteenth-century architects who developed a new architectural style intended to marry a "strict adherence to function and structure" with a contemporary approach to aesthetics, inspired by organic forms. Among the architects integral to the movement were William Le Baron Jenny, Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, and Daniel Burnham and John Root. Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 1.
10. Gebhard, 30.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 32.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.
15. Brooks, *The Prairie School*, 130.
16. Legler and Korab, 22.
17. Sullivan's inability to obtain commissions has been subject to speculation by a number of architectural historians. Likely factors contributing to his declining popularity include the economic recession brought on by the Panic of 1893, a slight shift in aesthetic preference in favor of more traditional styles influenced by the work of Daniel Burnham for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, and Dankmar Adler's fallout with Sullivan and subsequent abandonment of the firm in 1895. Hugh Morrison, *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 152–53.
18. *The MDCCCCIII Class Book: Cornell University* (Buffalo, NY: Hausauer, Son & Jones Printers, 1903), 61.
19. Brooks, *The Prairie School*, 131.
20. Gebhard, 54.
21. Mark Hammons, "Purcell and Elmslie, Architects: The Design of Destiny," *Architecture in the Spirit of Democracy*, last modified 2003, http://www.organica.org/peMN1900_1.htm.
22. William Gray Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1907 volume, William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota. Purcell documented in year-by-year volumes the firm's architectural work. His *Parabiographies* are a series of unpublished essays, some of which are early working drafts.
23. Legler and Korab, 25.
24. "Northwestern Club Dinner," *Cornell Alumni News* 9, no. 3 (1907): 243.
25. "G.H. Russ, Fargo, Once N.D. Bank Examiner, Dies," *Fargo Forum*, January 11, 1966.
26. "Death Takes Captain I. P. Baker," *Bismarck Tribune* (hereafter *BT*), January 28, 1938.
27. Curt Eriksmoen, "Famous Family Tried Banking in Bismarck," *BT*, January 3, 2010.
28. "I. P. Baker," *Who's Who in America, Vol. 18 1934–1935* (Chicago: N. A. Marquis, 1934), 228.
29. "Resident Population Data," *United States Census 2010*, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/2010census/data/apportionment-pop-text.php>.
30. Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 244–46.
31. *Ibid.*, 255–68.
32. *Ibid.*, 256–57.
33. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1908 volume, William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.
34. Walter L. Bailey, "De Mores Packing Plant," National Register of Historic Places nomination form, 1975, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 2.
35. Robinson, 190.
36. George F. Bird and Edwin J. Taylor Jr., *History of the City of Bismarck North Dakota: The First 100 Years 1872–1972* (Bismarck: Bismarck Centennial Association, 1972), 55; Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1908 volume.
37. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1908 volume.
38. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1909 volume.
39. *Bismarck City and Burleigh County North Dakota Directory, 1919–1920* (Norfolk, NE: Keiter Directory Co., 1919), 159.
40. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1909 volume.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Letter from William Gray Purcell to George H. Russ Jr. dated April 25, 1911, I. P. Baker Papers, Bismarck Bank Correspondence for 1911, State Historical Society of North Dakota, State Archives, Bismarck.
43. "Death Comes after Lingering Illness and Long Suffering," *BT*, December 9, 1935.
44. Robinson, 268.
45. Roxanne B. Salonen, "Treasure in the Garage," *Area Voices*, accessed August 27, 2009, <http://www.areavoices.com/peacegarden/?blog=52489>.
46. By 1912, Bonnie had died and Elmslie had moved back to Chicago. Legler and Korab, 21.
47. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1909 volume.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. H. Allen Brooks, *Prairie School Architecture: Studies from "The Western Architect"* (New York: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 74.
51. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1910 volume.
52. "Sudden Death of Prominent Resident Shocks Bismarck," *BT*, January 28, 1937.
53. "Boulevarding," *BT*, February 14, 1908.
54. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1910 volume.
55. *Ibid.*
56. "Jorgenson, City Finance Head, Dies in Sleep at Age of 70," *Fargo Forum*, October 19, 1951.
57. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1911 volume.
58. "Little Dies in St. Paul," *BT*, September 26, 1941.
59. George Feick Jr.'s role within the partnership of Purcell, Feick, and Elmslie is generally considered that of the engineer, primarily writing specifications for their early commissions. He based his departure from the firm in 1913 on the observation that his contributions were no longer necessary to the success of the practice, nor significant in the development of their design theory. Gebhard, 71.
60. Brooks, *Prairie School Architecture*, 128.
61. Purcell, *Parabiographies*, 1909 volume.
62. William Gray Purcell, "Schipfer, Dr. L. A.," Residence Project Building file B1:P&E 1-500, William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.
63. Frank E. Vyzralek and Louis N. Hafermehl, "The Cathedral Area Historic District," National Register of Historic Places nomination form, 1980, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.
64. The Atkinson house and the Byrne house are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as contributing properties to the Cathedral Area Historic District. The Atkinson house has seen a major remodeling in recent years with the addition of a garage, expanded kitchen, and family room, but the overall treatment of the exterior has returned the house to the look of its original clapboard and shingle siding, which had been replaced by asbestos siding sometime in the 1930s. The Thompson house has been remodeled for use as a multiple-unit rental property. The Jorgenson house has seen modifications as well, most of which are interior changes including updates to the kitchen and bathroom made by its current owners. The Byrne house retains the most architectural integrity of the four with all of its readily recognizable features. The Bismarck Bank building suffered a disastrous fire and was razed in the 1970s. The First National Bank building has seen a series of remodeling over the years, and no trace of the efforts of the Prairie School architects remains.
65. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 16 U.S.C. § 470 (1966).