

HAIGHT ASHBURY - HISTORY

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Style

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Examiner photos by Paul Glines

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Grandpa Cranston's gingerbread legacy

He was one of earliest and best builders in Haight

By Mildred Hamilton
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

'HE WAS A wonderful grandfather. He loved to work with tools. He made me a wonderful doll house, and he also made me a tree house," said Eleanor Cranston Cameron of her memories of Robert Dickie Cranston, early San Francisco builder.

"I was only 2 when he died so I have no independent memories of him," said Sen. Alan Cranston, her brother. "I possibly climbed to that tree house. I am proud that he left such beautiful houses in San Francisco."

Some 40 local families who still inhabit examples of Robert Cranston's design and construction talents share the pride of the senator and his sister. Many of the fine Victorian houses Grandfather Cranston built in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood nearly a century ago have survived, well-maintained. When one of these goes on the market, the current price tag can be \$300,000 or \$400,000. Monthly rental of a three-bed-



room flat in a handsome Cranston building, can command \$1,295.

The frequency of Cranston's name on old building records caught the eye of Dr. Christopher H. Nelson, architectural historian for the Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage, during his research on neighborhoods earlier this year.

"It was soon apparent that Robert Dickie Cranston was one of the earliest and best builders in the Haight," Nelson said.

The Queen Anne style, in the tower version on the larger residence, as well as in the smaller row house, and the flat-roof San Francisco stick were favorite designs of Cranston, who was a man favoring elaborate embellishment.

There are even plaster owls on the ornate facade at 1777 Page St., a restored Cranston gem where he lived with his family in 1899. Finials, decorative shingles, friezes, spindle work, dentils, garlands, columns, pilaster caps, turned portico balustrades, wreaths, corner brackets — you name the gingerbread and you'll find preserved and painted examples of it on his houses 100 years later.

"Grandfather had the habit of putting his business card in the newel post as he completed a house," said Eleanor Cranston Cameron, who now lives in Los Altos

Builder Robert Dickie Cranston sits on the steps of his home at 1777 Page St. with an unidentified family member in an 1899 photo. Some of the homes he built bring prices from \$300,000 to \$400,000 on today's market



'I remember my father telling me a lot about my grandfather,' says Sen. Alan Cranston. 'I have visited and admired many of the San Francisco houses he built'

Hills. "Several of Alan's constituents have found these over the years and have called the senator's San Francisco office to ask if there is a family connection."

The first Cranstons, the great-great-grandparents of the senator and his sister, emigrated from Scotland to Ontario, Canada, to farm. Robert Dickie Cranston, born there in 1849, hated farming but loved tools. "He left to seek his fortune in the West. In 1870, he took one of the first transcontinental trains across the country. On the train he met his future wife, Jeannie MacGregor, whose family was headed west to get rich in the mines," Eleanor Cameron said.

The young man got off at Virginia City, Nev., where he worked a year as a carpenter on the Sutro Tunnel. Then he came to San Francisco where in 1872 he was married. The couple had two sons and two daughters. (The younger son, William MacGregor, was the father

— See HOUSES, E-4

HOUSES

—From E-1

of Eleanor and Alan.) Old directories list Robert Cranston first as a carpenter, then a contractor.

In 1889, when he began building houses in the Haight, he was listed as an architect and builder. He had a variety of partners both in his building and his real estate businesses before his death in 1916.

The Cranston family lived in many of the houses he designed and built, including the big turreted and bay-windowed corner house at 1550 Page St., in 1893. Architectural Heritage records show he built it in 1891. The family subsequently moved, architectural historian Nelson said, to 1414 Masonic in 1896, to 502 Cole in 1897, to 1777 Page in 1899, to 649 Ashbury in 1907, to 1418 Waller in 1908 and to 635 Ashbury in 1916.

Architectural Heritage records list rows of Cranston-built houses on several streets in the Haight. Examples include the east side of both the 1200 and 1300 blocks of Masonic, parts of the 1300 and 1400 blocks of Waller, the 1500 and 1700 blocks of Page and the 400 and 500 blocks of Cole.

The 1200 block of Masonic includes a rare intact row of Queen Anne tower houses, including some drastically altered by being stuccoed over. Others, excellently maintained, present the original decorative detailing in a variety of fresh color schemes.

His flat-roof San Francisco stick styles appear in the 1300 block of Masonic, and Cranston's variations of the two plans are scattered through the district. A few have been hidden under asbestos siding as well as stucco. Some, victims of long neglect, are being renovated.

"A few years ago I was driving through that neighborhood when I saw one of Grandfather's houses, a

big white wedding-cake-like affair, in a very dilapidated condition," said Eleanor Cameron. "The sign on the lawn said 'Ronald Reagan Towers.'" Her chuckle was very Democratic. The president and the senator have a long history of disagreement.

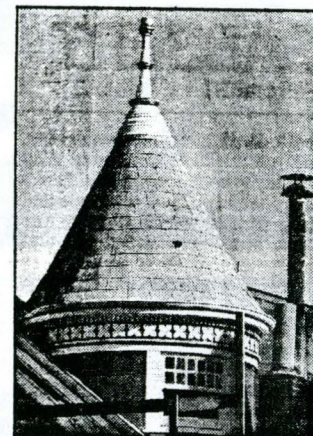
"Some of Grandfather's houses are mentioned in 'A Gift to the Street' (Judith Lynch Waldhorn's book on Victorian architecture). I remember my mother and I coming up from Palo Alto, where we lived when I was small, and she pointed out a row of his houses. They were all alike with different details and color. The mill work was lovely.

"I remember the house on Page with the owl faces. My grandparents lived there for a time, and I have photographs of a family wedding there. It was the wedding of my Aunt Florence, my father's sister, to Harmon Heald, of the family that founded Healdsburg. My grandfather, who was a big man with a gold watch chain across his vest, is pictured sitting on the steps. I also cherish another photograph of my grandfather giving me a ride in a wheelbarrow when I was very small."

Sen. Cranston, talking by phone from his Washington, D.C., office, said, "I remember my father telling me a lot about my grandfather. I have visited and admired many of the San Francisco houses that he built.

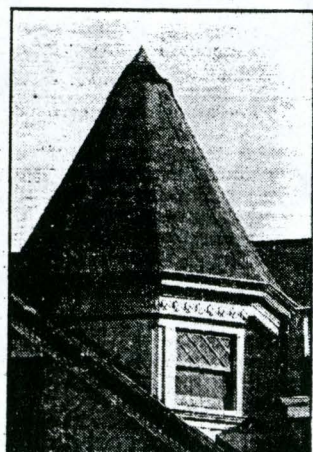
"My father was in one real estate company that my grandfather formed. Later he had his own company in Palo Alto and I joined it. I also have done some building. I did design and build, with my own hands, one house in Los Altos. We lived in it about 1953, until I was elected controller and moved to Sacramento.

"In the new Congress, I will be chairman of the Housing Subcommittee of the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee. The family interest in building and design does continue."



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Home at left on the 400 block of Cole shows the exquisite craftsmanship done in early 1900s. Above and below are two types of turrets used then



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