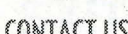


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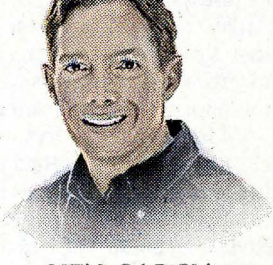
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KEN GARCIA

Visionary's 'ticky-tacky' landmarks

S.F. seeks to honor little homes' designer

He helped build a city out of sand and crafted a national model for constructing affordable housing, yet Henry Doelger's name has drifted as quietly and casually through San Francisco's history as summer fog.

It was not always that way. For a time, Doelger was considered America's most prolific home builder, a visionary who strove to meet San Francisco's insatiable need for inexpensive homes before and after World War II. He and a few others transformed the western half of San Francisco and the northern tip of the Peninsula into a haven for middle-class families.

In recent decades, though, the buoyant developer's reputation fell on hard times, generally dismissed in architectural circles as the person responsible for those ticky-tacky little boxes on the hillside that all look the same.

But songwriter Malvina Reynolds' less-than-flattering observations aside, Doelger's contributions are getting a second look from local preservationists. On Wednesday, the city's Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board will begin considering ways to honor Doelger. Board members will consider everything from granting landmark status to the first house he built in the Sunset District to proclaiming his early works as "structures of merit," a recognition that stops just short of landmark status.

Only one thing is certain, "the White Cliffs of Doelger," as Herb Caen once dubbed the developer's coastal canvas in San Francisco and Daly City, will officially be noted for more than their sea of similarity.

"Essentially we want to recognize the Doelger house and his contributions to San Francisco history," said Tim Kelley, president of the landmarks board. "We would like for Doelger to acquire some historic cachet since he basically transformed a good portion of the city."

Doelger, born in the city's Barbary Coast in 1898, built more than 20,000 homes in the fog belt known as the Sunset before the start of World War II, according to Bunny Gillespie, a Daly City historian who is in charge of the family trust's archives.

With an eye toward the future, he had bought a house on 14th Avenue near Irving Street in 1922. "Doelger had heard that there

Preservationists rethink little boxes on the hillside

► GARCIA

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was a movie theater going into the neighborhood and that a streetcar tunnel was planned nearby," Gillespie said. The theater never got built, but Duboce Tunnel became a reality. And Doelger had his house and found his model for future development.

Known in local circles as the basic junior five, the Doelger house was a two-bedroom, one-bath configuration that may now seem like a simple, quaint architectural plan, but it was carried out to perfection. The result was the biggest building spree in the history of the West Coast.

Kelley said Doelger's design was significant because it perfectly fit the family bill and the shape of the homes' 25-foot lots. And the houses were just different enough that if you happened to arrive home a few sheets to the wind on a fog-heavy night, you could still pick yours out.

With Kelley, I spent a few days tracing Doelger's sandy footsteps, tracking down his son Michael along with others who I thought could fill in the blanks of the past.

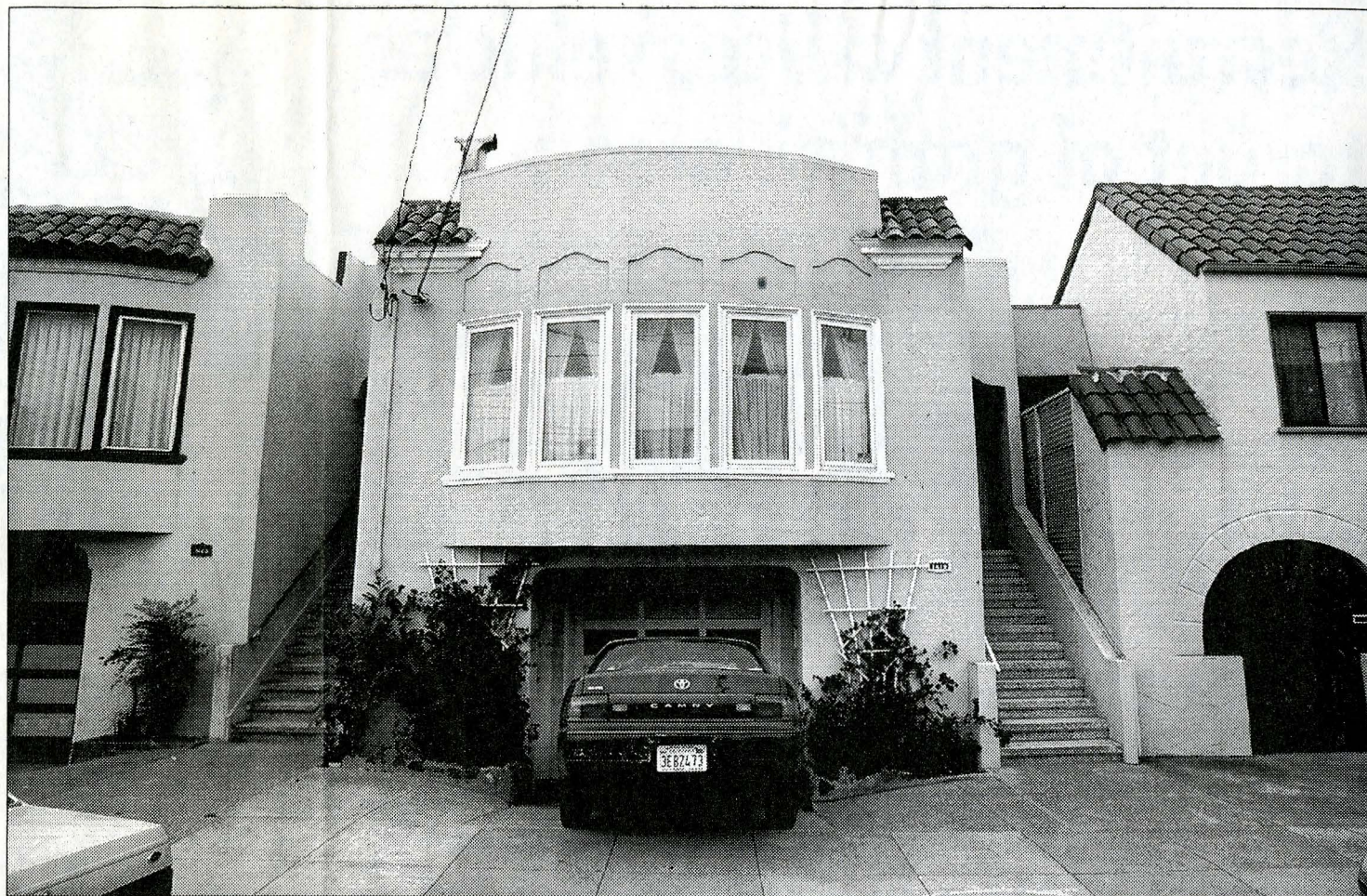
With Gillespie's help, I managed to pinpoint the block of Doelger's first development — 39th Avenue between Judah and Kirkham streets — but finding his first home was about as easy as locating men who worked on Doelger's construction crews.

The fact that Doelger's records are scattered didn't help. Nor did the fact that the city's building permit process has never been the smoothest-running machine. Add to that the fact that Doelger built as many as 71 homes at a time — often finishing two in a day — and things got even more complicated.

"He didn't always keep great records," said Michael Doelger, who lives on the Peninsula. "As you might imagine, when you build 24,000 homes you can get kind of busy."

But Kelley is a resourceful historian, and using city water department records, he located the first Doelger hookup on the 1400 block of 39th Avenue. He also contacted the co-owner of the house, Mike Spang, who told Kelley he might be open to the idea of accepting landmark status for the building — even though that means placing some restrictions on future renovations. If that doesn't work out, Kelley said the board would consider naming Doelger's first eight homes as structures of merit — essentially landmarking them but without any permit restrictions.

While Doelger's homes may have seemed like endless rows of cheap tract housing, their construction was considered first-rate. All the frames were built using redwood, and they were as sturdy as they were practical. For that re-



CARLOS AVILA GONZALEZ / The Chronicle

This house at 1419 39th Ave. is believed to be the first house built in San Francisco by Henry Doelger.

search, I only had to draw on memory — I grew up in a Doelger home, which my parents bought with a veteran's loan in 1947, for the then princely sum of \$11,000. Those homes now routinely go for more than \$500,000, a thought as inconceivable to any Sunset native as a town without Playland.

Doelger himself was anything but colorless. He proudly wore a

different toupee every day of the week, each hairpiece a bit longer than the last. He was a philanthropist who gave to everything from the zoo to the symphony, and he had a lifelong love affair with boats. He started with a 25-foot sailboat, and by the time he died in 1978 on his last boat in the Mediterranean, he had graduated to a 210-foot yacht.

"Old Doelgers never die," Caen used to write, "they just FHAd away," a nod to the fact that many of them were bought with Federal Housing Administration mortgages. It was a good joke for the time — a tad bit funnier than San Francisco's oversight in not naming a street for the man who helped raise the town from the dunes.

It's a gaffe that may soon be rectified, but probably not with the speed Doelger raised whole city blocks.

(Anyone with information about Doelger's early buildings, can contact San Francisco's landmark officials at (415) 239-6385.)

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