



Examiner/Fran Ortiz

Arden Wood, 'care facility' for Christian Scientists

The 'secret' S.F. retreat

A dart thrown at a map of San Francisco directed our reporter to 15th Avenue and Wawona Street, in search of a neighborhood story we might not otherwise have found.

By Stephanie Salter
Examiner staff writer

THE sand-colored stone building looks as though it should overlook the Loire Valley in France, not just sit behind 19th Avenue. But Arden Wood, a "care facility" for Christian Scientists, is smack in the middle of the Sunset District, bordered by Wawona Street, 15th and 19th avenues and Sloat Boulevard.

In a typical Sunset neighborhood of pastel-colored houses with short skinny driveways, Arden Wood is wonderfully, if hugely, out of place.

"It used to be called 'the sanitorium,'" said 15th and Wawona resident Ruby Janson. "I remember my father always telling us: 'Those people had the whole coast to build that place on and they chose this spot. That just proves this is the best place to live.'"

Arden Wood's classic Normandy architectural style sits on 12 acres of small but lush forests of eucalyptus, Port Orford pines, and dozens of varieties of bushes and trees. Invisible to most of its neighbors.

the sprawling manse evokes the period in which its construction began — 1929 — with its dramatic, brick-red tiled roof and six towering chimneys.

Arden Wood houses about 100 elderly and ill Christian Scientists, as well as members of the faith who want to study and retreat. There is a three-year Christian Science nursing school in the building and enough antiques to fill a warehouse.

"These side chairs were once in the palace of Kaiser Wilhelm," said Alva Louise Gruenig, a guide from Crescent City, who recently took a few weeks of study and rest at Arden Wood. She and other Christian Scientist volunteers conduct tours of the magnificent building each afternoon.

"I come here like someone would go to the Riviera," said Gruenig, with a chuckle.

And no wonder she does.

From sun-dappled grounds, flourishing with rose bushes and laden with sweet william, verbena and begonias, to the silverware in the dining room, Arden Wood is elegant, tasteful and comforting. A Jean Jacques Pfister portrait of the mother of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, watches calmly over the grand main entrance hall. Lavish, fresh flower arrangements are donated by local florists and provide color and life at every turn, on every floor. The whole scene makes one long for an antique wicker wheelchair, a lap robe and a soft-voiced nurse to wake you from an afternoon snooze in the sun.

Besides its brand of spiritual guidance, Arden Wood provides its residents with free bus service to shopping areas, lectures, the opera and symphony. Guest speakers are scheduled regularly and residents can watch television on a Texas-sized screen in a fifth-floor drawing room. There is even a beauty salon on the second floor for anyone who feels the urge to spruce up.

Arden Wood's mostly senior citizen residents pay \$900-\$1,200 per month for apartments furnished with their occupants' belongings — a touch of home that sets the facility apart from other care institutions.

Arden Wood's nursing school, which graduated 12 Christian Scientist nurses in its last class in May, does not provide an ordinary education. Because Christian Science rejects traditional medical practice and relies on prayer for healing, nurses at Arden Wood are required to understand "the practical wisdom necessary in a sick room" and to have "a demonstrable knowledge of Christian Science practice."

According to an Arden Wood publication, that knowledge does not include the actual treatment of a patient. That is the duty of the Christian Science practitioner.

One of the most attractive aspects of Arden Wood is the cost of a rest and study room. A visitor is asked to pay \$38 a day for one of the nicely appointed rooms or \$49 with three meals included.

"And the food is very good," said Gruenig. "You're always given a choice of entree and side dishes." And you can gaze out at one of the best-kept secrets in San Francisco, the pastoral calm of Arden Wood.

□ Dwight Chapin is on vacation