

FLASHBACK

Old-world idyll in Altadena

An early death relegated J. Wilmer Hershey to obscurity, but Norwic Place teems with his vision of pastoral France.

By LAURA RANDALL
Special to The Times

SOMETIMES Sally Warner wakes up in the morning, gazes at her petite bedroom's ceiling and understands how the shrimp in the takeout container must feel. Her neighbor John Gregoire has to warn visitors to watch their heads when they pass under the low arches in his front hall. And don't even think about getting a pizza delivered fast to their out-of-the-way cul-de-sac in Altadena.

"You practically have to go out on the street and beg," Warner says. "They think the street is a driveway and pass right by."

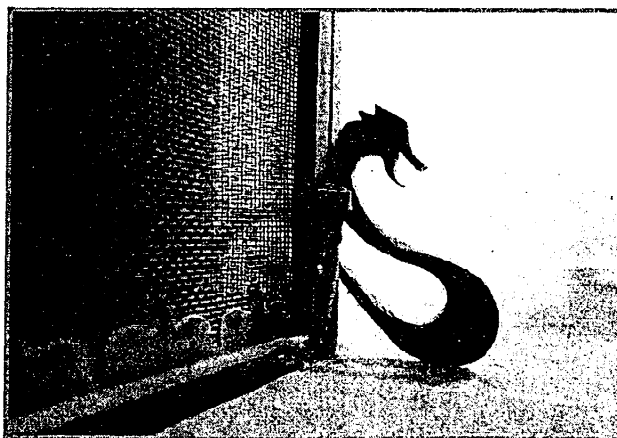
Inconveniences, sure, but for Warner, Gregoire and their neighbors, -these are minor trade-offs for living in a quirk of history. Their street, Norwic Place, is a little-known cluster of eccentric houses meant to evoke the rural feel of 1920s French Normandy. Most were designed or inspired by a footnote in California history: a young architect named J. Wilmer Hershey.

Because Hershey died young — he was 31 when he succumbed to bacterial endocarditis in 1926 — few records of his work exist. He is best known for drawings that became the basis for the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, beloved by locals for its architectural whimsy. He is believed to have worked with Wallace Neff, either as a draftsman in Neff's Pasadena office or as part of a team known as the Community Arts Assn., enlisted by Santa Barbara civic leaders to redesign downtown after the June 1925 earthquake devastated the city.

"It's fair to say that Neff and Hershey were in that group at the same point," says Robert Ooley, the architect for Santa



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times



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STORYBOOK: Glenn Leisure, above, pulls down a retractable screen that allows him to showcase leaded windows unobstructed. Romantic details such as a dragon motif on Sally Warner's fireplace screen, left, capture the area's rustic flavor.

Barbara County. Though William Mooser III is credited as the courthouse's primary architect, Hershey's designs, Ooley said, "had a strong influence on the building," which is among Santa Barbara's top landmarks.

Like Neff, Reginald Johnson and Roland Coate, Hershey was closely associated with the Spanish Colonial Revivalism

movement that dominated California architecture in the 1920s. He designed many of San Clemente's classic Spanish-style buildings, including its community center and the Hotel San Clemente, now an apartment building on the National Register of Historic Places. He built residences in Pasadena and Beverly Hills, according to his granddaughter

Christine Hershey, including one that belonged to film director King Vidor.

AND then there is Norwic Place. The homes — with their high gables, exposed timbers and prominent brick chimneys — are described in a 1925 [See Norwic Place, Page F7]

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[Norwic Place, from Page F6] Pasadena Star-News article as "a secluded retreat with Old World characteristics." In an early nod to the indoor-outdoor lifestyle of the West, most have French doors that open to backyards or gardens. Hershey's plan also called for a huge elm tree and a working well in the center of the cul-de-sac, both meant to encourage socializing.

"He was in love with the romantic notions of the European villages," Christine Hershey says, adding that he wanted the design to appeal to the tastes of the era.

It did — and still does. Though lots have been divided and more homes have been added, many have stayed true to Hershey's whimsical vision. Warner's home wasn't built until the 1940s, but its beamed ceilings, amusingly miniature doorknobs and fireplace metal work with a dragon motif all conjure another time and place. On the whole, the street has retained its period flavor.

"I was amazed at how intact it was and redolent it was of 1920s community life and architecture," says Tim Gregory, who discovered Norwic Place in the late 1980s as president of Altadena Heritage, a preservation group that was conducting a windshield survey of historic homes. Because Altadena is an unincorporated area of Los Angeles County, none of its structures are eligible for designation on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hershey, a distant relative of Pennsylvania candy mogul Milton Hershey, would have appreciated the effort, his granddaughter says. Hershey was a passionate, hands-on overseer of his projects. As Norwic Place was built, he would monitor the carving of wood beams, the hand-painting of ceilings and other details. "As I understand from my grandmother," Christine Hershey says, "he'd literally make sure the plaster was the right texture."

THESE days, residents say they were attracted to the street's storybook charms long before they knew its history. Warner, a children's book author, moved to Norwic Place seven years ago with her husband, sculptor and writer Kit Davis.

"The first thing people say when they visit is, 'It's magi-



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

QUAINT: An old-fashioned lamp and high gables reflect the spirit of J. Wilmer Hershey's designs.

cal," she says.

When Rick Zuber bought his two-bedroom home in 1984, a Realtor suggested that he and his wife could move again in a few years as they expanded their family.

"I said, 'I don't think so,'" Zuber says. "We fell in love with it."

Glenn Leisure also had a love-at-first-sight moment when he bought his home in 1984.

"I had been looking for a cottage-style house when my agent called to tell me about this," he says. "I came racing up here, took one look and said 'Let's sign the papers.'" Leisure, the owner of a business management firm, has become the street's unofficial historian, keeping files of Hershey's designs, digging up articles about him in old regional architecture magazines such as California Southland, and matching the architect's Altadena designs to homes in Pasadena.

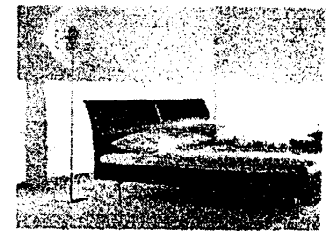
When one of Leisure's leaded glass windows shattered during a windstorm, he had it reconstructed true to the original. He avoids drywall and instead has called upon pricier plaster contractors to maintain the uneven texture of Hershey's original walls. He figures it's the least he can do to honor a man who never achieved fame — nor got to demonstrate his full potential.

"Architecture is mostly an old man's profession," says Altadena-based landscape designer Mark Goldschmidt, former president of the heritage group. He says Hershey didn't have time to build up a body of work. "Here's this guy who was tremendously talented and had done all this stuff, then died at a very young age. He never got the recognition he would have gotten if he'd lived for another 20 or 30 years."

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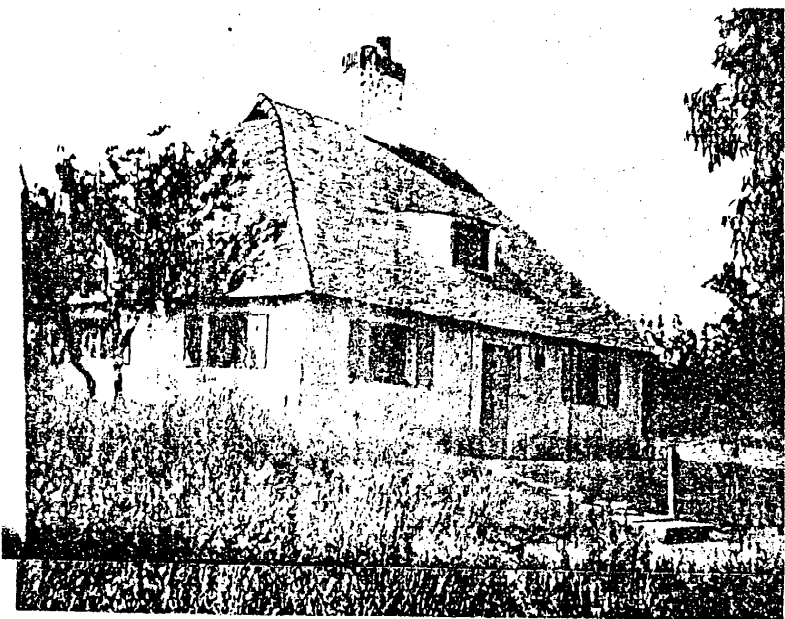
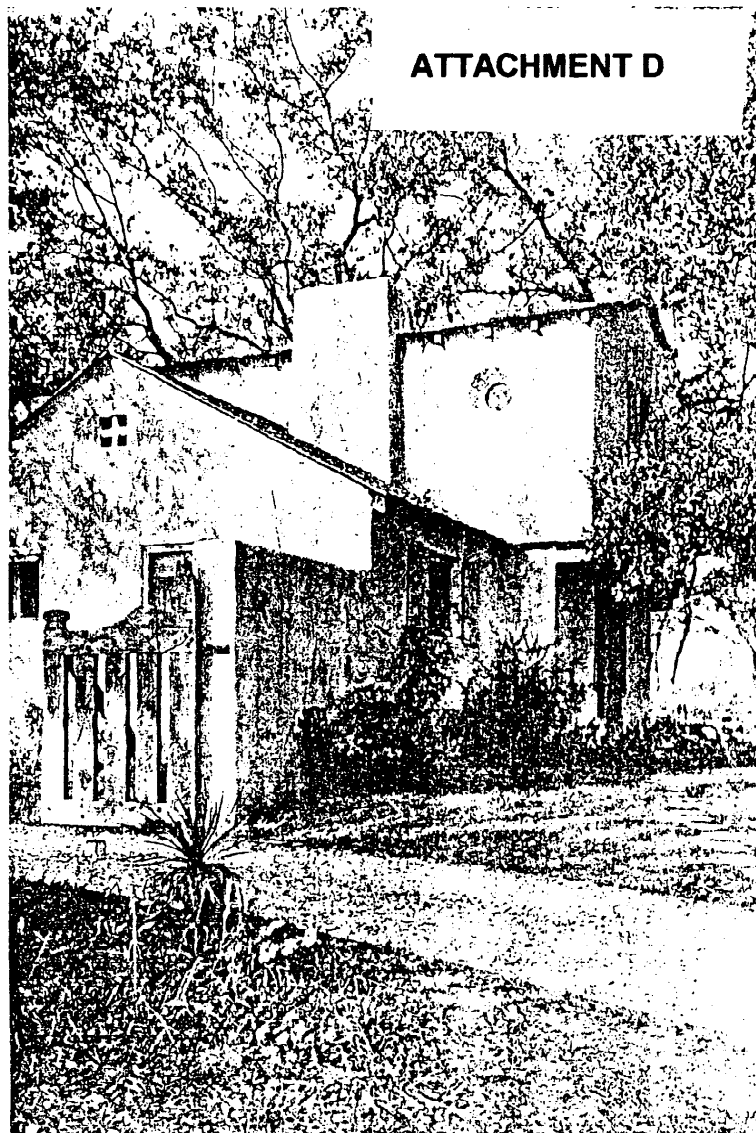
A SECRETARY OF COMMERCE TAKES A HAND AT "HOMES"

Part of an introduction to a Housing Pamphlet, written by Herbert Hoover, President, Better Homes in America.

MAINTEINING a high percentage of individual home-owners is one of the searching tests that now challenge the people of the United States. The present large proportion of families that own their own homes is both the foundation of a sound economic and social system and a guarantee that our society will continue to develop rationally as changing conditions demand.

A family that owns its home takes a pride in it, maintains it better, gets more pleasure out of it, and has a more wholesome, healthful, and happy atmosphere in which to bring up children. The home-owner has a constructive aim in life. He works harder outside his home; he spends his leisure more profitably; and he and his family live a finer life and enjoy more of the comforts and cultivating influences of our modern civilization. A husband and wife who own their home are more apt to save. They have an interest in the advancement of a social system that permits the individual to store up the fruits of his labor. As direct taxpayers they take a more active part in local government. Above all, the love of home is one of the finest instincts and the greatest of inspirations of our people.

Today, in the period of post-war recovery, when our National productivity is increasing, we have the opportunity to make definite progress in the right direction. Moreover, the development of the automobile has given a great impulse to suburban life and an increasing possibility of home ownership. Happily, a large section of the people is awake to the problem, and an increasing number of business groups have publicly acknowledged their responsibility and interest in it. They realize that unnecessary barriers that may encompass a man determined to own his home are hindrances to good community spirit and to good business. They see that taking a neighborly interest in developing sound financing and other machinery for the use of home-seekers, and insisting on the observance of honest,



A HOUSE IN PASADENA DESIGNED BY J. WILMER HERSHEY. ONE WHO HAS INSTINCTIVELY THE ARCHITECTURAL GIFT OF DESIGN IS NOT BOUND BY ANY ONE STYLE OF ARCHITECTURE

SET AMONG INDIGENOUS TREES THIS HOUSE IS TRULY CALIFORNIA BECAUSE IT IS THE RESULT OF THOROUGH STUDY OF THE SITE COMBINED WITH THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF BUILDING AND A NATIVE TALENT FOR DESIGN. BUILT BY J. WILMER HERSHEY, CONSULTANT IN DESIGN FOR ARCHITECTURAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE AT SANTA BARBARA AND MR. OLE HANSEN AT THE NEW SPANISH TOWN OF SAN CLEMENTE, CALIF.

straightforward methods by those who deal with home-seekers not paternalism but good business and good citizenship. It is not a "square deal"—and it is not only right but essential that the car should not be stacked against the home-seeker.

SANTA BARBARA BETTER HOMES DEMONSTRATION HOUSE NO. 1 By PEARL CHAMBERLAIN

AN excellent example of the successful use of Spanish style in the small home. It is called "La Recuerdo," in remembrance. It is the eighth that its owners have built for a home and investment. The plan was drawn in detail by the wife. It was built under the husband's direction. It has real charm, though unpretentious and simple. The exterior walls are adobe laid on a continuous footing, reinforced with steel. Interior partitions are of lath and plaster, to save floor space. The floor plan is compact, the room arrangement good and economical. The small patio court is an attractive feature. Built-in bookshelves on either side of the fireplace and triangular corner cupboards in the dining room would be a useful addition. The position of the doors in the screen porch should be arranged and it should be made larger for convenient use as a home laundry.

This little home attracted much attention, for very many were interested in the problem of furnishing the small Spanish type house on a limited budget. The total cost of the furniture and furnishings was \$1162.25. The lot was valued at \$1000.

Mexico. Under one of the two side windows there is a convenient serving table. (Continued on Page 2)

