

East Bay Then and Now: A Yankee Bricklayer's Creation, Bonita Hall Endures *Berkeley Daily Planet*

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Thursday August 06, 2009 - 10:48:00 AM



Photos by Daniella Thompson

Bonita Hall was built in 1905 as a warehouse with a lodge hall on the second floor.

On the corner of Bonita Avenue and Berkeley Way stands an elegant Colonial Revival brick building that might have been transplanted whole from a New England town, where it might have served as a Masonic lodge.

Bonita Hall was, in fact, a venue for local lodges during the first three decades of the 20th century. Beginning in 1906, the assembly hall on its second floor was used by local chapters of organizations such as the Native Daughters of the Golden West, Grand Army of the Republic, Daughters of Pocahontas, Knights of the Maccabees, Ancient Order of Foresters, Modern Woodmen of America, Knights of Pythias, Order of Owls, and Companions of the Forest. Here they held officer installations, banquets, dances, whist parties, musical entertainments, bazaars, and bonbon socials. The Berkeley baseball team gave a hop here on the first Saturday in September 1906. Entre Nous, a social organization of Berkeley young people, held its

initial dance here in June 1913.

A social hall may not have been what the building's owner, William G. Black, initially had in mind. Black (1865-1943), a Maine-born brick mason and contractor, needed a warehouse for his business. When he took out a building permit on Aug. 30, 1905, it was for a brick dwelling of two stories. The "dwelling" entry was probably a clerical error—Black did not require a new dwelling, having moved only the previous year into a large Italianate house at 1930 Delaware St., two short blocks to the north.

In moving to his new residence, Black didn't have far to go. From 1898 to 1904, the Black family resided a block to the east, in a charming Victorian cottage at 2012 Delaware St. Earlier still, between 1894 and 1897, they owned and occupied a similar Victorian cottage at 1612 Virginia St. All three houses are still standing.

Nobody knows why and how William G. Black and his wife, Luella F. Parsons, came to settle in Berkeley. They first appeared in the city directory in 1894, briefly residing at 1937 Berkeley Way—only half a block away from the site where they would build Bonita Hall. Luella, 18 months older than her husband, hailed from Plymouth, Mass. Her seafaring father died while she was still a child, and perhaps this early loss instilled in her self-sufficiency, for she appears to have been the family's business head. One newspaper account described her a contractor, and all the Blacks' properties, which multiplied from year to year, were registered in her name.

The Blacks married in 1885. Two twin daughters, Hattie and Helen, were born to them in 1891 while they were living in Massachusetts. In 1900, the U.S. census taker found them in Berkeley, residing at 2012 Delaware St. with Luella's widowed mother, Ellen Parsons. Mrs. Parsons was declared insane in 1905. Nor did the Blacks see happiness in their daughters, both of whom married precipitately and were divorced within two years. In addition, the family's animals were the victims of a dog poisoner and horse thieves.

On the business front, however, all went swimmingly. In an audacious promotional ploy, William used both his residence and Bonita Hall as standing advertisements for his fireplace- and chimney-building abilities. Two fireplaces were installed on the exterior wall of Bonita Hall above street level. The Black home at 1930 Delaware St., whose bracketed Italianate style dates it to the 1870s or earlier, received three Arts and Crafts clinker brick chimneys, one of them ingeniously perforated to expose a small window. This house was evidently moved from an unknown location to its current site around 1902, since the assessment records show no improvements on the lot until 1903.

The clinker brick chimneys were part of a general remodel the Blacks performed on their new house before moving in. Another notable feature is the square cupola on the roof, also seen on Bonita Hall. Fire insurance maps show that after 1903, the house was enlarged toward the rear. Its assessed value more than tripled in one year, rising from \$500 in 1903 to \$1,800 in 1904. By 1906, the Blacks had acquired the two adjoining lots to the south, constructing a water tower and an accessory building that included a stable for their horses.

The year 1906 was a watershed for the Blacks, as it was for Berkeley. The influx of San Francisco earthquake refugees swelled the city's population, triggering an unprecedented building boom. The Blacks wasted no time in acquiring the remaining three vacant lots south of their homestead. This purchase put in their hand the entire east side of Bonita Ave. between Delaware Street and Hearst Avenue. On the three southern lots they erected four identical two-story Colonial Revival houses, of which only one, 1807 Bonita Ave., remains. The other three were demolished in the 1960s for BART construction along Hearst Avenue.

Also in 1906, the Blacks built a commercial store building at 1942-46 Bonita Ave. This charming two-story building survives practically intact. Still on a roll in 1912, the Blacks added a warehouse and stable to Bonita Hall.

While the Blacks were residing at 2012 Delaware St., architect and Civil War veteran William H. Wharff built himself a house next door, on the corner of Milvia Street. The Wharff house, a large Colonial Revival affair clad in clapboard, inexplicably rises from a base of clinker bricks, a material also used in the front stairs' parapets. Did William Black build the brick parts and perhaps even the entire house? And did Wharff, a fellow Maine native, advise on the design of Bonita Hall? Wharff, a senior member of the local Grand Army of the Republic lodge, was likely the one who encouraged Black to include a lodge hall in his warehouse building.

About 1910, the building's ground-floor space was leased to the U.C. Express & Storage Company for its warehouse, but by the early 1920s, the company had moved to 2120 Berkeley Way. The Blacks' little empire collapsed about this time. The reasons are unknown, but Luella's death may have been the trigger. In 1925, the building was listed in the city directory as the American Legion clubhouse. The ground floor was converted into a 10-car garage.

William Black moved to the Danville area, where he was recorded by the 1930 U.S. census as a 65-year-old widower working as an "on the job" bricklayer. He died in Santa Cruz in 1943. The Blacks' successor at 1930 Delaware St. was William N. Hartshorn (1861-1947), a laborer and former fireman. In the mid-1920s, he replaced the stables with a four-unit bungalow court, still standing at 1803-1805 Bonita. The house itself was converted to four apartments before 1950.

As the Depression deepened, Bonita Hall stood empty, while the number of the homeless unemployed increased. On Nov. 1, 1933, the Oakland Tribune reported that since January of that year, the Berkeley YMCA had "furnished 4,737 beds to needy transients and other deserving men [...]. In addition, 5,233 free meals were served to transients in Bonita Hall, former American Legion headquarters which has been fitted up with beds and tables to provide for needs of transient unemployed." To do so, the YMCA utilized funds allotted it by the Community Chest.

In 1936, Bonita Hall was acquired by Arthur and Grace Mauerhan, who commissioned architect Clarence Mayhew to convert the building into a fine furniture showroom with a neo-Georgian touch. Arthur C. Mauerhan (1888-1951) was working for the San Francisco furniture store of Gullixson Bros. in 1920 when he met Grace Worstell Harnden (1896-1986), a doctor's daughter from Big Sandy, Montana, newly arrived in town with her lawyer husband.

Like Luella Black, Grace Worstell had pluck. At the age of 15, she left home on her own initiative, determined to get the high school education unavailable in her rural community. Having arrived in the Bay Area, she enrolled at the University of California, receiving her bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1925 and her Master's in 1927. She was a Phi Beta Kappa and an Honorary Traveling Fellow in Philosophy.

In 1925, Grace and Arthur married. Several years later, they launched a successful home decorating business. Early practitioners of the Tupperware sales method—perhaps even before Tupperware existed—they introduced new lines of furniture or fabrics to invited guests at tea parties in their showroom. They lent homeowners decorative objects to place in their homes on a trial basis. Grace delivered lectures on home decorating to women's clubs around Northern California.

Grace's most popular topic was "How to Be Your Own Interior Decorator." She often quoted William Morris, "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful," and advocated the three fundamental principles of function, character, and beauty. "If you are forced to choose among the three, choose in that order," she advised.

By 1950, the Mauerhan business occupied the entire Bonita Hall, with furniture warehouses in the adjacent annex and two buildings in the rear. The neighboring Cape Cod-style house at 1908 Bonita Ave. became a showcase home advertised as the "Little House next door."

After Arthur's death in 1951, the business became Mauerhan's-Sarnes. It continued until 1965, when the building was sold. The large newspaper ad announcing the public auction promised "\$243,780 all new luxurious furnishings, imports, lamps, rugs, wall decor, antiques, etc. (3 entire buildings of exquisite decorator selections," trumpeting the business as "The House of Quality Since 1937."

The building was then converted into three floors of offices and renamed Berkeley Bay Commons, a name that has since fallen into disuse. It was designated a City of Berkeley Landmark in 1979.