



**355 E. Grand View Avenue
Westphalia
1924**

**By Patricia Duarte-Pocock
1993**

Photo: Michael Ellis

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We named our home Westphalia after the fictional kingdom of Voltaire's story of *Candide*. Westphalia, originally in Prussia, was optimistically referred to as the "best of all possible places" in the "best of all possible worlds".

To our knowledge the house was never officially named by the builder, Mr. Karl Graf. The word *Graf* means Count or Earl in German. Although Mr. Graf was not known to have been nobility, he left a very strong record of his apparent regard for royalty in the appointments of the house. We know only that Mr. Graf emigrated to this area from Germany and established a sausage business.

He and his wife Maria never had any children, but were very fond of entertaining and needed a very large home for this purpose. We're told that Mr. Graf was a rather suspicious person and would not hire a regular crew for building the house, but hired day labor only, inviting the workers to return the following day if he approved of their work.

Some time in the 50s, the Grafts sold the house to Dr. John Robertson. He and his wife Shirley raised eight children in the home. We purchased the home from Shirley Robertson in January of 1982 shortly after Dr. Robertson's death.

Although the house has the appearance of a Mediterranean structure because of the arched windows and doorways and red tile roof, it was apparently modeled after Austrian and German architecture.

Throughout the house a generous use of wood panels, trims and railings are found. The wood has been referred to as Southern Gumwood, Australian Gumwood or, as one woodworker suggested, it may actually be a wood called Linden. The large doors at the front entry and off the dining room are of solid wood, while the panels in the dining room are quarter-inch paneling.



Image courtesy Patricia Duarte-Pocock

In our efforts to restore Westphalia to its original beauty we have discovered a treasury of hand-painted walls, trompe l'oeil, stencil work, and decorative motifs. Unfortunately most of these have been covered over the years in several layers of paint and most are not recoverable. The single intact wall painting is found on the upper wall coving in the breakfast room. This depicts archways open to the outside world with birds (not indigenous to America) in the trees. Beneath splattered paint and old wallpaper, the master bedroom was ornamented with Wistaria vines overhanging trellises and transoms created around the windows in trompe l'oeil.

One of the greatest treasures of this home is the Batchelor tile work. The living room has a magnificent fireplace with a single tile depicting a hunting scene in the foreground of a castle. In the solarium a pair of peacocks decorates the Batchelor tile water fountain.

During the Robertsons' tenure in the home, many of the original ceiling fixtures were replaced by "modern" pieces. We've replaced these with antiques whenever available. However, the chandeliers and wall sconces in the living room and dining rooms are original. Some of these sconces were recovered in a neighborhood yard sale.

The kitchen was originally filled with Delft Blue tile work on the walls and a blue and white checkered slate floor. Only fragments of this were found when we remodeled the kitchen. Sometime in the Fifties or Sixties, the wall between the kitchen and breakfast room was removed and the windows were updated to sliding aluminum and louvered windows.

Because the kitchen had been modernized in a way we felt was incompatible with the construction of the house, we chose to remodel. In doing so we replaced the windows with beveled glass casement windows

matching those in the dining room and entry. We added the arched transoms above these windows to enhance the entry of light and to open the view of the mountains.

We're told that Mrs. Graf didn't approve of the orientation of the house and wished she could have raised it up and rotated it around to face the mountains.

The master bedroom has a smaller Batchelder fireplace with a Wistaria vine draped across its surface. This was covered in a heavy layer of epoxy paint, which required months of hard work to remove. A similar layer of epoxy point covered the entire tiled bathroom.

There were a few secret panels in the walls which led to very small crawl spaces and have been boarded over by prior construction changes in the house. Behind one panel is a large safe. The largest secret space was found in the cellar. A separate room was hidden behind a metal-lined door. The face of this door had a set of shelves to conceal it from the occasional viewer. In this back room, we're told Mr. Graf kept his beer barrels during Prohibition. The remnants of a copper tube enters this room through the heavy cement wall. According to the Robertsons, Mr. Graf, who was quite fond of his beer, had it delivered to an off site and piped down into his cellar via these tubes.

The original property, which can be traced out by the river rock wall, was covered in citrus and avocado trees. It spanned several adjacent properties to the west and north of the present three-quarters acre.

The Sierra Madre earthquake of 1991 set back our restoration efforts considerably. Our third-story high chimney, above the roof, came tumbling down , taking with it a swath of barrel tiles. The chimney flue had two large terra cotta pots which we were unable to replace. Search as we could, the Los Angeles Tile Company could not be found in existence. No one seemed to be making the 1 X 1½-foot tiles. Rather than settle for smaller tiles, we managed to pull up and re-lay the entire roof, spreading the tiles farther apart in order to salvage as many as possible. The terra cotta pots had to be replaced with garden pots from which the base had been removed. The remainder of the chimney was left in such an unstable way that it had to be removed in entirety and reconstructed.

This was how we discovered that the master bedroom fireplace had not been "closed over for uncertain reasons", but had never been connected to the flue at all. We had hoped to finally open it "again" when rebuilding the chimney. But alas the dimensions were all wrong. In order for the second-floor flue to function, the external chimney would have to have been almost doubled in girth. It appears that the original designer of the house had not taken this into account and the fireplace was sealed over in brick and never joined the main chimney.

That brings us to the present, where we continue our labor of love for Westphalia. We hope to eventually eradicate all traces of mustard yellow and epoxy paint, eventually restoring as much of the original wall covering and stencil work as possible.

[Ed. note 2014: This property is referred to on the Landmark-designated list as "Karl Graf House; 'Austrian Vacation Villa'"]