



397 W. Montecito Avenue Wilson-Bixby House 1881

**By Dick Johnson
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Photo: Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society

Percy R. Wilson, an attorney in Los Angeles, purchased the original property of 20 acres (two 10 acre plots) from town developer Nathaniel Carter, in exchange for an orange grove. The property extended from Central Ave. (changed to Sierra Madre Blvd. in the 1930s) to Highland and from Lima west to a point west of the Bailey Canyon stream.

The house, barn and tank house were built on the eastern 10 acres of the property in 1881 by Wilson, and orange trees were planted. A photo dated 1882 shows many small orange trees with white stakes in front of the house. This photo also shows open country clear up to the mountains. The house and tank house are all that is left of the original buildings.

The Sierra Madre co-operative Water Company supplied water to the property from springs in the foothills. Each ranch property was allowed a certain day and time to draw water from the system supply line by a valve at the northern edge of the property on Highland Avenue. At this time the water tank in the top of the tank house was filled for household and garden use and the orange orchard was irrigated. Records show that the water billing address for the property was on Highland Ave.

In the 1890s, the undeveloped western 10 acres were sold and the developed property was sold to its second owner, Augustus Bixby, who continued the orange grove enterprise and maintained the house as a mountain retreat for his family. This is the same Bixby that developed areas of Long Beach and Santa Monica. There are several photos of the Bixby family in and around the house.

The eastern 10 acres that contained the house, barn and tank house, plus several out buildings and orange grove, was sold to W.A. Evans in 1903. Mr. Evans operated the orange grove and egg ranch. The hen house was to the west of the house.

The house was lit by natural gas that was piped to all of the rooms of the house and heated by coal heaters in each room connected to two chimneys. In the early 1900s, when electricity came to Sierra Madre, Mr. Evans remodeled the house, installing electricity and expanding the upstairs from two to four bedrooms and a trunk room. Also a screened sleeping room and indoor bathroom were added to the first floor.

At this point the house contained four bedrooms plus a trunk room upstairs. The downstairs consisted of a front parlor with a fireplace, a dining room, two bedrooms, and the screened sleeping bedroom for Mrs. Evans, a bathroom and a kitchen. This remodel made the house larger for the Evans family. Mr. Evans was also a builder, and he installed electricity in many houses in Sierra Madre. His daughter told the Johnson family that theirs was the first house in Sierra Madre with electricity.

The county records show that the house has seven bedrooms, the four upstairs and three downstairs.

In the 1920s a floor heater was added to the downstairs and the upstairs trunk room was converted into a bathroom.

Grove Lane was the original driveway to the house and barn as the property address was on Central Ave (now Sierra Madre Boulevard.). During the lean years of the depression Mr. Evans sold off many lots along Highland Avenue, Lima and Sierra Madre Boulevard. In the 1930s, Montecito Avenue was completed from Lima to Sunnyside.

In 1957 Mr. Evans sold the remaining one and a half acres to Lewis George Jr., who split the property into four lots. Dick and Elva Johnson purchased the lot containing the house and tank house in 1964, and owned the property until April of this year.

A major restoration of the house was started in 1991 when the Sierra Madre earthquake caused extensive damage.

The house was gutted inside and underwent three years of restoration, including a new foundation, structural reinforcement, new updated electrical service and copper plumbing, wiring for phone and cable, and new heating and air conditioning systems for the upstairs and downstairs.

The old fireplace in the front parlor, damaged by the earthquake, was removed and a new fireplace was added to the living room. The kitchen and downstairs baths were remodeled and the open north garden porch was enclosed. New period light fixtures were added to the living room and dining room.

The two north bedrooms upstairs were converted into a master bedroom suite and master bath, with a door out to a north (mountain) facing deck. The third floor attic storage room was converted into a reading room and study, and new decking was installed on the front porch. The tank house was restored and new roofs were put on all buildings. The house, tank house and garage were painted.

In mid-April of 2014, Dick and Elva Johnson sold their beloved home of the last 50 years. The new owners are proud to be the new stewards of the Wilson-Bixby House and are looking forward to carrying its heritage forward.

Many photos of the house and property are in the Sierra Madre Historical Archives located in the Sierra Madre Library.