

If Walls Could Whisper

By Robert Mace and Wendy Weiss

Have you ever walked through your home and wondered who lived there in years past? Who were they? What did they do?

One way to hear your walls whisper is to visit the Austin History Center at 9th and Guadalupe, next to the Main Branch of the Austin Library. The Austin History Center is dedicated to documenting the history of Texas' capitol city. The hallways are lined with exhibits of days past and the library is stuffed with documents, old and new. This library holds important clues to the history of your house.

Recently, we spent a couple of afternoons at the history center to find information about our home at 3208 King Street.

Armed only with our address, a pad of paper, and a pencil (no pens allowed!), we started to poke through the numerous card catalogs to see if our address was listed. Saddened, we found no listing. After exploring a map room, we found insurance maps from 1935 and picked out our neighborhood. We saw that houses

used to line 34th Street and that another structure was in our back yard, something we had suspected after finding large, flat pieces of limestone oriented in a rectangle. After gawking at these maps for a few minutes, we wanted to know more.

A nice, helpful lady at the front desk directed us to the city directories located on the north wall of the library. Here we struck gold. With any address you can find out the occupant's name, phone number, if they own or rent, their profession, and the names and professions of any working people living with them. An incomplete collection of these books go from the present back to the late 1800's, though address listings only go

back to 1909. To use these listings, you find where streets are listed in the directory, determine the occupant's name at your address, and then look up the occupant's name. We learned that our home's address had changed (it used to be 3308 King) and that our house used to be rental property before World War II. Since the house was rented, many people passed through its doors: a plumber, professor, tutor, manager, bricklayer, army captain, engraver, dressmaker, salesman, bill collector, to name a few. Names can also be checked in the card catalog and we found an article written by the professor and pictures of Victorian houses designed by an occupant's father.

Many people have passed through our home's doors: a plumber, professor, tutor, manager, bricklayer, army captain, engraver, dressmaker, salesman, and bill collector, to name a few.

Another big find was that people were living on our property before 1930, which is when tax documents say our house was built. We found evidence that our house may have existed as far back as 1900. On a future weekend we hope to rummage through numerous deed and tax records on microfiche at the

history center to confirm this and determine when our neighborhood was developed.

We learned so much about our house and who lived in it in only four hours. It was great fun to sleuth through old documents and maps! If you want to find out more about your house, visit the Austin History Center, which is open 7 days a week (call 499-7480 for hours). We recommend looking at the 1935 insurance maps, the card catalog, and most importantly, the city directories. The support staff are friendly and helpful. In one afternoon, you can begin to discover some of the history of your home and decipher some of the whispers from the walls.☑