



# RESTORING THE GEORGE

BY PATRICK JOHNSON

**T**he George House on Victoria Drive was built by William Roy George in 1928 for a whopping \$19,000 according to the headlines in the Santa Ana Register that year. The Italian Renaissance Revival design makes this landmark home stand out with its massing, proportions and the fact that it sits on two large lots.

Roy George was an executive with the Federal Finance Company in downtown Santa Ana and was heavily involved in real estate and stock trading prior to the stock market crash of 1929. The George family lived in the house for nearly 70 continuous years. The house was then purchased by Brett Waterman, current host of the cable TV show *RESTORED*, who did major water-damage restoration to the foyer of the home caused by leaking shower pans in the front upstairs bathrooms. The house was then sold to its third owner, who sold it to my wife, Denise, and I last summer.

Fortunately for us, my brother, Sandy Johnson, had just retired after spending close to 35 years restoring historic homes in Old Town Orange and he agreed to take on and supervise the one-year restoration of the George. It was also fortuitous that having so few owners, the house remained fairly original and unmolested, other than a full kitchen remodel, the replacement of the original bathroom fixtures and the building of an out-of-character pool.

Before the restoration of the house could commence, the property needed to be “cleared” of years of overgrown vegetation and numerous “volunteer” trees. It took the efforts of eight men and our arborist one week to release the house from a vegetation time capsule, filling four 40-foot dumpsters in the process. In removing the overgrown vegetation at the back of the property, we discovered that the vines and shrubs had “consumed” the wooden perimeter fencing, which next

needed to be replaced with block walls to secure the property and pool. The pool was also drained for a long winter’s nap. With the lacing of the two cedar cedars in the front yard, many people commented that the new paint job looked great. But we hadn’t yet painted the house . . . we had just washed it and thinned the trees to let the sunlight once again illuminate the façade.

With the house now exposed, we turned our attention to the major utility services to the house. With a service pole in the back corner of the property, electrical, telephone and cable TV feeds ran through the grand oak tree, over the back driveway and onto the service panels on the side of house and looked very unsightly. To correct this, we ran all the cabling down the service pole, into a new underground vault and up into new service panels to an area hidden on the side of the garage. From there, all services were then run underground and into the basement, where we converted the



old canning room into a utility room.

Likewise, we moved the natural gas meter and the “dog house” that enclosed it from the back of the house to the side yard, removing another unattractive interruption to the back of the house. The house was originally built with four gravity-feed furnaces that were dropped into the basement before the first floor was constructed. None of the furnaces were fully operational and repairing them would have still left us with a very inefficient heating system. So, we disassemble the furnaces, carried them out of the basement and replaced them with high-efficiency heat exchangers. In the process, we also removed all of the original asbestos-clad ducting, and installed air-conditioning in the house for the first time. This required that we find paths inside the original interior walls to run return ducts, a pretty amazing feat considering that air-condition was never an original design consideration for the house.

After removing all the terra-cotta roofing tiles and replacing the original roofing paper on the three-car garage, we converted it into a work shop for Sandy to create his restoration magic. This included completely rewiring the garage and installing period correct utility lighting. We also harvested about 300 original roof tiles of the backside of the garage roof, replacing them with vintage replicas that could not be seen and used the original tiles to repair broken tiles on the house proper. Fortunately, the roofing paper on the house was in good shape having been replaced about 20 year earlier.

Before any interior restoration could be started, we had to first demo the kitchen remodel that had been done by previous owners. It’s not that the remodel was done badly . . . it just didn’t match the character and original design of the house. So, we decided to remove it and restore the kitchen to its original splendor. Fortunately, we not only had

pictures of the original kitchen, but we had material samples as well, allowing us to replicate the original kitchen exactly. In fact, we found a 1928 Magic Chef 8-burner stove, identical to the original stove, in a barn in Ohio and had it shipped to Los Angeles for a ground-up restoration by the craftsmen at Antique Stove Heaven, a process that took ten months.

Sandy’s first order of business was restoring all the windows and exterior doors. As most of the sash-cords were badly frayed or cut all together. Every



*This fully-restored, 1928 Magic Chef range is an exact duplicate of the original range that lived in the house when it was built at same year.*

sash window had to be disassembled from the inside and then removed through the outside of the house. This took several days per window. The casement windows were all originally installed with hi-tech interlocking copper weather stripping, however over the years the copper had been bent, crushed and deformed in one way or another. This required the weather stripping on each casement window to be re-shaped, so it properly inter-locked once again. The exterior doors then needing restoring, in many cases, replacing the worn oak thresholds and rebuilding the origi-

nal hardware. As much as possible we attempted to retain the original finish of the hardware and the patina that had developed over 90+ years. Finally, all the windows and doors were fully stripped, repaired and repainted in the colors original to the house.

While Sandy worked on the windows and doors, Floral Park landscaper extraordinaire, Jim Shepstone, and his team began the restoration of the front yard. Using a picture of the house shortly after it was built, we wanted to create the original look of the front yard. We

also wanted to minimize the unsightliness of the restoration for our neighbors and avoid placement of a construction fence. With the original deodar cedars dominating the front yard, we just had to redefine the pathways and the perimeters of the yard.

The original cast-in-place front walkway pavers also remained, but they had been removed from the parking. Jim’s team made new pavers to match the original, returning the main approach of the house to its original design. Flower beds were also created along the balustrade at the front veranda and under the deodars. We also created a “wine garden” on the south side of the front yard, installing an antique stone Italian fountain and restored antique park benches. The replica pavers were also installed here. In addition, we had our cabinet maker build five garden gates that took their cues from the massive garage barn doors, the first taking its place in the wine garden. Finally, we defined the perimeters of the yard with the planting of shrubs, being careful not to cut-off the flow from the neighbors yards at the side walk. Denise and I believe it is important that front yards flow together in a neighborly-way in Floral Park.

With the restoration of the exterior doors and windows completed, we turned our attention to the interior painting of the house. With the exception of where there was still original stenciling and murals in the house, all ceiling, walls





*Before: Kitchen of the George House after the original kitchen was remodeled in the 1980s. After: The original kitchen design was restored with matching tile, linoleum flooring and 1930s Magic Chef range.*

and millwork were repainted, picking up cues from the deepest layers of old paint in the house. Most of the interior doors and millwork are mahogany and for the most part, these just required cleaning and superficial restoration. Again, we did our best to preserve the original aged finishes in the house.

With the interior painting completed, we could then refinish the floors. With the exception of the kitchen and the bathroom, all the floors in the George are quarter-sawn white oak. Given the intricate pattern of the flooring, it's estimated that it would have taken 3–4 months in 1928 to install them, one board at a time. Terry Keyes, who does a lot of flooring work in Floral Park, had his team spend a week on each level of the house, sanding, filling and refinishing the oak floors. And with that, we were able to move into the guest room on the second floor, which we dubbed “the apartment,” because it felt like we were

living in the only finished room in an abandoned apartment building.

Next came the restoration of the kitchen and mud room. We first installed a new sub-floor made from 1-1/8” marine grade plywood, on

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which the replicated Marmoleum flooring would lay. Then the ceiling and walls were painted and vintage 1924 Westinghouse pendant lights were installed, to shine a little light on the subject. We have a fantastic cabinet maker, Michael Lee in Tustin, who specializes in vintage cabinetry. With

the photos we had, Michael was able to recreate the original cabinet design in the kitchen, something we continued into the mudroom. While looking vintage, the cabinets hide a bevy of modern features that not only make the kitchen look great, but very functional. Michael also recreated the original butler’s pantry, with a mahogany counter and mirrored backsplash trimmed in mahogany, to match the swinging butler’s doors.

With samples and pictures of the original kitchen tile, we were able to have it reproduced in the correct color, size and design. We have an “old school” tile guy, Jack Neglia, who has done work for me for 30 years, who also came out of retirement to tile our kitchen. Jack’s not fast, but he is meticulous, both supervising the production of the tile in Redlands, as well as installing it in the kitchen. And when we could not get tile made in the original size, Jack would cut and shape it on-



*Before & After: The metal balcony rail was replaced with wood and the pool was removed and rebuilt along with a columned pergola.*



site, to make it exactly right.

The cabinets were then painted to a high gloss finish and the flooring was installed. And with this, we were able to install a dishwasher, hidden in the original cabinet design. Two retro refrigerators, selected to closely replicate the original ice boxes, were installed in the kitchen and in the mud-room. After a ten-month restoration, the Magic Chef stove almost completed the kitchen refurbishment. The final touch was the restoration and reinstallation of the original brass doorbell over the kitchen door to the main downstairs hallway.

We also restored the down stairs powder room, painting, wall papering and replacing the toilet, pedestal sink and plumbing fixtures with period-correct porcelain pieces.

While the original kitchen was being recreated indoors, Sandy got to painting the exterior of the house, first painting the under-eaves, then the walls and finally the trim, consuming hundreds of gallons of paint. We were very popular at Dunn-Edwards on Greenleaf! However, before the exterior painting could be completed, the railing on the rear balcony needed to be replaced back to original. The original wood railing had been replaced with a wrought iron railing and the redwood decking had been replaced with ceramic tile. Michael and Sandy combined efforts

to beautifully restore the balcony, using photos of the original and again picking up the architectural details of the barn doors on the garage.

Jim Shepstone then began the backyard landscape design, starting with the remodeling of the pool to match the architectural design of the house, building a fireplace and raised patio adjacent to the newly re-build spa. The supplier of the original stamped red concrete used on the covered patio and

a variety of eight fruit trees along the rear driveway, where fruit trees had originally been on the property, the harvested fruit being passed down through the driveway transom windows to the canning room in the basement.

As you might imagine, the full restoration of a 4,200 square foot house involves hundreds of details, too many to remember, to speak nothing of writing down. The house retained more than half of its original light fixtures and the

Batchelder fire place (design #357). Denise spent the better part of a weekend removing decades of soot from the fireplace and we scoured the earth to find period correct replacement light fixtures.

At this point, what remains of the project is the painting of the back staircase and the restoration of the two upstairs bathrooms. Like the powder room, the plan is to repaint the bathrooms, repairing and restoring the original tile, some of

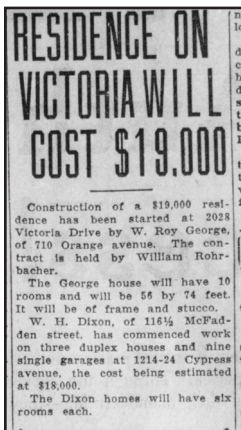
which was replaced in the water damage repair mentioned previously. Again, we plan to have tile custom made to exactly replicate the original bathroom tile, such that when finished, the tile will be as it was in 1928. Finally, we will replace the modern sinks and toilets with period correct pieces and find period correct replacements for the missing light fixtures.

It is our privilege to be the custodians of this lovely old home and to safely preserve it for future generations.



*Big Chill makes modern refrigerators that duplicate the look of vintage ice boxes or earlier times.*

the veranda was found in Los Angeles and so we were able to repeat the same finish on the new raised patio. The entire yard was replanted with a cooler northern California shade garden on the one side and a southern California desert garden on the opposite side of the yard. The desert garden was created from "pups" we brought from our Ross Street house. Jim also planted



*Santa Ana Register, June 8, 1928; New front irrigation and lawn installed preserving original walkway; kitchen being demolished prior to restoration.*