

# 321 N. WORTH

Prairie  
Built 1909



People sometimes choose their homes in unusual ways. In this case, the current owners had lived in Elgin previously. The husband, Norbert Kurth, encountered the house years before he came to own it.

Norbert lived on the east side of Elgin in an old house. On New Year's Eve 2003, he and fiancée Sharon Ruck, soon to marry, looked at nine houses in a one-day "house blitz," Sharon says. Both she and Norbert love their house for its "warmth and character."

321 N. Worth has had several longtime owners in its 85 years of existence, although the first, Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Kelly, lived there only in 1925-26. They sold the house to Jack and Anna Sweet for \$15,000, according to an Oct. 5, 1926, newspaper account. Jack was an employee of I. Cohien & Co., a prominent Elgin clothing store of the time. Anna was the daugh-

ter of Isaac Cohien, a merchant and entrepreneur who emigrated from Russia in the 1880s.

The Cohiens' businesses were diverse. They began with food and clothing and segued into real estate investment, according to a mid-2000s Elgin Area Historical Society exhibit, "The Jewish Experience in Elgin." The businesses alternately thrived and struggled, battling bankruptcy and fire over the years. By 1935, Jack and Anna Sweet divorced, leaving Anna and their daughter, Ruth, with the house.

In 1946, Anna sold their home to Jack and Anna Rubnitz (another couple named Jack and Anna). Jack owned Elgin News Agency, a newspaper distributor, for 40 years. Both the Sweets and the Rubnitzes belonged to Congregation Kneseth Israel, and helped establish its current Elgin building. Jack Rubnitz died in 1967, and his widow sold the home in 1968.

The house passed quickly through several more owners until 2004.

Norbert was born in Germany. The family immigrated to the United States when he was two, settling in Lake in the Hills, but returned to Germany when he was 10. At age 17, Norbert returned to the United States. Coincidentally, he is from Hannover, Germany, the same area as Conrad Doerge, who laid the brick for this house.

Sharon grew up in Buffalo Grove. As an adult she lived on Elgin's east side, in an apartment in an old house, and later in the College Green neighborhood.

Norbert and Sharon first met in 1982 at a softball game. They dated for a while, then drifted apart. Norbert then visited Germany for a few months and traveled through Europe with a friend.

Sharon, a mortgage underwriter, and Norbert, a school bus driver who has also taught school, re-met at the former Prairie Rock Brewing Company's 2002 Brewfest in Elgin. They began dating again, eventually deciding to marry.

Before the ceremony the couple began looking for a home. Norbert first saw 321 N. Worth years earlier when he dated a woman who lived there. He liked the house then, and his relationship with it survives today. Although he and Sharon viewed the house three times before, it stood out for them that fateful New Year's Eve and they decided to buy it. Soon thereafter, the Kurths were married at Prairie Rock, choosing it for its importance to their relationship. They moved into their new home in April 2004.

The Kurths say they were drawn to the house for its solid structure and porches. Among the changes they've made are joining the master bedroom with the bedroom next door to create a master suite, and repainting and re-carpeting the basement. The couple enjoy gardening and have created an impressive yard; Norbert takes


care of the perennials while Sharon is in charge of the annuals.

### ***Architectural Notes***

In the late 1890s and early 1900s, Chicago and its suburbs were fertile ground for the newly emerging Prairie Style. By the mid-1920s, Prairie-influenced designs were appearing on suburban lots across the Midwest and elsewhere. Pattern books and home-and-garden-oriented magazines led many buyers to vernacular forms of the style. This home is an example.

The Prairie-Style elements are clearly present in the low-pitched hipped roofs, the one-story porch nestled against the two-story main body of the building, windows arranged in bands and the inconspicuous main entrance. This house uses brick for its entire wall cladding, rather than bands of different materials such as stucco or clapboards, as may be found on high-style examples. However, even here there is a suggestion of banding by having the bricks below the second-story windows stand slightly out from the rest of the surface. Prairie-Style homes often had massive square columns supporting porch roofs. That motif is also suggested in this house by the arrangement of windows around the porch. Note that the garage is designed to match the house.

Other vernacular forms of the Prairie Style are seen in what is now referred to as the American Foursquare design.



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